

Twenty-two

Shirdi Village Life

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Shirdi was in the last century such an obscure hamlet of the Ahmednagar district in the Bombay Presidency that even in the district the village name was not well known. It was in those days a mere group of about 80 or 100 mud houses interspersed with narrow lanes between them and surrounded on all sides by an abundance of *babul*, prickly pear, and other wild growth. There was hardly a single respectable building fit for occupation by any gentleman visiting it from the town. There were no shops except the tiny village shops where grains or oil were sold, and there was no respectable temple barring perhaps the Maruti temple which also was a tiny dilapidated structure next to the Mosque dilapidated. Its rafters were coming off one after another and falling down. That was the condition in the middle of the last century. The villagers led a quiet life absorbed in their usual agricultural operations, and as for shows and conveyances, these were seldom had there, and a weekly village fair was the grandest sight and comfort for the villagers. If once a *tonga* came into the village, the village children and elders would stare at it as a rarity. This was because it was but a hamlet of the main village Rahata, which is three miles away. Even Rahata is a place of very little importance known only to those who are accustomed to the road map or to constant travel on roads. But the distance of three miles from Rahata was sufficient to keep the Shirdi people humble and contented with their lot, and the place was so wretchedly poor that with very little income or none, one could pull on with his life there. Some hermits or *fakirs* would occasionally visit the village and kept the people in touch with the lofty thoughts or modes or life dimly perceived by them.

We are referring, of course, to the main mass of the villagers who were Hindus. There were just a few Mohammadan houses and the Mohammadan population was very poor, wretched, and not prospering. They were artisans or labourers and were hardly possessed of anything like property. Some of them chiselled images. Others built houses. At the head of the village society were the Hindu village headmen. Immediately after the middle of the last century, the village headmen or Patils were Ganapat Rao Patil Kothe and his brothers or cousins. All were styled Patils and the head of them was actually performing the

function of the village Patil. There were no roads, no street lighting and no public comforts such as privies. Even for the supply of drinking water there was only a village well and the water had to be drawn up, each one bringing his or her own vessel. There were one or two mud built *chavadis* used as schools for the few children, with furnished accommodation for visiting strangers. Corporate life was at a low ebb, and as for religious life, there were three petty, fragile structures one for *Sani*, one for *Ganapati*, and one for *Sankar*. So petty indeed that they had hardly any doors to preserve and safeguard the images. For instance during the early years of this century, a half crazy man entered into each of these temples and broke the images; whether by iconoclastic zeal or simply by a freak of madness; people could not make out. He also broke the marble *padam* of Baba placed under the *gode neem* tree into two by hitting it with some heavy stone or other object. Thus there were hardly any religious buildings. The Maruti temple next to the Mosque was about a dozen feet square. The Khandoba temple just outside the village was about 8 or 10 square feet, a structure of brick and clay; and a mud and brick temple of Vittal in the heart of the village were practically all the religious buildings. Thus Shirdi in the middle of the 19th century would hardly be considered a place of religious merit and certainly not a place having any person, object or shrine of religious importance enough to attract people to visit the village. Incidentally the reader would note that today it is exactly the opposite of what has been described above. Along the cool sequestered vale of life They kept the noiseless tenor of their way may be taken from Gray's elegy and applied to old Shirdi with great appropriateness. This obscure and negligible village has now suddenly become perhaps the most important place for Sai worship, which has spread all over the country and which promises to overflow its present limits and work wonders and benefits for thousands, if not millions. Today Shirdi looks exactly like a township with numerous buildings of brick and stone and concrete with a number of storeyed structures, and it has become a place of pilgrimage for people all over India-not merely for Hindus but for all communities, taking rank with Kasi, Kanchi, Mathra and Rameswar.

Now in 1955, it presents the daily appearance of Tirupati Venkatesa temple and its approaches. There are streams of devotees coming by every train and every road and gathering at Shirdi. In spite of the very large number of rooms and halls and *Dharmasalas* provided by the Samasthan, most of the visitors find it difficult to get accomodation. Though boarding houses have also sprung up, the question of boarding is a difficulty for many. It is not merely in the assemblage of crowds but also in the atmosphere of the village and of the shrine that there is a close resemblance to Tirupati. People fired by *bhakti* and belonging to every class including the beggar class are swarming everyday and at everytime to the feet of Baba. And any one who visits the place cannot fail to catch the contagion of devotion and enthusiasm. Referring, however, to the crowds, we may incidentally notice how it has pleased Baba to arrange the arrival of the crowds to his feet. Toward the close of the last century, Baba's popularity began to swell by the work of Chandorkar and Das Ganu, especially by the latter's *Hari Kathas*. In the first decade of this century there was a regular and perceptible increase in the number of people especially respectable people, running up to see Sai Baba and in the next decade, the crowd of visitors was swelling not only in number but also in the nature of its components. People like Lokmanya Bal Gangadhar Tilak, George Seymour Curds, Revenue Commissioner of Bombay, Collectors, Deputy Collectors, *Mamlatdars*, and other employees of the Government, rich *Parsis* and well-to-do *Mohammadans* especially from Hyderabad side were in the swarm that came to Baba. It was noticed that poor and weak people, especially old and crippled people, could not easily get to see Baba on account of the approaches being filled with crowds difficult to cross. The crowds at the *Dwarakamayee*, where Baba was generally seated, were also very thick and included not merely human beings but a large number of dogs and other creatures. Abdulla Jan in his statement in 1936 says, All that glory of Sai Maharaj was then grand, but in 1936 there was no relic of the crowd. The halls of *Dwarakamayee* and the *puja* room were visited only by a few people on ordinary days. And Abdulla Jan thought that Baba's, like all human glory, rose to the zenith at one time and afterwards went down to the

nadir. But Abdullah Jan did not know Baba's ways. Even as Jan was giving his statement, the movement was progressing and within a very few years, the number of visitors to Shirdi increased and went on increasing in arithmetical or geometrical progresssion. At present it is difficult to say whether we are anywhere near the zenith of Baba's popularity. Perhaps it is only just now that Baba is getting to be recognised in various parts of India. The more He is known, the more assuredly will He draw groups to his feet. One index of his growing popularity is the large number of children we name after Him in so many families, Hindu and *Mohammadan*, and the large number of temples and *bhajan salas* named after Him. So he is sure to equal Tirupati Venkatesa in the matter of attraction of people. Incidentally it may be noted that Tirupati Venkatesa and Sai are not different. Sainatha Manana says,

Venkatesastu Sayeescah
Tayor bhedatn Na Vidyate
Tayor aikyam Smaran Nityam
Tat Sthanam Labhate Narah

this means, Venkatesa is indeed Sayeesa or vice versa, Sayeesa is the same as Venkatesa. There is no difference between the two. Perpetually remembering this identity, one reaches that position of Venkatesa or Sayeesa. As may be seen from the historical sketch of Sai Baba's growth and development in his last birth, He attained his present position, as stated by himself several times, by the grace of Venkatesa, his *Guru*. His *Guru* was originally named Gopal Rao, but had become identified with Venkatesa. And to Baba, Venkatesa is only one of the names of God, Allah, Hari and Khandoba all denoting the same God. Therefore, his *Guru* having become identified with God Venkatesa, divine powers permeated and saturated his nature and these flowed on to Baba especially at the time of initiation of *diksha* and throughout his further life when he was constantly dwelling in his mind upon his *Guru*. So, no wonder that Shirdi begins to resemble Tirupati.

We are not, however, concerned with the mere question of crowds. We are concerned with the way life is led at Shirdi or has been led all these years.

The followers and worshippers of Baba have derived the same benefits by worshipping him as the most intense worshippers of Tirupati Venkatesa or Brindavana Krishna or Bhadrachala Rama have. For all these are but God. For purposes of spiritual benefits, the accumulation of crowds is not a necessary or beneficial factor though the enthusiasm of large crowds might be infectious and sufficient to start many people on their *bhakti marga* and may confirm waverers in the strength of their *bhakti*. So far as ideas of Baba prevalent in the village are concerned, there is bound to be some fluctuation in the villagers' mentality. Before the closing decades of the last century, Baba was considered first as a negligible or pitiable *pagal fakir*, then he grew to be the wizard of the village, and then into the god or godman of a good number and the Lord or benefactor or food-giver. The Sai Maharaj that fed several hundreds everyday, shed his mortal coil in 1918, and when he passed away, many a villager formed and retained the impression that Baba was dead and was no more a factor to be dealt with. The poor beggars who were fed by Baba, did no doubt suffer from his absence but those, whose hunger was spiritual, did not suffer so badly, though they also found the physical absence of Baba at first to be a handicap in the way of Sai *bhakti*. Sai was so little understood and there was hardly anything worth calling a real account of Baba at the time of his *Mahasamadhi* in 1918. Luckily by the exertions of H.S. Dixit, Dabolkar, and other *bhaktas*, literature sprang up.

A monthly journal, Sai Lila was started and Baba was pleased to keep up some degree of Sai *bhakti* amongst those who had contacted him and the small number that came into contact through them. As decades after decade went on, this way of keeping up Sai *bhakti* appeared to fail, and that is why Abdulla Jan noted in 1936 that the number of persons approaching Sai Baba at Shirdi was so pitifully small on ordinary occasions. But it was not Sai's will that his movement should flag. He roused up agencies from unexpected quarters and the Sai movement flared up in the thirties and forties of this century so that it attained an all India character and drew thousands instead of drawing hundreds to Baba's feet. So Shirdi village life has been changed into Shirdi town life so far as externals are concerned and even so far as the spiritual side is concerned. Sai

Bhaktas are carrying on Sai Worship and flocking to his feet in his present astral form keeping up a high degree of enthusiasm. Through Sai literature like the present available and the growth of Sai temples and *bhajans*, the Sai spirit amongst the visitors to Shirdi is bound to grow more and more. Shirdi is now important mainly on account of the growing Sai movement though incidentally the sugar factories and other industrial conditions have added to the material improvement and importance of Shirdi. The main fact to notice about Baba worship at Shirdi is that the dilapidated Mosque that represented his residence in about 1880 or 1890, when N.G. Chandorkar first came to him, has been built up and modernised to the extent permissible. The main place of worship of Baba is now at the Sai Mandir which was formerly termed Buty Wada. The Samasthan has now acquired and become owner of these holy places connected with Baba. To the credit of the Samasthan it must be said that all places connected with Sai Baba and his daily movements are so well maintained that the *bhakti* of any serious Sai devotee has ample facilities to develop while at Shirdi. Every part of Shirdi is important to the *bhakta* by reason of Sai having visited it or performed certain *chamatkars* or other benefits at those places or by the burial or erection of memorials of his devotees or followers or creatures connected with him. Even the horse that formed Baba's procession *Shamakarna* has his burial tomb just as the tiger that visited him shortly before his *Mahasamadhi* has its tomb in front of *Dwarakamayee*. The best *bhaktas* of Sai Baba are not buried or given memorials there except in the shape of pictures. There are a good number of pictures in front of Baba's shrine including Ganpat Rao Patil's, Bayyaji Bai's, Tatyapa Patil's, Dabolkar's, Dixit's, Chandorkar's and others. These will give many a holy thought for the *bhaktas* viewing them to develop their *bhakti* and increase their stock of information about Sai. After all Shirdi is historically important because of the growth and spread of the Sai Baba movement from it. Out of love for Baba's dwelling place and out of regard for his statements about Shirdi, many a devotee vows to go to Shirdi if some wish of his is accomplished. But in most cases, Sai Baba has outgrown Shirdi and his presence is felt in the various temples that have been built for him and in the

bhajan halls; and even in the homes, Baba's presence is actually felt and his *sakshatkaras* also take place sometimes to confirm the feeling that He is divine and everywhere. Still Shirdi retains and must retain its importance and attractions to Sai *bhaktas* and is bound to increase in its material appearance and in the material provision made for the satisfaction of the devotees needs.