

CHAPTER VI

Sai Baba and the Future of Religion

There are thousands, if not tens of thousands, who are perfectly convinced that Sai Baba was fully divine or, in the words of the orthodox, an Avatar, though, as soon as we use that term, troubles arise and dissidents come forward to differ. So the best thing to say is that Sai Baba had in him the all-round perfection of divine qualities in such a manner as to fulfil our idea of God. That is what Sri G.S. Khaparde said, and what many others have said, who are learned enough to draw distinctions between divinity and a divinely gifted human being. Metaphysics apart, let us confine ourselves to the usage of terms according to popular parlance and go on in this article with the explanation of Baba's position in respect of the future of religion.

So far as India itself is concerned, the future of religion in India is largely a question of the fusion of the two great trends which appear to be so widely different, namely, Hinduism and Islam. The differences have led frequently to the breaking of heads and burning of temples, and recently even the breaking up the political unity of the country. So the achievement of something like a basis for the unity of Hinduism and Islam is itself a very great and momentous task and may be justly viewed as affording a solution to the country's problem of fusing the two into one. So, we might first take the question of Hindu-Muslim religious differences, and see how far Sai Baba was able to draw these communities nearer so as to give some ground for hope that Islam and Hinduism might one day combine and produce a blend that will satisfy really earnest among the adherents of both religions, and form the foundation of India's main religion of the future. In India itself the Muslims are so numerous that any failure to take note of their religious needs in trying to shape the future of Indian religion must spell a failure. Happily for us, however, Sai Baba has chalked out some outlines which

give very good promise of a blending of these two. We shall see what history has to teach us about the blending of these two religions in the past.

Great souls have always existed who appreciated the advantage of fusion, and they worked hard to achieve success in this matter. Akbar's name must naturally be given the highest prominence in point of time and in point of width of views, as he was not merely an emperor with both Hindu and Muslim subjects, but one of the most liberal rulers that the world has ever seen. The idea that God is one, and therefore, people professing all religions should come together and worship Him in a common place with love and amity among them, being the children of same God, treating one another as brethren, was the noble idea of Akbar. This must always command the assent of every right thinking individual. The difficulty arises only when a thinker convinced of the above position as being right, tries to make others accept it and propound not an individual faith, but a popular formula for a popular religion that would please both these communities. Akbar did not, however, care to go into the metaphysics or the technique of this question, but did what was the most practical and best thing to do for the promotion of his object. He, as an emperor, commanded the obedience and allegiance of both the religionists and he ordered the leading followers of both religions to come together and worship God in a common place, and called the faith which he thus propounded '*Din Ilahi*' that is, God's religion. Every religion must be God's religion and the essence of all religions must be God's religion. God has no special religion.

Religion is that which binds, '*Re*' back and '*Ligo*' to bind. Religion is that which binds people back together in society for purposes of worship and other similar matters. Religion is a social phenomenon, and it necessarily includes something which will appeal to the average or even the lowest level of intellect prevalent in any society. The ideas of God that are found even in one religion, even at one age, widely vary, and the modes in which God is approached and people carry on their contact with or approach to God, are various, and it is no easy joke to unify religions even for the people of one country and one age. Yet,

Akbar attempted his task and by reason of his position and the excellence of his idea carried his point almost to success.

Unity of God is the central principle in both Hindu and Muslim religions, and the one God has always to be revered and adored by prayer for protecting oneself and one's dependants and country. For this purpose, therefore, Hindus and Muslims can always join, and in fact have often joined. In national calamities and crises, differences of opinion have not prevented people from joining together and praying to a common God for relief from great distress and peril. Similarly when an emperor ordered, people were able to join together and pray to a common father. For some time Akbar's experiment proved to be practical and successful. Unfortunately, his ideas and practice did not take root, and his successors had widely different ideas from his. Aurangzeb's policy was extremely opposite to his. Instead of promoting harmony between the two religions Aurangzeb's idea was to compel all his subjects to discard other religions to adopt one religion, namely, Islam. Historians agree that this was one of the chief causes of the collapse of the Moghul Empire in India. When we discover a mistake committed in the past, it is our duty to discover and adopt the correct policy.

"Live and let live; freedom to all people as far as possible to adopt their ideas of approach to God" must be the basis on which society must be founded. Any compulsion in religion will destroy religion and society also. This cardinal principle is noted to be one of the main features of Sai Baba's dealings with his multifarious devotees including Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Parsis, and others. Anything like compulsion or for that matter any attempt for conversion is absolutely destructive of the work of religion. We can have neither religion nor unity where compulsion is adopted. Conversion is very often the result of either compulsion or low motives, and Baba, who knew this fact very well, on one occasion when a Hindu convert to Islam was brought by Bade Baba to him saying, 'Baba, this man has been converted to Islam', struck him (the convert) on the cheek, and asked, 'Have you changed your father?' Changing one's father is absolutely unthinkable, and an absurd idea. Each religion makes God the father

of its followers, and when one has got a father according to accredited lines, which are useful, it looks absurd to think of changing either the physical father who begot one or the Universal Father that is adored in religion, So, Baba always dissuaded people from changing their religion either from Hinduism to Islam or from Islam to Hinduism or from Christianity to Hinduism, and *vice versa*. What is most important is not mere external conversion but conversion of the heart, which makes a man lose his sinful and bestial nature and climb up to Godhood. That real conversion is not called conversion by people because it generally has no external marks to denote it. Baba's object was that all people should be really converted and should have God in their hearts, and get firmly attached to God so that all of them- will be soaked through and through with the idea of God, and in consequence there will be no friction between one person soaked in God and another person soaked in God.

There can be no quarrel among religions so far as the essence is concerned. The quarrels are all about the externals. 'You wish to go to a temple. I wish to go to a Mosque. So, we cannot agree. You put on Namam vertically. I put on sandal or sacred ashes in parallel horizontals. So we cannot agree'. Can this be recorded as the correct attitude? Let every person sit quietly directing his mind to the greatness of God and the grand qualities of God and allow himself to be lost in them. Then there is no possibility of his quarrelling with any other person or any other person quarrelling with him. The result of contemplation of love for God is Love. If we go into the essence of religion, that is, if each tries to concentrate on God, the result will only be love and harmony and not a jarring set of crusades among people trying to trample on one another. Luckily wars of religion like the crusades are now things of the past. But what have succeeded them are wars for the sake of material aggrandizement, for getting colonies, and for conquests of population, for economic purposes, and these are quite as deadly in their effects as were of religion. If a discovery is made of a solution for the problem of difference of religions amongst mankind, it bids fair to solve also the problem of wars for pelf, for colonies, etc. We have to examine carefully into Sai's history to see what he has done, how far he was successful in promoting

harmony between individuals of the various groups that came to him, such as Hindus, Muhammadans, and Parsis, whether the solution found by him has worked well amongst his immediate followers, and whether that solution can be extended to other fields and to the entire world.

Let us now see what has been done by Baba. He was first worshipped by a handful of Hindus who treated him as God or Gurudeva, because he showed such wonderful powers over material nature. He converted water into oil and, therefore, the villagers of Shirdi were firmly convinced that he was not an ordinary human being but one gifted with divine qualities. Along with that, the exhibition of other chamatkars by Baba proved his possession of very vast powers though this was done only gradually. He, by a unique series of kind acts towards all, and especially the poor, the sick, the unfriended and the miserable, showed uniformly a golden heart of love towards all, treating every one, prince or peasant, pandit or rustic, Hindu or Muslim, on the same level. There was in him practically universal love combined with a sense of equality and equanimity, and utter absence of self. He had no family, no attachments, and the whole world was his kin.

Ayam nijah perovaiti ganana laghu chetasam

Mahatmanastu..... vasudhaiva kutumbakam

That is, it is the petty mind that considers whether any particular person is one's friend or a stranger. The great souls treat the entire world as a little family of their own. Baba was undoubtedly such a great soul from the very beginning and for this reason as well as on account of his chamatkars, increasing numbers began to worship him as God and called him their Gurudeva, their Ishta Devata. Now some would suppose this is only adding one more to the 33 crores of Gods that Hinduism recognises, and, therefore, giving more scope for difference. But luckily this "33 crores and 1st" God swallowed up all the 33 crores and showed the unity of God. He drew people to himself for granting them various reliefs and finally led them on to the one God who is nothing but Love, who is common not only to Hindus, but Muslims, Christians, Parsis and others also. He demonstrated to all that the only God that they could deal with was something visible,

something in human form, something with wonderful love and power and mercy, so that they were compelled to bow down to it and accept it for their good in every department of life. So, Hindus, Christians, Muslims, and all practically worshipped him. However, as the semetic religions like Islam and Christianity forbade people from accepting any one as God barring the God that they proclaimed, Christians and Muslims mostly did not avow him to be God nor adopt the external processes of worship which the Hindus always adopt. But this really does not matter, for the essence of holding on to God is prayer to God and getting relief. This, the Christians and Muslims did not hesitate to do. They had their distresses, and because they were *Aartas*. They prayed for relief before Baba when he was in the flesh or at his tomb when he left the body and got the relief, proving to them that they were really appealing to a divine source. So in effect they treated him as God, but would not confess that they were treating him as God on account of their dogmas and doctrines. All the same, in effect and in reality, all persons bowing to him and appealing to him for aid in their extremities were adopting him practically as their God and revering him as their *Ishta Devata*. Whether they used the name *Avalia* or Guardian Saint or *Ishta Devata* does not really matter.

Unity was brought about and a common bond was created by Baba by his acting as the common Father of all. Baba said, 'I am the father of you all, so you should not say *that*'. G.G. Narke, M.A., M.Sc., an England returned scholar, said Baba was a man and not God. This was reported to Baba. Then Baba pointed out that what that learned scholar said was true from the material standpoint. That is, if you regard the Baba body as Baba, it is a human body, and, therefore, there is no mistake in saying that Baba was man. But it is a terrible mistake for people to view Baba as man, especially, if they wanted Baba's divine help. Divine help was not coming from the muscles, nerves, and bones of the human body, but was coming from the spirit, and that spirit was divine. So, Baba told them, 'You should not say *that* (that is, that I am a mere physical human being). For I am your father, and you have all to get your things from me'. It is by treating him as God that Ramasami Chetti, Abdul Kadar Saheb, Joseph Ransome and other

persons could get what they wanted; that is, it is the divinity in him that must be kept in mind, and the material body must be put aside and completely forgotten in order to get one's relief. Therefore, Baba pointed out the correct attitude to take was not that Sai Baba was the body of $3^{1/2}$ cubits height which they saw, but the divine spirit which was living within that body, and which could work at any place far away from that body. Baba exhibited such power that sitting at Shirdi he could influence men and things thousands of miles away and draw spirits to him at the moment of their death in order to give them the protection they needed, or the help they wanted. It is this Baba spirit that we call Baba, that sensible people will call Baba, and not the mere Baba body. When once this view is accepted, then the system built up by Baba, of unity among all persons approaching Baba for various sorts of relief from the common father must be regarded as a remarkable achievement, an achievement not merely for the individuals but for the entire groups, for countries and for the world. On the basis of attachment to this common father Baba, Brahmins and Sahebs, Chettis and Parsees all combine and go together and act like brethren. That is what they did when Baba's chavadi procession took place and what they do now when it takes place at Shirdi. All communities join together in paying their respects to this Mighty Master and, therefore, Baba furnished the clue to the unity of religions amongst his immediate followers. The clue is, 'Do not stress the external observances. Externals no doubt differ. But stress the essence of all religions, namely, the approach to God and the achievement thereby of the satisfaction of your various needs, and the conquest of various obstacles for the elevation of your nature gradually, further and further upward, till you lose your self by contact with the feet of God'. This is a common plank, which is furnished by Baba, which has been used time and again by various people. Hindus who have given statements to this author and others, mostly show their acceptance of this view. Even a few Muslims who have accepted Swami Vivekananda as their guide adopt the same view.

Thus Baba has furnished a basis on which Hinduism and Islam can combine. That is Hindus and Muslims must make up their minds to revere God in

essence. As God in essence cannot be seen or sensed, that divinity should be approached through human personalities exhibiting divine powers in wonderful profusion as in the case of Sai Baba. One may ask how one Sai Baba can suffice to leaven the whole world; but let us look at facts. One Sai Baba has now produced hundreds of Sai Babas. There are many Hindu and muslim saints all over the country who act upon the principles on which Baba acted, and have amongst their followers both Hindus and Muslims. In almost every District we now find Mulsim Saints who are catholic enough to allow Hindus to continue their observances, and yet approach them as their Godmen. These are slowly leavening the whole Indian society. The adoption by a few individuals of such an attitude towards such Saints may not suffice to convert the entire country to the cause of religious unity. There will always be people who will rejoice in differences and who can never rise above the existing level of thought prevalent in their particular community. But when any one says that 'No man can rise above that level', they are committing a huge mistake.

History shows us how in the past vast upheavals have often taken place and how masses themselves have been attracted and led to adopt mere doctrines, dogmas and religions. One great powerful Sai can by his perfectly divine powers stamp the entire world with the impiess of his own views. With the advance of time, the numbers that follow the great saint will be increasing largely and it will soon be so large that others will actually drift into union with them. Mankind has no power of resistance against divine currents. This is proved by the history of great saints in every land. Thus, we have a fair basis for hope that the present Sai and the future Sais that might develop out of the present Sai will furnish the entire world with a uniform religion, in some form, some shape, and some beliefs that we cannot now define or describe. There is excellent ground for hoping that this achievement may come to pass, and we may rest in confidence that Sai's spirit will accomplish the same.