

P. R. AVASTE

Sri Purushotham R. Avaste, B.A., LL.B., Poona a retired judge of Gwalior, is another devotee of Sai Baba whose great merit is the fact that but for him, Sri B.V.N. Swami, who was made the instrument of spreading Baba's faith throughout India, would not have known about Baba, at any rate not enough to make him do that work as he has done. Sri Avaste was born in February 1870 in a fairly orthodox family and had very good and holy associations and contacts for nearly two decades. In his sixth year, he came in contact with Dev Mamlatdar, as he was known, that is, Sri Yeshwant Rao Basker, *Mamlatdar* of Satara and when that officer was transferred to Nasik, Sri Avaste's father was also in Nasik. Young Purushotham had the opportunity of taking his *darsan* and receiving one guava fruit as prasad at his hands. Thereafter the young Avaste had many opportunities of taking his *darsan* and learning about his wonderful piety-piety that is said to have wrought miracles like that of Ramadas of Bhadrachalam. This Dev *Mamlatdar*, being very charitable, helped a poor man to perform his son's marriage and gave the funds out of treasury of which he was in charge, hoping to replace it in due course when he got the funds. This leaked out and somebody carried the report, and the Collector of the District paid a surprise visit and looked up the treasury and later tried to check the accounts with the cash balance. Dev *Mamlatdar* who

did not know anything of it, was quietly carrying on his usual work at home including puja, learnt after all his puja and other things were over that the Collector looked up the accounts and checked the cash balance with it, and found that the two tallied. Dev then thanked his *Ishtamurti* for making up the deficit. When Dev *Mamlatdar* retired, he was leading a very pious life, influencing the minds of old and young. Avaste was very impressed with him, especially between 1887-90, that is, between the ages of 17 and 20, when Dev *Mamlatdar* was at Nasik leading the life of a religious recluse. Avaste and his father often visited him and derived considerable religious influence. This was a very important grounding. Soon after, in his college course, Avaste went on with his studies of John Stuart Mill and Spencer, and the prevailing scepticism and theism of the West easily captured his mind, and he became materialistic, combative and egoistic. He wished to distinguish himself as a debater and a speaker, and wanted to earn lots of money. The old influence appeared to have left him. Luckily however in 1889, when he was just 19, he got, in a street *bazaar*, a copy of the Bhagavad Gita for half an *anna*, and he carefully preserved it in his pocket, and it had become a habit with him to read the Gita everyday during his leisure hours. This stood him in very good stead in later life. This atheistic period lasted for eight years, namely, from 1890 to 1898 when he was in the full flush of youth. As Providence would have it, even in that period his atheism received some shocks, which were noteworthy. He picked up a stray leaf from the Srimad Bhagavata and read it. That contained stanza wherein fear is described as arising out of a sense of duality resulting from one going astray from God and getting caught up by *Maya*, which veils one's view of God, and prevents one from uniting with God. Another such opportune interference with his atheism was when he went to listen to the devotional songs of a very charming South Indian lady singing in Tamil or Telugu before the figure of Sri Ram, making gestures and referring to Mira Bai, Mukta Bai, Jnana Bai and others. Sri Avaste was always very sensitive and impressionable and this lady's songs brought home to his mind the beauty and advantage of *Bhakti*. A third such interference was when he indulged in hot discussions with his cousins about the existence of God, in which they appointed their maternal uncle Sri Bala Bima Thakurdas as the judge. The discussion went on endlessly and the umpire was not consulted, each hoping to beat down the other and convincing him about the correctness of his position. Anyhow Sri Avaste met the umpire, who had a great belief in *Kirtan* and *puranas*, and asked him whether he truly and honestly believed that the saints were as great as they were represented to be and whether he could convince him of it. Then that uncle Sri Avaste took him before the Sri Ram image inside the temple, and swore solemnly

an oath before him that he fully believed every word stated in these holy books, and hoped that it would be P.R. Avaste's lot to meet such a saint, he would get into the same certainly. Then Sri Avaste asked him to mention the name of some saints who were living. That uncle gave him the names of Dondi Bua of Palus, Hari Maharaj of Phaltan and Sri Kumbharaswami of Kolhapur. The uncle took a promise from Avaste to visit them and that he should test them and get convinced. Luckily, Sri Avaste was able to meet all the above three.

Sri Avaste had attended philosophical lectures of Dr. Besant and Dr. Richardson, and read books on philosophy and religion. Poona was suffering from an outbreak of plague at the end of 1896, and the anxiety for life and property on that account drove him to religion and God. He began reading reverentially the lives of Maruthi saints namely Jnaneswar, Eknath, Namdev, Tukaram, and Ramdas, as a refuge from plague. He went to Targaon to his uncle's house where sacred books on Krishna were all available and read them daily. Enquiring about Dondi Bua of Palus from his uncle, he was told how to get to Palus. He went to Palus and got Dondi Bua's *darsan*. He was reading Bhagavad Gita on the way, and stopped suddenly at the IV Chapter, 34th Stanza, where saints are said to give jnana. He resolved to test this with that Dondi Bua and whether he would give jnana to him. In the beginning, Bua treated him curtly, asked him to go and salute the temple, because when he looked at the Bua seated outside and guessed that he was evidently a *Sudra*, he did not find it easy to bow to him being a *Brahmin*. When he said, "Go to the temple", he felt it easy and he went inside and discovered that it was the picture of the same Sudra Bua inside that was worshipped. Anyhow, he had flowers and offerings in hand and placed them there. He discovered that the Sudra outside was the God worshipped inside. There was no image there but only his picture. After a couple of hours spent there struggling against his own doubts; he came out and apologized to the Dondi Bua, and asked him how he came by his powers. He replied, "It is very easy. Simply say, *Ram, Ram, Rajaram Seetharam* and everything is accomplished" Then Dondi Bua asked Avaste to cook for him and his company. Dondi Bua provided the salt, as he did not wish to eat anybody else's salt and be obliged to him. He mixed his salt with the food and Avaste prepared. On the whole Avaste was not willing to treat Dondi Bua as his *Guru*, and Dondi Bua also said that he did not want to be anybody's *Guru*. Anyhow, he gave him his blessing and Avaste came back.

The next person he met was a Brahmin Paramahansa. Avaste approached him with the mental question. "Can *Brahma Jnana* be got?" That person made Avaste lie down and he also lay down on the

ground by his side and told him, "Have no fear". But when that person put his hand across the throat of Avaste and nearly choked him, Avaste got frightened and tried to evade the grip. That man said, "You are a coward. Get away. You cannot realise *Brahman*".

Sri Avaste next went to Domi Bua of Satara. After that he came to meet an elderly lady who was on a sojourn at a *dharmasala* at Poona in the Somvar temple which was said to be free from plague. He went along with a friend, who was the devotee of a yogi, to visit that lady. Avaste took Vivekananda's Raja Yoga, in respect of which he wanted to put question as to *Kundalini*, how it progressed through various *chakras*, etcetra. They found her surrounded by a motley crowd of devotees, *pandits*, sceptics and scoffers. They thought that there was very little chance of talking to her. So they sat at a distance and resolved that at a fixed time, say, 5 o'clock they should go away if they got no chance of talking to her. Just five minutes before that hour, the lady got rid of the crowd by a very clever device. She suddenly covered her face and said that she was dying, and asked all the people to go away. The crowd dispersed. Naturally Sri Avaste and his friend thought that they too should go away, but first went near her to bow to her. As they said that they should not trouble her, as she was not in good health, she said that she was feigning ill-health for their sake, and she gave evidence of her powers. The picture of the *Kundalini* and chakras was shown to her, and she was asked whether she could enlighten them on the subject. She returned the book and said her Guru Maharaj had shown her only the path of *bhakti*, and she could therefore, give no help on Yoga. Then, they left her, well impressed with her simple and unassuming manners. So, Avaste went again to listen to her talks, which was after dusk, sitting in a dark corner outside the assembled crowd. He used to carry some questions in his head for solution in respect of matters he had studied during the day. During the talk he would change her topic, and raise the very question, which he had in his mind. She would then put those questions before elderly people and the *pandits* near her, who would join the discussion. After sifting and rejecting their answers, she would give the solution, which satisfied Avaste. She stated that the same question was once raised and answered by her *Sadguru*. Knowing her powers, Avaste induced his friends to go with him to pay their respects to the lady. They continued to attend her talks and became more intimate. He had very high regard for her divine powers. One day she sends for him at his friend's house, and he came along with his friend, his younger brother, and both their wives. She said she was going to leave the place shortly and wanted to give some *mantra* and instruction under instruction from her Guru Maharaj, if Avaste and others were willing to accept it.

But Avaste had no desire to have a *Guru*, and would not accept mantra except under conditions. At last, she made him accept some *mantras*. The mantras were *Sivapanchakshari*. She gave Panchakshari to each one, prefixing in the cast of the males *Hari Om* and omitting it when giving it to the ladies. To Avaste, she said she had come to Poona especially to meet him, and there would be no harm in his accepting her advice. He imposed a condition that he would not use any *japa* mala or keep any reckoning *sankhya* of the number of *japas*, not would he observe any formality about the time and place of the Japa, but will only mentally repeat it, whenever his mind was not otherwise engaged. She agreed, and then gave him *Panchakshari* and also said that she was not going to be Avaste's *Guru*, because she thought Avaste was her *Guru*, and thus flattered him. In the japa, she made slight changes for each, giving precedence to one after another of the letters of the *Panchaksahari* as representing the five elements with five presiding deities. Then she left Poona. She was a widow with a two or three year old child, and she went to see her son. But she wanted to be *sanyasi* following the lines of Tulsidas whose Ramayana she had always been reading since childhood. Hanuman was pleased to give her his *darsan*, and thence forward she went from place to place visiting holy places and holding *saptahas*, feeding the *Brahmins* and poor by the hundreds. It took her three years thus to march from Hardwar to Coimbatore. At Coimbatore in South India she sat up at a Hanuman temple and began her routine. People were attracted to her. Her Guru was at Velankurichi in the Coimbatore district. He was a coffee planter living with his family and he was a devotee of Sri Ram for whom he had built a small temple near his quarters. She stayed in his village for six months and then started off for her home at Saraitareisn in Uttar Pradesh. She came to Poona directly from Pandharpur, and told Avaste at a private interview, that she had been specially commissioned by her *Sadguru* to come to Poona for his sake. She received messages from her *Sadguru* during her japa and meditation, after daily *pooja* of Hanuman and her Guru. His advice to Avaste was to concentrate his mind on the first three letters of the *japa*, then on the *pranava* alone and finally on the inflow and outflow of the breath, *pranayama*. He was told not to be anxious to have darsan of the presiding deities of those letters but to carry out her instructions as well as he could.

A very young girl Shanti, whom he was fond of once, was away and when he was searching for her, she cried out from a distance, "What are you searching for?" He answered "Shanti". She replied, "Shanti is not got by this sort of search by waiting quietly; then it comes automatically." One day she came to the group in which her father,

Avaste and others were talking about *sakshatkara* and God and asked whether any one of them had seen God. She asked Avaste point blank, "Have you had *Sakshatkar*." and he said, "No". One day while reading Tukaram, he came across an *abhanga* in which Tukaram insists on giving his *diksha* then and there and Avaste was started and sat quiet. He felt as if God was asking him from outside the window next to him whether He should come in. Avaste felt that he was not yet fit for *darsan*, and said, "No, no." Then he stopped the reading, as he felt himself incapable of bearing the strain of seeing God and he promised not to trouble God again. Then Shanti asked him to pray to *Sri Ram* to grant him *Sakshatkar* and he promised each night to pray. She also would pray for *Sakshatkar* each night before going to bed. One night, he felt that *Sri Rama* was slowly descending from the top of the door of the hall where the image of the deity he worshipped had been placed. He bowed down, and the vision passed away before he could see the part above the breast. He had seen only the legs and the waist. He discontinued this practice of night prayer as he did not wish to repeat the experience and he stuck to that idea ever since.

His initiation into the *Panchakshari* was in 1898, and his *darsan* of *Rama* was in 1912. In 1914, he wanted to go to Pandharpur, and prayed to Pandharinath for the fulfillment of the word of his lady *Guru*. Then M. B. Rege, a devotee of Sai Baba, came to him and learning about his intention to go to Pandharpur, told him to stop at Shirdi, which was on the way from Indore to Pandharpur. Avaste promised to go with Rege to Shirdi. So, during Christmas of 1914, they started. It was then that they had the threatened interruption of the rail journey at Mhow as already described. Eventually the Commander who first commandeered the train allowed Avaste and Rege to continue their journey and when they reached Shirdi, They went to stay with Ramakrishna Ayi, and she appeared to him as a *Sadguru*. She recalled some peculiar incidents that had taken place years ago in the company of his lady *Guru*, and therefore struck him as a remarkable person. He agreed to treat her as a sister of his lady *Guru* but not as a substitute for her. "Even if I die will you not agree?" asked Ayi. He said, "No." Suddenly Ayi cried out that she was dead; and lay flat on the ground as if she was really dead. "This was exactly like his first *Guru's* conduct on the first occasion when he had met her. He got upset and ran up to her and put her head on his lap and shed tears. Then in order to revive her, he began to loudly recite the *Panchakshari mantras*, which his *Guru* had taught him, though his first *Guru* had said that he should not loudly recite those mantras. He implored each of those gods presiding over each of the *Panchakshari* letters to revive this lady. He offered to give up all his *punya* of 16 years of *japa* of the *mantra* if she revived.

Then she gradually opened her eyes, as if she had come out of her swoon. She said to him, "You go and mind your business." He felt grateful for having repaired the consequences of his folly. He felt sorry for violating his *Guru's* instruction not to pronounce the *mantras* loudly. Then his mind was so upset that he began to repeat the *mantras* again. He began to see one deity after another coming down as in a magic lantern show. After the first two or three deities appeared, Ayi told him, "Stop all this show. Lie down. Go to sleep." He obeyed Ayi. During the succeeding days also, he had similar experiences. On the final day, an *Ekadasi* day, he got into a repentant mood for having to go Shirdi contrary to the advice of his *Guru*. He had been told not to visit saints, as they would molest him. Then he feared that his stay at Shirdi would endanger him and his *mantras* would all lose their efficacy. In this mood, he was slowly beginning to feel that he and even Ramakrishna Ayi were led to astray by Sai, a juggler, an old *fakir*, who imposed upon the public and upon so many honest and devout people including Ayi, inducing them to believe him to be a saint and an incarnation of God. Suddenly he felt that Sai was trying to overpower him by his sorcery and felt he must protect himself and overcome him. So, he began uttering loudly and vehemently *Sri Ram, Sri Ram*, and carried on that *nama japa* for a long time. Ayi and Rege went up to Sai to free Avaste from this fit of craziness, having passed the whole night in this way. He was cured of this spell instantly when he heard in the morning Baba uttering the words, in a solemn and melodious way, "*Allah Malik hai* from the *chavadi*, which is fairly near the *sala* where Avaste was staying. He then mentally apologised to Baba for his thought and behaviour. As soon as the morning prayers and *arati* were finished, Baba sent for Rege and told him to take Avaste away from Shirdi. A *Tonga* was soon got ready and he and Rege started off. They saluted Baba near the village gate and got his blessings for leaving. Every male bird or beast on the way appeared to Avaste as Baba and female birds and beasts as Ayi. That was so till they reached the *Lendi* rivulet. After that, this spell left him. He lay quietly on his friends lap and slept. He reached home safe.

One result of his visit to Shirdi was that his desire to go to Pandharpur vanished. Baba had shown himself as Vittal. Thereafter Avaste repeated his visits to Shirdi along with his family or friends, twice or thrice each year, until Baba's *Mahasamadhi* in 1918.