

CHAPTER VIII

Sri Sai Baba and National Unity

The peaceful atmosphere of Shirdi (Sai Baba's village) was never disturbed by politics or other controversies, In his own quiet unostentatious way, Baba was however laying the solid foundations of Indian unity and affording both

by example and precept valuable suggestions for India's welfare. The greatest stumbling block in its way was the difficulty of yoking together the two great communities to a common cause and making them pull in unison and amity in spite of wide difference in religious observances and doctrines. Baba showed his devotees the essence of religion and gave them a common bond - regard or love - for the same Guru Deva (Sai) who was practically the great Controller—a *Botthe Chalthe Dev*, a talking and moving God.

While at Bombay and in other places heads were being broken and temples, mosques and houses were burnt down, at Shirdi each of these groups built or lent a hand in building other's temples, mosques and houses. A Hindu inspector gave Baba stones for the reconstruction of his Mosque; and Baba gifted them all away for the reconstruction of the Hindu temples in the village. The Hindus later collected thousands of rupees and reconstructed his mosque. A devotee of Sai Baba, viz., Sri Upasani Maharaj, put up at Sakori (3 miles off Shirdi) a neat little mosque, within twenty yards of the local Siva and Maruti temples without disturbing public or private peace. Hindus and Moslems have always joined together for processions and celebrations in honour of Sai Baba, and for prayer at his tomb; and both partook of the vegetarian offerings (Naivedya) brought by either to Baba, after due pronouncement of namaz and fatiah.

Sai Baba was the living emblem of Hindu Muslim unity. His life and teachings were the strongest and the most forcible exposition of the underlying unity of all communities and creeds of India. Till the last moment of his fleshy life no one could be quite sure whether Baba was a Hindu or a Muslim by birth or breeding or profession (Baba professed no religion). There were elements of both; so, both so closely intermixed in him that a conclusion was not easy. People nevertheless drew their conclusions and Baba laughed such conclusions to scorn.

In 1916 Dasara, when Baba was contemplating giving up his fleshy body, he threw up all his clothes into the fire and stood stark naked and then said, 'you worthless fellows, try and find out whether I am a Hindu or a Muslim', for perfect

nudity was necessary to enable a person to find out whether Baba underwent circumcision or not. Nana Chandorkar thought that he was not circumcised and some others thought he was. Having been brought up in his earliest years by a Muslim fakir, the probabilities will distinctly favour circumcision. But whether there was circumcision or not, it was to Baba perfectly irrelevant and insignificant and also an absurd matter to enquire into. The question relating to circumcision is only a question relating to a part of Baba's body. Similarly some noticed that he had bored ears. And others noticing them were perfectly sure that his ears were not bored. Whether the ears were bored or whether there was circumcision was only relevant for a discussion about his being a Hindu or Muslim. Once the question of community is shoved aside as being irrelevant or absurd, the further examination of those matters can only be done by "worthless people" as Baba called them. Baba almost up to the last did not care to give any information on the question as to the circumstances of his birth and as to the ceremonies and samskaras he underwent or did not undergo, and he evidently treated the discussion as being flippant as to whether he was a Hindu or a Muslim, because that would arise only if his nature was human. Baba had perfect and clear consciousness of himself as not the body, but as the spirit, merely utilising that body for certain purposes. He had rinanubandha with many and these he drew to himself and wished to give them the greatest benefit by contact with him, and that benefit could come only if his fleshy body was ignored and his spirit was recognised as the spirit of a Samarta Sadguru or actually of Iswara or Allah. That is why Baba was saying, '*Maim Atlahhum*, I am Lakshminarayan', so as to impress particular devotees that he was the divine spirit in the particular forms they recognised as God. He also showed in his own body the forms of Vittal, Rama, Datta, Maruti and others, to convince them of his divine nature. Therefore, when this had the effect (as in the case of the South African doctor) of convincing the devotee that Baba was (and is) God, a further discussion whether he was a Hindu God or a Miihammadan God is most ridiculous. Baba wanted to prevent people's minds from running in such absurd and ruinous directions. Therefore he discouraged all investigations into the origin of the body, etc., not only about

himself, but also about saints in general. Also Kabir has a *dohra* (couplet) saying that the conditions of the saints' birth should not be enquired into. Above all there is the danger that such investigations are generally productive of more harm than good.

Notwithstanding all that has been said above, a very large number of people still felt anxious to find out whether Baba was a Hindu or a Muslim. This pernicious habit persists and hence we have to take notice of it. A particular bhakta, who was favoured highly by Baba, still believes that Baba was a Muslim, and he wonders how anybody could take him to be a Brahmin; and his association of Muhammadanism with Baba is greatly detrimental to his bhakti. This sort of classification of Baba as belonging to one caste or another is the result of one's own *dehabhimana* i.e, the idea that one is one's body, and that one is of superior Brahmin caste in Hindu religion. The absurdity of these ideas lingering in the mind of a person who aims at absorption in God (*poorna laya*) was pointed out by a very great sadhu with wonderful powers at Nanded. That sadhu told the above mentioned devotee, 'shall I point out to you what your *'abhimana'* or egotism was? Your Guru was Sai Baba. From his feet he made Ganga flow out. You had that Ganga in your hand. And what did you do with it? You barely sprinkled it on your head, and you would not put it into your mouth, look at this *abhimand*¹, To fill up the blanks in that Sadhu's statement, we may say that that devotee considered that he had the benefit of receiving Ganga from the feet of a *Muslim* Maha Vishnu, which should not, however, be allowed to taint his pure Brahminical lips. Nothing can be more absurd than such an idea, and yet the idea was entertained and perhaps continued for decades.

The fact is that prejudices die hard, and it is the fact that even enlightened devotees could not give up prejudices that makes this author proceed further in this chapter and deal with the question of Sai Baba's caste, and to point out that the answer of S. B. Dhumal as to Baba's caste to the European District Magistrate is the only answer that can be given by any person worthy of the name of a devotee of Sai Baba or even by a judge in a court of law. Dhumal answered that 'Baba is neither Hindu nor Muslim but above both'. Of course

S.B.Dhumal had no necessity to discuss further the question of what Baba did to solve the national problem of Hindu-Muslim unity. Now in this chapter we have to deal with it and, therefore, we shall point out, rather against our will, the Hindu-Muslim features in Baba, and how there was a perfect blending of those features in his appearance, in his mosque, in his behaviour, in his teaching, and in everything with which he was connected.

Baba said that he was Kabir in a former janma and that Akbar, the great emperor, stood in awe of him. Baba carried out the ambition of Akbar to unite Hindus and Muslims. This he carried out to a considerable extent. And he took Akbar's work also many steps further, Kabir lived in the time of Sher Shah (15th and 16th centuries) and his ideas were not as advanced as those found in modern days. Baba fully absorbed the modern spirit, and understood the conditions of India. Baba declared that in the first great war of Indian independence, he had been in the army with the Rani of Jhansi. That is, he was a fighter for Indian independence in 1857. But in his life at Shirdi, there was no politics. He never discussed politics even when E.G. Tilak or G.S. Khaparde came to him. He always encouraged patriotism, keeping it far away from controversial politics. As to the question of Hindu-Muslim unity, any person carefully studying the subject would see that Hindu-Muslim unity is the one great desideratum to make India strong and prosperous. Baba also saw it, and so he laid the foundations of Hindu-Muslim unity. We shall show how first in his body, next in his life, thirdly in his mosque, fourthly in his teachings and lastly in all other matters, Baba brought out this unity to the fore and worked for its consummation.

Taking first his body, though Baba did not want us to discuss his body, there is not a particle of doubt that Baba's ears were bored, and this is corroborated by his statement made to Mahlsapathy that his parents were Brahmins of Patri in the Nizam's state. Baba added that when he was a tiny infant he was handed over to a fakir by his Brahmin parents. Here is the first proof that Baba's life was to be one of fusion of Hinduism with Islam. The fakir who took him appears to have been a highly advanced soul, evidently a Sufi of

the highest grade. Baba, whenever he referred to God or Guru-God, or the fakir (God), evidently meant the fakir who must have first acted as his father, Guru, and everything to him. From him he picked up his idea of God and the essential virtues of vairagya and complete dedication of life to the cause of God that characterised his entire life. After a few years the fakir died, and under his orders, his widow handed Baba over to Gopal Rao Deshmukh, a pre-eminent saint, who had vast wealth, power and military prowess. In fact he acted as the Governor of Jintur Parganna, which he wrested from Muslim hands, but at the same time, he was a great devotee of God Venkatesa at Tirupathi whom he worshipped at home also. He thoroughly merged himself in Tirupathi Venkatesa. The powers of Venkatesa flowed through this royal saint's person and his touch cured blindness. He drove away devils and Brahma Rakshasas and achieved many marvels set out earlier in this same volume. Therefore, Baba was again brought into contact with the highest spiritual perfection that a Hindu bhakta was capable of attaining which in no way differs from highest Sufism. Baba refers to this Guru as Venkusa with great affection time and again and shows that his marga with this Guru was the Universal religion of love. Beasts can also understand love and Baba was thoroughly soaked in love for the Guru. The Guru loved him intimately. This Guru bhakthi is of the essence in all religions, especially in the religion in which Baba grew, and through which he attained all the wonderful powers he had. He declared that he became what he was (with all siddhis at his command) through the grace of his Guru, and that the love he and his Guru felt for each other was intense. Therefore, from the very beginning Hindu-Muslim elements were combined so far as externals were concerned. So far as the internal state of the soul was concerned, the common factor of all religions, namely, the idea that God is love, that the human being is a spark from that God, and that he should get back to God through that love, was the thing on which he was nourished, through which he became perfect. Therefore, Sai by such a training was developed and shaped into the perfection of humanity and the perfection of Sainthood. He became one with God and a Samarth Sadguru of all those who could make use of him as such. This became pronounced only in later life.

When he parted from-the Guru he was merely sent away with a brick and a cloth and also blessings of his Guru for perfection. He was mingling once again with fakirs, as a fakir among fakirs, and wandering here and there, for how long and in what places, no one can say. Shirdi became his final residence, and his earlier years at Shirdi were spent merely as a nameless fakir. But when once his powers of Siddhi and his kindness became clear to persons competent to understand them, that is, first to the Hindu sadhus who met him and later to ordinary folk also, especially by his power of giving blessings for issue, etc., people swarmed to his feet, and he was compelled to allow them to worship him as God, first individually and then collectively. His position as a Samartha Sadguru was established decades after his arrival at Shirdi. All the while, and even after this position was established, he was carrying on his mission of love, love primarily to those who were connected with him by rinanubandha and next to every one of his devotees. In his samatva, he loved all and served all, and lived merely to bless humanity with his powerful personality and the attention he could pay simultaneously to thousands of people in thousands of places. Such a person naturally was in a better position than others to carry out his mission of life.

One important aspect of the working of that love is what we are considering in this chapter, namely, the achieving of Hindu-Muslim unity. The bickering and difference between Hindus and Muslims when he first began his life at Shirdi, were as pronounced, though superficial, there as elsewhere. To unite Hindus and Muslims is a task of very great difficulty, for in externals they differed so much i.e. in dress, in personal habits and the formal practice of religion. They had a tendency to keep apart, a tendency which the Britisher who ruled the country took very good care to strengthen. To work in the face of all these and to promote Hindu-Muslim unity was a very difficult task but Baba's method of work was very subtle. Nobody could see what he was working at and how he was carrying out his aims. His method of love is unexceptionable and nobody could suspect what would be the consequences of that love. Persons loved by Baba, whether Hindus, Muslims, or Christians, came to regard each

other as brothers; they were all "Children of Dwarakamayee", as he called them, and they were all being cared for by Baba. This one fact that Hindus, Muslims, Christians and persons of all religions were loved by him equally and without difference, tended strongly in favour of establishing Hindu Muslim unity.

Baba took good care to see that there should be no such bitterness as would be caused by conversions or intolerance. He put down intolerance and conversions. On one occasion when Bade Baba (Malegaon fakir) introduced to him one Ibrahim as a recent convert to Islam, Baba slapped (Ibrahim) on the cheek and asked him 'have you changed your father?' and he would not allow him to come into the mosque, Baba brought together Hindus and Muslims in his mosque. There was Agni worship performed by the Hindus in the mosque and Baba ordered S.M. Naik to pour in his oblations of rice with ghee, which Parsis and others also worshipped, and the udhi or ashes of which were distributed to all. There was also the Tulsi Brindavan in the mantap (front hall) round which pious Hindu ladies made their circumambulation (pradakshinas). For the Muhammadans there was the central pulpit in the western well with three or four steps in it, on which the preacher would stand, if there was a preacher, and lamps would be placed to light up the place (mosque). This is called Mimbar. As for the external appearance of the building, there were small minarets conforming to ancient Muslim tradition and Saracen religious architecture. As for what went on in the building, there was the practice of both Hindu and muslim scriptures being read. During the day Hindus performed their worship with "*artis*" (waving of light) based on Pandharpur practice to the accompaniment of loud music as at Pandharpur, including the beating of drums. But there were also times when the Muslims came in for their Idga worship in front of it and the recital by zealous Muslims at night of the Kalam or Shariat and the frequent reading near the dhuni of the Koran by Abdul, Baba's bodyguard and companion. During the day after the "*arti*" there were generally Tukaram gathas, Bhagavatha, or other puranas read and bhajans carried on. Thus both communities had their desired religious readings and practices without coming into conflict with each other.

As for the more esoteric, more individual or spiritual benefit, Baba who was the antaryami (inner soul) of all, suited himself to the circumstances of each, and gave occasional direction or advice to Hindus to go on with their Rama Mantra or Guru Charitra Parayana or Bhavartha Ramayana and Bhagavata and Jnaneswari, the well known Maharatti commentary on Bhagavad Gita, following the lines of Sri Sankara's philosophy. At night arti there were special references to Jnaneswar, Tukaram, and other great Maharatta Saints. Baba was the central object of worship while the Maharatta and other saints were appealed to. Nobody felt that there was anything inconsistent or self-conflicting in these courses, for with Baba the one common principle was that all religions are true and each man should keep up conservatively to his own creed, faith, *Guru sampradaya*, i.e. Guru's tradition and practice. This is the principle on which all religions can unite. Differences there are bound to be amongst men as long as human nature continues to be what it is. The principle of variation is found in humanity as in other creatures coupled also with the principle of an underlying unity or uniformity. If due to lack of love and sympathy, the differences are allowed to poison the feelings of each towards the other, then there is conflict, individual conflict, sectarian conflict. But if there is one guiding principle of love enforced especially by a Guru who is the soul of Love like Sai Baba, then there is no chance of these natural differences creating any bitterness.

The feeling of love flourishes amidst differences just as love flourishes amidst differences of sex, temperament and unequal equipment of intellects. Sai Baba made people tolerant towards each other and prevented bickerings and conflicts not only by his words but also by his example. Thus the principle of love pervaded the atmosphere in Baba's mosque. That is the principle which can unite not only all religions but all groups. Even economic differences can be dissolved by that golden solvent of love. Mankind can become one family and achieve the socialistic ideal only on the principle of love. Baba, therefore, paved the way for the solution of the numerous differences that now tear mankind into warring groups. This unity of religions is not a new idea. Eknath, Namdev, Kabir and others had worked at it each in his own way. Guru Nanak was also in his own

way working for the same. It was left to Baba to complete their work. His admirers and worshippers in Maharashtra could not at first think that outside Maharashtra anybody would care to worship Baba. But to their astonishment, Sai worship and the admiration for his doctrines and methods are now covering the entire country from Cape Comorin to the Himalayas and from Assam to Bombay. He was thus the creator of intercommunal unity, and no doubt he was also the emblem of it. The task of uniting the highly advanced religious exponents of each religion into one is not so easy as the task of uniting the masses. The masses come in when they see that a weird and impartial God-man like Sai Baba, whether proclaimed an Avalia or an Avtar, is working for their good, and they unite easily into a harmonious group. That was how the Kabir Panthis were formed including the Hindu-Muslim elements in it and ignoring differences. Round Sai Baba also, these elements united and the number of worshippers has grown and is vigorously growing. But the ultimate work of importance would appear to be getting together the highly advanced thinkers and heads of religions to accept the idea of unity. Even here Baba was successful. Differences between religion and religion are found to be matters of doctrine and dogma. All religions must unite and do unite in adoration of one common God whose nature is love, and who with his limitless power creates all and loves all he creates equally. Baba made no distinction between Hindu, Muslim and Christian, and treated them all as his children. All religions were united before Baba. Love is a principle on which all religions must unite. That love gets identified with God and perfection in man. Baba achieved in himself that perfection, and therefore was able truly to declare that he had reached the highest *Anandam Brahmeti Vyajanath*. Baba showed that he was the Paramatma of all, that he was the Antaryami of all, and that he had in him perfect bliss, which we call Satchidananda. To Muslims Baba is the Sufi. Kabir panthis being part of the contributors to Sufism recognised Baba as the perfect Sufi. Hindus including the most advanced in Bhakti and Jnana recognised him as the perfection of divinity or Satchidananda. Therefore believers in the principle of love as embodied in Godhood found it demonstrated in Baba. No doubt, success in this is not

achieved in a day, but he has laid solid foundations for the edifice of inter-religious unity and, as time advances and as other world movements also advance, Baba's pioneering efforts will be recognised and followed by the masses and also thinkers. This is imminent; one can see glimpses of it even at present. Let none think that Baba is gone and has ceased to work. See the Chapter on latest lilas. That enables us to see that Baba is the emblem and cause of the unity of religions in India and the world. Regarding world unity, we are reminded of Abdul Bahai who attempted in 1830-40 to make people accept him as the Messiah of unity and to establish one religious, economic and social order into which all countries will fit in their systems harmoniously in accordance with his principles and directions. But history records the failure. Baba's work was similar to Bahai's, i.e. promoting love, cooperation and harmony. But Baba was preeminently practical and he saw with his wonderful prescience how limited the progress will be at the outset and for a considerable time; and Baba laid the foundations of future World Unity in all essential matters to the extent that was possible.