

CHAPTER XI

Baba's Recent Lilas in the South and Their Purpose

After 1935-36, that is, after the broadcasting of Baba's wondrous nature, powers and lilas - through Madras 'Sunday Times' and through many books and booklets, etc., faith in Sai Baba spread like wildfire throughout the country, especially in South India. Numerous persons were anxious to start their contact with Sai Baba and were helped on therein by remarkable experiences gained by them or occurring in their neighbourhood. The single experience of an instant cure of fits, for instance, in Velampatti, a village near Vellore, converted the entire village to Sai faith. Instances of this sort abound, the earliest of which in the South was perhaps that of Nagabhairva Venkataratnam of *Ventrpragada* near Vijayawada. He and his wife had been married seventeen years and all that time she had not conceived even once. By making vows to Baba and visiting Shirdi they obtained the blessing for issue in the shape of a daughter whom they gratefully named Sai Prasada (i.e., gift of Baba). To further immortalize the fame of Baba and his wondrous lilas, with the help of friends they constructed at Ventrpragada a pucca Sai Mandir with Dhuni (ever burning fire as at Shirdi in front of Baba) and accommodation for guests, and this has been attracting crowds all these dozen years and more. This and the Tenali Mandir at Tenali

built by the exertion of the veteran bhakta Dr. Ramana Ammal, (whose methods of curing patients were not always medical, but included also prayers to Baba) were the main big Sai Mandirs till three years ago in Andhra Desa. Then the star-shaped Kurnool Sai Mandir was built by Veeraswami, a bus contractor at a cost of over Rs.2 lakhs.

In 1942, Coimbatore, famous for its salubrious climate and numerous mills became yet more famous by reason of the development of, and its becoming the chief centre for, Sai bhakti. Captain Devaraj, a Military Medical Captain, a native of Coimbatore, had to serve in the Mediterranean during the War on board a ship, which was bombed by the enemy. Though the ship suffered damage by the bombing, this Sai bhakta was perfectly safe, and returned safe to his country and home. Sundararajan, a fellow townsman of his, built a small cottage (temporary hut) as a Sai Mandir, and had Sai bhajan conducted there as also at his house in R.S. Puram. In January 1943, Baba began to show his lilas there at the Mandir. One evening at about 5 p.m. Sai bhajan was going on there and a snake moved up fairly near the assembled crowd and was facing the picture of Sai Baba and remained listening to the music of the bhajan. From 5 p.m. it continued to be there frightening none and harming none, neither frightened nor harmed by any. After 9 p.m. the bhaktas went back to their homes, and when they arrived in the morning, they were surprised to see that the snake was still there near Baba's picture. Knowing full well that Baba appeared in various forms including serpents, they got a thousand chrisanthemum flowers, and standing on all sides close to the Snake (cobra) Baba, did their Ashtotra puja, showering the flowers on the cobra. This went on for a time and all the while the cobra did not budge. Then they prayed that the Baba snake should not move until a photographer came and took a photo of the Snake Baba in the midst of the flower heaps to immortalize his (Baba's) visit to Coimbatore in the form of a snake. After some hours, a photographer turned up and had an excellent snap of the cobra with uplifted hood in the midst of the puja flowers. Then the Snake Baba was given milk naivedya, which was tasted, and camphor light also was offered. It was only at 11 a.m. next day, that the cobra that had arrived at 5 p.m. the previous day, left

the premises. During these 18 hours the news of Naga Sai's visit to the shrine went round the town and a great number of people came and had darsan of Sainath, and thus Coimbatore town, with its tens of thousands of population, drank deep the Sai faith. On the above mentioned spot, a building costing over Rs.40,000/- has been built, and further lands and structures have been added thereto, the total cost running up to six figures. All journals, including Sai journals, spread this Naga Sai manifestation throughout India, and the local earnestness of devotion was strong enough to support the Sai Baba mission with a Girls' school accommodated in a grand building with vast grounds.

Baba's lilas abound throughout India, and our selecting only a few of them for mention here, especially South Indian places, might appear invidious but in view of recent messages of Baba, mention of a few lilas seems to be necessary. In any case, after mentioning two more Andhra Desa lilas, specially attractive to the curious and scientific mind, we shall wind up this chapter with a lila in the North, that is, north of Andhra Desa.

Let us take *Ramachandrapuram*, a place 24 miles away from Rajahmundry in East Godavari District. There Srimati Krishnabai, the wife of Sri K. Seshagtri Rao, Superintendent of the office of the Accountant General, Posts and Telegraphs, Simla, had very extraordinary experiences and special favour granted by Baba. She had studied only up to I Form. When she and her husband were living at Nagpur, he had remarkable experiences. He was in charge of the special treasury keys, which he kept locked up in a drawer in his office, and the key of that drawer alone was taken away and kept by him. One morning when he came, the keys were missing, and despite hectic searches by himself and his peons, he could not trace the keys. Then he suddenly prayed to Baba to save him from the effect of such loss, and he once again went to the drawer and opened, when lo and behold! Right in front of him in the drawer were the very keys he was searching for all the time, and which could not have escaped his sight if they were there earlier. How they disappeared and reappeared Baba alone knows, but the main favour and lilas of Baba relate to his wife.

Srimati Krishnabai's father, a retired station master (Hanumantha Rao by name) was living at Ramachandrapuram. When her husband came from Nagpur to Ramachandrapuram, and was starting back to Nagpur, the lady suddenly took ill. What the illness was could not be discovered. But she was positively apprehensive of death and pointed to some invisible figure in the room saying that that person was the Yamaduta, and so there was no use giving her medicines. Yet some medicine was given, and the husband placed Sai Baba's picture beneath her pillow. Suddenly she awoke at night and cried that she was being dragged away. Her father found that a part of her body was dragged away and her legs were dangling. He restored the body back to the cot, and later she told her father that Sri Raghavendraswami, the family deity, and Sri Sai Baba were protecting her, and that they had left under the pillow a packet that would save her. The father looking under the pillow discovered that there were tulsi leaves of large size and sacred earth (like that at Mantralaya, Raghavendraswami's place). These were applied to her. Again when her husband was downstairs, and she was alone in her room, she was found talking, and she declared that Sri Raghavendraswami and Sai Baba had given her advice and teachings. Sai Baba began to protect her as they could easily see.

At her puja of Baba, miraculous events were taking place. At the close of the puja, she would deliver for more than 45 minutes pravachanams far beyond the capacity of a first form student. Again the plantains and flowers, that were offered to Baba, were covered over with inscriptions. For instance, when the Joint Registrar of Cooperative Societies, Sri G.V. Chetty, took a *Nilamala* (a huge garland of about a thousand roses) and placed the same on Sai's picture, thousands of 'Sai' in Telugu or 'Om Sai' were found on all the petals in a very short time written by some invisible hand. The naivedya she placed before Baba were accepted and consumed by Baba, a fact evidenced by a part of the offerings missing after puja. On the plantain fruits placed before Baba, inscriptions appeared in Tamil, Telugu, Hindi or Gujarati or English and these were mostly answers to questions by bhaktas visiting her puja room. The

inscriptions included Sanskrit verses from Yoga Vasishta, Gita, etc., which were far beyond the capacity of that lady to understand or repeat.

A most remarkable fact is that Baba appeared and said that she had eight more births to take, and that he would exhaust the karma of those births by making her die and get back to life eight times in this very life. So during her periods, she turned a vivid blue, and persons near her thought her dead. On each of these occasions, the *Kolam* marks, (i.e. border lines) around her cot with Baba's udhi would mysteriously appear, disappear and then reappear after Baba's reviving her. Baba invariably revived her, and he enabled her to develop *clairvoyance* and power to read the past lives of herself and other bhaktas that came there, and report Sai's reply to people's questions. She is adopted as the Guru or Sadguru by a number of people from far and near, from places like Nagpur, etc. She not merely gives them instructions and upadesa but also manifests chamatkars for protecting them.

One Ramachandra Rao of Nagpur came along with Seshagin Rao and lectured at the All India Sai Samaj during 1953 giving a full account of all the above. The mounting bhakti roused by that lady has helped in the construction of a Sai Mandir at Ramachandrapuram with a marble idol of Baba with Radha and Krishna installed on the occasion of the last Ram Navami (1954).

We may next proceed briefly to Baba's lilas at *Shanti Ashram*, Thotapalli Hills, which had long been famous as the residence of His Holiness Sri Omkar Swami who toured America and other places and is conducting two Ashrams, one at the foot of the hills and the other at Visakhapatnam town, and publishing the organs of the Ashrams, 'Peace' in English and 'Shanti' in Telugu. This Swamiji has written valuable works, like 'Cosmic Flashes' etc. While the Swamiji was largely believed to be interested in and developing the philosophical side, suddenly from March last a wave of Sai bhakti began to manifest itself in his Ashram. By Sai's Grace his Ashram at the foot of the Thotapalli Hills, when visited by Srimati Ratnamma Garu of Rajahmundry (Mother of Kaku Rama Rao) and her friends, became a place of great bhakti development. In March last these ladies with others were conducting 'Sai puja' with intense devotion in the

Thotapalli Shanti Ashram. Noticing their earnestness, and the miracles of Sai, His Holiness Sri Omkar Swami devoted his own meditation room for Sai puja and called it 'Sai Mandir'. At first it was a weekly puja on Thursdays to Sri Sai's pictures, and on the first two puja days, Baba accepted (consumed) pan of the coconut offering placed before him. But this was not sufficiently impressive. Ratnamma Garu and others prayed to Baba to write his name on the offerings made. Accordingly when flowers and other things were placed before Baba, and the door of the room was closed as per custom, Baba's writings or inscriptions in Telugu of the letters 'Sai' appeared on the flowers, fruits, and coconuts that were there and also on cashewnuts. Sri Rajaji, who was taking a very active part at the Ashram, offered his gold ring and prayed to Baba that 'Sai Nama' should appear on the ring also. (That ring is now with His Highness The Maharaja of Mysore). Others offered their chains, watches, and other jewels and placed them before Baba. The Telugu letters 'Sai' appeared on all these. The Sai Pracharaka P. Viswanatham from Rajahmundry went up to Thotapalli Hills Shanti Ashram and placed his silver watch and prayed that Baba might write his name clearly so that he may show the same to others and thus intensify his pracharak work. By Baba's grace, 'Sai', appeared on the lid of the watch in Telugu. Then at the request of an ardent bhakta who placed before Baba a ball of udhi, Baba's writing appeared as 'Sai Mandu' (Medicine of Sai Baba) on the udhi. A bit of this was administered to a patient who was suffering from high fever. He was immediately cured. There was a cow in the Ashram with udder disease yielding brackish milk. After the udhi was smeared on the body of the cow, the milk given by the cow was no more brackish. It became sweet. *Sai Mandu* has been used at various places with good results.

His Holiness Sri Omkar Swami himself was so much impressed with Sai's lilas that he determined to have a picture of Sai Baba, and began worshipping it, as Sai is only a form of God. In his own private worship also Baba's lilas were exhibited. Once he placed an Australian apple before Baba in the cupboard and a good portion of the apple was found eaten up. When he placed a bottle of honey tightly corked before Baba and retired from the room, he found on his

return that the cork had been extracted and that about 2 ounces of honey were not found there evidently accepted by Baba.

The Ashram inmates began to have great faith in Baba. When a lady was returning from Swami's chamber to her own quarters, on the way she trod on a snake, and at once cried out 'Om Sai'. The snake did not hurt her, but quietly moved away and disappeared. The Swami on Rama Navami day dictated an article in which he explained to his devotees and the public the phenomena that were taking place in his Ashram and gave a general invitation to any one who had Sai bhakti to go to the Shanti Ashram² and have their communion with Baba. He appears to have issued subsequently a second invitation (both of which appeared in the Telugu 'Shanti' dealing with Sai lilas at Thotapalli Shanti Ashram). What is the purpose of the Sai lilas in these places in Andhra Desa? One marked feature of Andhra Desa is that it is full of social and political ferment, and easily catches up new ideas and gets them widely circulated and absorbed. Sri Sai Baba has evidently found just a few places suitable here to respond to his call which may act as nerve centres from which all surrounding parts could receive quickening of life. Not only the above places, but Kurnool and Repalle have quickly responded by building Sai Mandirs, and sent abroad messages of inspiration and faith to even distant places. That is sure to have a very gratifying response in the near future.

There is a very simple indication of the effect of the stimuli given in South India and Andhra Desa, Mysore and adjoining parts, and that is a tide of passengers in the trains proceeding to Shirdi, Kopergaon, and the daily crowd visiting the Sai Mandir at Shirdi, Abdulla Jan in 1939, when he gave his statement, said 'There was usually vast crowd at Shirdi preventing people from approaching Dwarakamayee, and all that has gone now'. Obviously he implied that even Baba's splendour like that of so many Maharajas had faded away and

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- ² The address of the Ashram is: "Shanti Ashram, Shanti Ashram Sankhavaram-533 446, E.G. District. The Manager Sri Rajaji kindly undertakes to send replies either for udhi or for other information.

could not endure. Now, if Abdulla Jan visited Shirdi on any day, especially a Thursday, he would find that the crowds are again there. This time the crowds are in thousands and include persons from distant South India and Andhra Desa, who form probably the majority of the crowds of every day. This fact may give the clue to Baba's display of his lilas in Tamil Nadu and Andhra Desa as stated above. It was a Tamilian that was chiefly used by Baba for starting the huge wave of Sai bhakti that State after State in India covered so many towns and villages.

The Southerners' bhakti to Baba has evidently still an important part to play in moulding the future of Sai faith and in the progress of the spiritual field. It is Madrasis, Andhraites and Mysoreans, Southerners as a whole, who have carried the 'Leaven of Sai bhakti' to all distant corners of the country such as Assam, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bengal, Bihar, Bombay, etc., and have even carried it across the seas to Rangoon, Singapore, Aden, West Africa, South Africa, Europe and America.

There is very probably an important part for Southerners to play in getting Sai movement more extensively and intensively carried forward everywhere. Though one cannot be dogmatic in these matters, one may presume that there may be such a purpose for Sai in his choice of places in his manifestation of the lilas in Andhra Desa and Tamil Nadu. None should draw the conclusion that other parts of India have not been favoured with Baba's chamatkars and lilas. Ahmedabad, which is far north of Madras, about a thousand miles away, has been the scene of Baba's bhakti spreading and lilas manifesting. Sri Ratilal Shah and other bhaktas, who have also their contact with Adoni Sai devotees (Adoni is in Andhra Desa) have established Sai bhakti in and around Ahmedabad. They have published books in Gujarati dealing with Sai, and they have also built a Sai Mandir at Ahmedabad.