



**The Sai Baba of Shirdi
A Saint-Seer Beyond Compare**

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Om Shri Satchidananda Sadguru Sainathaya Namaha

The Sai Baba of Shirdi, also commonly referred to as Shirdi Sai Baba, was an Indian spiritual Guru, Yogi and Fakir (mendicant), who was regarded by both Hindus and Muslims as a saint-seer. Many of his devotees consider him an incarnation of the Supreme. Some Hindu devotees revere him as an avatara of Lord Krishna, while to others, he is the incarnation of the divine Dattatreya. Though there are no recorded origins of the birth of Shirdi Sai Baba, all devotees unanimously agree that he was a Satguru, a Qutub or Sufi Pir beyond compare.

In this article, we will study the life and times of the Sai Baba of Shirdi.



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DATTATREYA

Origins of Shirdi Sai Baba

Though Sai Baba is one of the major saints in India, his true origin and his real name remains unknown. He was given the name "Sai" when he first arrived at Shirdi, a small, charming, town in Maharashtra, in the Western part of India. Mhalsapati, who was a local temple priest, initially thought of him as a Muslim saint and greeted him with the words "Ya Sai!", which means, "Welcome Sai" in Marathi.

The term Sai or Sayi, which literally means, "the Poor One", is a Persian title that is commonly given to Sufi saints. In Sanskrit, however, Sai could also refer to "Sakshat Eshwar", or the Essence of the Divine. The term Baba denotes a father or a saintly man. Hence, the name, Sai Baba.



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SAI BABA ON THRONE

Sai Baba was and remains one of the most popular saints in India and all over the world as well. Since his actual lineage was not known, he was revered by people from all religions and all walks of life. He was a sanyasi and had no love for worldly, material things - his only goal was that of self-realization.

Sai Baba preached a moral code of love and forgiveness; contentment and inner peace; teaching others the true value of helping others; and devotion to God and guru. His teachings combined many elements of Hinduism and Islam. He lived in a mosque, which he named as Dwarakamai, which is essentially a Hindu name. He dressed up as a Sufi, with a long gown and head wrapped up in a loose bandana of sorts, made of the same cloth.

Baba practiced both Hindu and Muslim rituals, celebrated the major festivals of both the religions and used words and figures from both traditions. When he attained Samadhi, his mortal remains were buried like the Muslims do.

One of Sai Baba's most famous epithets was, "Sabka Malik Ek" (everyone is ruled by One God). This, incidentally, is one major tenet associated with Sufism and Islam. He always used the phrase, "Allah Malik" (God is King).

Shirdi Sai Baba was a truly special Guru, because he also gave rise to a lineage of great gurus. Many of his disciples went on to become well-known spiritual figures. This list includes Mhalsapati, who was the priest of the Khandoba temple at Shirdi; and Upasni Maharaj, who was much revered for his teachings.

Sai Baba always referred to many saints as his brothers, especially if they were the disciples of Swami Samartha Maharaj of Akkalkot.



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SAI BABA - SABKA MALIK EK

Early Years of Sai Baba's Life

There is no documented record on Sai Baba's birth or which part he came from. Though people of many communities debated that he belonged to their caste or religion, there is no official evidence to suggest anything about his childhood days. The only thing that people knew for sure is that he always spent a lot of time with Muslim fakirs and that he dressed like them as well.

One of Sai Baba's major disciples, Das Ganu, had once tried to develop a sketch on Sai Baba's childhood years. Das Ganu visited the little hamlet of Pathri and collected tales of the Sai's early history. He has written about this in four chapters of his book on Sai Baba, which was later titled as the Sri Sai Gurucharitra.

According to the book, Sai grew up in Pathri, raised by a fakir and his wife. When Sai turned five, the fakir's wife put him in the care of the saintly Deshmukh Venkusha, where the boy continued to stay on for many years. Das Ganu refers to the young Sai Baba the very reincarnation of saint Kabir.

However, Das Ganu was known to take poetic liberties while relating stories about Sai Baba. Hence, there are no other sources to substantiate this story either.

Sathya Sai Baba's Account of Sai's Early Life



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SATYA SAI BABA

Interestingly, the Sathya Sai Baba of Puttaparthi has the same story to narrate about the childhood of Sai Baba. He too stated often that Shirdi Sai Baba was adopted by a fakir and his wife. However, Sathya Sai Baba did not enjoy much credibility with Shirdi Sai Baba's staunch devotees and hence, this narration is not of much importance either.

Sai Baba's Life According to the Sai Satcharita

According to the book, Sai Satcharita, Sai Baba visited the village of Shirdi when he was about 16 years old. He clearly was an ascetic, as he proceeded to take an asana and sat motionless under a neem tree, going into a deeply meditative state.

The residents of Shirdi were amazed to see such a young lad practicing such hard penance, not at all mindful about the weather conditions. The lad spoke to no one and did not move to shelter in the night. He merely kept sitting in the same pose and meditated all the time.

The boy soon attracted the curiosity of the villagers and was regularly visited by the religiously inclined, including Appa Jogle Mhalsapati and Kashinatha. Some people considered the boy crazy and threw stones at him. Shortly after, Sai Baba left the village and was never found again for a year or so.

There is some degree of evidence to suggest that during the time he was away from Shirdi, Sai moved around with many saints and fakirs, also working as a weaver. Some sources claim that he had fought along with the Rani Lakshmbai of Jhansi during the Indian Rebellion of 1857. This, though, cannot be backed by actual historical evidence.

One thing that is generally accepted is that Sai Baba had stayed in Shirdi for a period of three years, after which he disappeared for an entire year. After that, he came back to the village around 1858 and then permanently stayed on there for the rest of his lifetime. This fact would probably go to suggest that his year of birth was around 1838.

Sai Baba Returns to Shirdi

Sai Baba returned to Shirdi in the year 1858, after having been away for about a year. This time, he had adopted his easily recognizable style of dressing, which consisting of a Kafni or one-piece, knee-length robe and a cloth cap.

Ramgir Bua, one of the Sai's staunch devotees, has stated that Sai Baba was dressed like an athlete and sported long hair, flowing down to the end of his spine, when he arrived in Shirdi. He also said that he never had his hair cut, trimmed or shaved. It was only after Baba forfeited a wrestling match with one Mohdin Tamboli that he took to wear his kafni and cloth cap. In fact, according to certain sources, some of his devotees actually initially adopted this kind of dressing for a few years. Of course, there is no evidence to substantiate this fact, historical or otherwise.



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SAI BABA



Although Sai Baba, could have got a feast everyday from the villagers, he still preferred 'bhiksha' or begging. He is seen here in the market place with his begging bowl.

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**FROM THE BOOK
SAI BABA OF SHIRDI - A UNIQUE SAINT**

by

M. V. KAMATH AND V. B. KHER

For the next four to five years of his return to the village, Sai Baba lived under a neem tree, oft wandering into the jungle for long periods of time. He was withdrawn and uncommunicative and undertook long periods of rigorous meditation. His devotees eventually persuaded him to take up residence in an old and dilapidated mosque. He agreed to do so and then lived a solitary life there, surviving by begging for alms, also receiving his Hindu and Muslim devotees and other visitors.

Inside the mosque, Sai maintained a sacred fire, which is referred to as the dhuni. He collected the ash formed in this dhuni and distributed it to his visitors as the sacred Udi. This ash was believed to have strong healing powers.

Sai Baba also performed the function of a local hakim or doctor and often treated the sick by applying the Udi on them. Additionally, he would deliver spiritual teachings to his visitors, recommending that they read the sacred Hindu and Muslim texts, thereby experiencing the best of both worlds. He insisted on the incessant chanting of God's name - dhikra japa - often using cryptic phrases and parables to describe himself and his philosophy.

During important religious festivals, Sai would go from home to home, begging for alms, gather all the rice and vegetables that people offered him, and singlehandedly cook a feast for all the residents of the village. He served the food as prasad. After consuming the prasad, he would later dance and sing God's praises, along with other devotees.



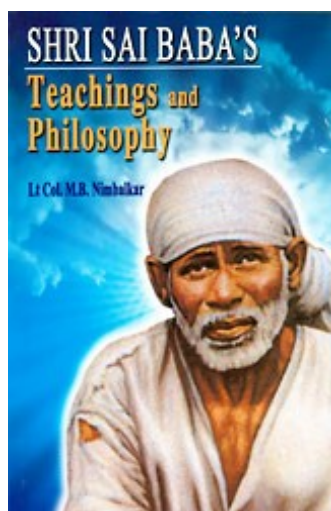
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SAI BABA

By and by, Sai Baba's started spreading to areas around Shirdi. Soon, devotees from Mumbai and other adjoining places started pouring in. Many of the Sai's followers, especially the ones that experienced his miracles, considered him to be an avatara of the

Supreme. Shirdi Sai Baba's very first temple was constructed at Bhivpuri, Karjat.

Sai Baba's Teachings



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**SHRI SAI BABA'S TEACHINGS
AND PHILOSOPHY**

by

LT. COL. M. B. NIMBALKAR

Shirdi Sai Baba was against all persecution based on caste or religion. He openly defied the religious orthodoxy that was most prevalent then. Also, though Sai Baba was himself a sanyasi, he advised his followers to lead a normal family life and experience the world as it was.

In his personal spiritual practice, Sai Baba observed both the Hindu and Muslim worship procedures. Though he shunned the regular use of rituals, he was all for the practice of namaz, chanting of Al-Fatiha, and Qur'an readings during all major Muslim festival days. Occasionally, Sai would recite the Al-Fatiha himself. He also enjoyed listening to moula and qawwali accompanied with the tabla and sarangi.

Sai Baba advocated that his devotees should lead an ethical and moral life, help others and love everyone without discrimination. He also advocated Nishtha (perseverance), Shraddha (dedication) and Saburi (patience). He advised his devotees and followers to keep performing their worldly duties, without being attached to them, and to keep being content, regardless of the life situation they had to face.

Sai Baba would often interpret Hindu and Muslim religious texts, explaining the meaning of the important portions from each text. His discourses would touch upon advanced subjects such as Advaita Vedanta, Bhakti Yoga, Karma Yoga and Jnana Yoga.

He also encouraged charity and placed great importance on the act of giving and sharing. It was his view that everyone should keep aside a sum for charity and give it away to the poor and the needy. He also asked his followers never to belittle anyone who was in dire need, and also to keep helping others whenever and in whatever way they possibly could.

Assurances Made by Sai Baba to His Devotees

Shirdi Sai Baba made 12 assurances to his devotees. His followers still worship these as the ultimate truth. The assurances made by Sai Baba to his devotees are as follows:

1. Whosoever enters Shirdi, their troubles will end forever.
2. Those that enter Dwarakamayi will immediately filled with joy and peace.
3. I will always be present here, even after leaving my mortal coil.
4. My tomb shall always protect my devotees' needs.
5. I will forever be present, even from my tomb.
6. When needed, I will speak to my devotees from my tomb.
7. I am always there to protect those who surrender to me and seek refuge in me.
8. If you look to me, I look to you.
9. If you give your burdens to me, I will willingly bear them all.
10. Those who seek my advice shall have it, always.
11. No true devotee of mine will ever be left in want.

12.If you take one step towards me, I will take 100 steps towards you.

Worship of Shirdi Sai Baba

The Shirdi Sai Baba movement had started off as early as the 19th century, while the saint was still residing in Shirdi. Mhalsapati Nagre, the local priest of the Khandoba temple there, was the Sai's very first devotee. Back in the initial phase of the movement, Sai Baba had very few followers. Their number was limited to only a small group of the inhabitants of Shirdi and a few other adjoining places.

The actual Sai Baba movement, though, fully blossomed during the 20th century, with Sai Baba's message spanning the length and breadth of India. He was adored by people from all religions. While Hindus worshipped him with Hindu rituals, pujas and aaratis, Muslims revered him as a great Sufi saint. Gradually, even Christians and Zoroastrians entered this huge movement that started gaining rapid momentum.

At the present time, Shirdi is considered as one of the major pilgrimage centers for Hindus. This beautiful temple is visited by tens of thousands of devotees, each and every day. It gets especially crowded during festival times. Interestingly, during his lifetime, Sai Baba had promised his followers that one day, devotees would throng the temple like ants being attracted to sugar.

These followers include people from all the castes and religions of the world. Today, the movement flourishes abroad as well, in places such as the United States, the United Kingdom, the United Arab Emirates, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and even in the remotest areas of the world.

Noteworthy Disciples of Shirdi Sai Baba

Sai Baba did not officially announce any spiritual heir who would take over after his time. Sai also never gave any formal diksha or initiation into the movement. Nevertheless, many of his disciples went on to become great spiritual leaders themselves. Upasni Maharaj of Sakori was one of the forefront disciples who became a spiritual leader. After Sai Baba's Samadhi, his devotees would offer daily aarati to Upasni Maharaj whenever he visited Shirdi.

Other major devotees include the following:

1. Nana Saheb Chandorkar - He was the Deputy Collector of Shirdi. An ardent follower of Baba, he witnessed many miracles. In fact, legend has it that Sai Baba saved his daughter from complications and near death during childbirth.
2. Ganpath Rao - He was a police officer who resigned from his post, in order to become an ascetic. He was also referred to as Das Ganu. He was the one who was responsible for spreading the spiritual message of Sai.
3. Tatyapa Patil - This lad had huge faith in Sai Baba and considered him his very own. Sai Baba, in turn, treated the lad like his nephew.
4. Baija Mai Kote Patil - She was Tatyapa Patil's mother and the one who Sai treated like his very own sister.

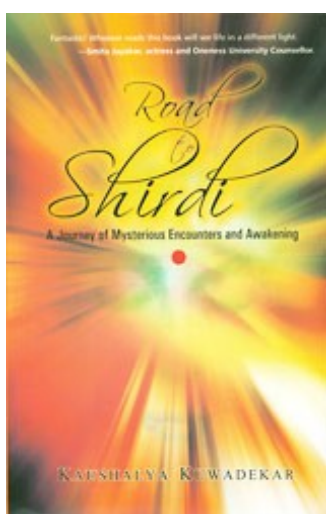


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**DEVOTEES CARRYING SHIRDI SAI BABA
ON A PALANQUIN**

5. Haji Abdul Baba - This devotee was an ardent follower of Sai Baba and selflessly served him until he took his last breath in the year 1918.
6. Madhav Rao Deshpande - Later known as Shama, he would forever debate and argue with Sai Baba, but was also very much devoted to him. In fact, it is said that Baba mentioned many times that Shama had a deep connection with Baba since the past many births.
7. Govindrao Raghunath Dabholkar - Also referred to as Hemadpant, this was the devotee who Sai allowed to pen the Shri Sai Satcharita.
8. Mhalsapati Chimanji Nagare - A priest of the Khandoba Temple at Shirdi, he is also believed to be the very first follower of the saint.
9. Radha Krishna Mai - A very ardent devotee of Sai Baba, she cleaned the temple every single day and took care of all of Baba's needs.

Miracles Performed by Shirdi Sai Baba



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**ROAD TO SHIRDI - A JOURNEY
OF MYSTERIOUS ENCOUNTERS
AND AWAKENING**

by

KAUSHALYA KUWADEKAR

Shirdi Sai Baba's devotees from all over the world have reported several miracles performed by the seer, long after he left his mortal coil. Even during his lifetime, Shirdi Sai performed many miracles to the utter amazement and awe of his devotees. In fact, miracles were almost an everyday phenomenon at Dwarakamai. These miracles included instances of mindreading, materialization, exorcisms, bilocation, body transcending, bringing back the dead to life, levitation and so on.

Most popular of Sai Baba's leelas or miracles are as follows:

Sai Baba Stops the Roof

One day, Sai Baba was having lunch with fellow devotees, as he sometimes chose to do. Suddenly, there was a cracking sound from the roof of the old building. Those gathered out there immediately realized that it would soon come crashing down. Some of the devotees immediately ran outside to protect themselves.

Sai Baba, in an authoritative voice, asked the roof to wait and then continued to eat. Those who had undying faith in his powers continued to eat peacefully. After finishing the meal and then moving away, Sai Baba said, "Now you may fall". Immediately, the roof came crashing down.

Sai Lights Lamps with Water

This is one miracle that made all the villagers realize his true divinity. Sai Baba, who many in the village considered was just a mad beggar, would often go begging for oil to light the lamps at Dwarakamai. Some shopkeepers were against giving him this oil and

so they conspired to humiliate him in front of all the others. They decided to deny the oil to him when he next came begging for it. Sai, who did not get any oil that day, walked away unperturbed.

Sai Baba then drank some water and spat the same in the container he used to beg for the oil. He then poured water into the earthen lamps placed in the mosque. To the utter surprise of everyone present there, the lamps immediately lighted up and stayed brightly lit all night.

Sai Knew Every Visitor in Advance

Sai Baba always knew if someone was visiting him, much before they actually entered Dwarakamai. He would talk to his devotees present at the time, telling them exactly who was coming, what they were, from which village they were visiting and so on. There have also been several instances when he came in people's dreams, asking them to visit him in Shirdi. Many of these "invitees" never even knew who Sai Baba was. Strangely, things would work for them in such a way that they would find their way to his abode.

Sai Baba also had the powers to physically manifest in front of a devotee who was far away from Shirdi at the time. He would come to them in physical form and advise them about the actions they should perform at any given point of time, also warning them of impending danger.

It was also true that no one could gain access into the mosque without his express permission. If they tried to force their entry into Dwarakamai, they would experience all kinds of obstacles, sometimes even physically walls blocking their entry into the mosque. Even today, devotees believe that they can visit the temple and take his darshan only if he called them there.

Sai Heals the Sick

Many times, Sai would take on a person's illness onto himself, in order to heal him or her. He would then remain sick for a while and then come back to normal in a little while. If a devotee had burned his hand in oil, Sai would be suffering the pain at the same place and time. In the meantime, the devotee would have been completely and miraculously healed of the burns. Once, Sai gave up his own body for a few days, in order to save the life of a devotee who died before his time. Entering the devotee's body, Sai healed him, brought him back to life and then re-entered his own body.

Sai also gave the boon of progeny to childless couples who desperately wanted a child. Devotees praying to him for the good fortune of children would invariably be fortunate enough to receive the grace of the Sai's blessings.

Many times, Sai Baba would manifest as a devotee's ishta-devata (favourite deity), in order to instil faith in him or her. There are accounts of the Sai appearing as Vithoba, Vishnu, Rama, Krishna, Shiva, Jesus and so on.

Sai Baba Tells Shama about the Udi Pot Being Taken Away

Sai Baba left his mortal form on the Dusshera day of 1918. While the entire Shirdi was in darkness and despair, Shama was particularly mournful. After begging forgiveness of the Sai for all his sins committed in his lifetime, he decided to meet Kaka Saheb in Bombay.

Before leaving Shirdi, Shama had collected a pot full of Sai's sacred Udi and kept it in his house. The women of his house unknowingly proceeded to take the pot of Udi for cleaning. Shama was sleeping in Bombay, when Sai appeared in his dream and asked him stop them from throwing away the Udi. Shama immediately rushed back to Shirdi and saved the pot in the nick of time.

The Shri Sai Satcharita recounts many more such miracles performed by Sai Baba during his lifetime and after.

The Main Reason behind Sai Performing Miracles

Sai Baba had only one reason to perform all his leelas in front of his devotees. He wanted to attract people towards the divine, thereby helping them cultivate the qualities of devotion, love and compassion for those who were suffering. Once the devotees came close to Sai Baba, they would find themselves awash with the love and grace that incessantly flowed from his divine, fatherly presence. That is also the reason why his devotees call him "Baba" - this is a term used to address one's father.

The Shri Sai Satcharita

Many books and magazines were already going in print about the time the Shri Sai Satcharita came into existence. But this book enjoys the maximum importance and is actually considered sacred to Sai Baba's devotees. There are valid reasons for the same.

The Shri Sai Satcharita was originally penned in Marathi in the year 1916, by Govindrao Raghunath Dabholkar, who Sai nicknamed as Hemadpant. Comprising a total of 53 chapters, this book describes the life and times of Sai Baba, his teachings and also documents his many miracles. This book compares Sai's love to that of a mother's love, which is tender and caring and ever-loving and forgiving. But like a mother scolds her child, it shows Sai too chiding his devotees and nudging them back to the right path. almost

It also tells us how we should love and surrender to God and trust our Guru. Because God created the entire world, it also teaches that we should love all forms of existence and never hurt any creation of God.

The Shri Sai Satcharita talks about Sai Baba's stories and miracles by way of parables and by drawing comparisons. It gives devotees mental peace and releases them from their worldly sufferings. This book is a veritable ocean of knowledge and they say that one can actually feel waves of love emanating from Sai's divine being as one keeps reading it.

Hemadpant, it is believed, completely surrendered his ego at Sai Baba's feet and invoked his grace before beginning work on this book. The path in front of him cleared immediately and the words flowed out effortlessly. The final result was his own experience of boundless joy and self-realization.

Before attempting to write the book, Hemadpant wanted to ask Sai's permission, but did not have the courage to approach him with the request. Hence, went to Shama and asked him to request Baba for permission. Sai Baba was moved by his humility and devotion and giving Hemadpant some Udi, blessed him. Asking him to start penning pages, Sai promised that his grace would be there throughout. He also told Hemadpant that he would be an outward instrument for Sai himself to manifest through him and document his own life story.

It is believed that those who completely finish reading the Shri Sai Satcharita within a week of starting it would be able to fulfil all their desires, worldly or otherwise. Such is the Mahima (greatness) of the Sai Satcharita.

The Worship of Sai Baba in the Present Day

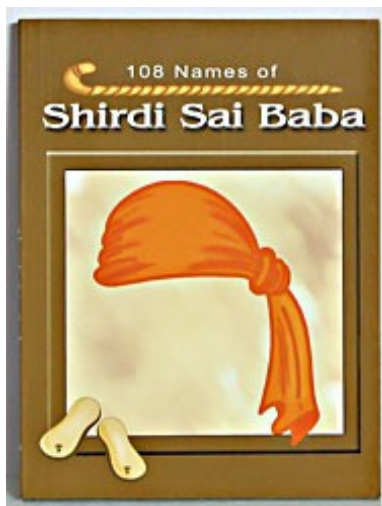
Today, it is very common to find a Sai Baba shrine or temple in any city, town or village, irrespective of its location or size. Sai Baba's main temple is located at Shirdi (situated approximately 300 kilometres from Mumbai). This was built in the year 1922. This impressive-looking, devotion-inspiring temple houses the main temple of Sai Baba, one can find a beautiful marble, larger-than-life idol of the saint, created by the sculptor, Balaji Vasant Talim. This idol is installed in the Samadhi Mandir and is placed just above Baba's tomb. In Dwarakamai, there is also a life-size portrait of Sai Baba, created by Shama Rao Jaykar, an artist from Mumbai.



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SRI SAI CHALISA

In the main temple at Shirdi as well as all the other major temples in India and across the world, devotees offer pooja, aaratis and other forms of ritual worship. The caretakers of the temple idol at Shirdi, who are believed to be descendants of the original devotees during Sai Baba's time, conduct 4 aaratis every single day, starting from the early morning Kakad Aarati, proceeding to the Noon Aarati, then one in the evening and finally, the Shej Aarati at night, before putting their Lord to sleep, for the day.



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108 NAMES OF SHIRDI SAI BABA

by

VIJAYA KUMAR

Many staunch devotees regularly chant the 108 names of Sai Baba, as a means of offering worship to him.

Strangely enough, Sai Baba himself was against merely performing rituals. He wanted his devotees to attain self-realization in their lifetime, through the path of Shraddha and Bhakti.

Sai Baba Features in the Indian Postal Stamp

The Indian Postal Service released a stamp in commemoration of Sai Baba in May 2008. In late 2009, the New and Renewable Energy Minister, Mr. Farooq Abdullah, unveiled what is believed to be the largest steam solar system in the world, at the shrine at Shirdi. The energy ministry contributed Rs.58 lacs for the project. The lion's share of the expenses, though, which amounted to over a crore of rupees, was paid up by the Shri Sai Baba Sansthan Trust. This system is supposedly capable of cooking 20,000 meals per day for pilgrims visiting the shrine.

Interestingly, the Shirdi Temple Trust is considered the second richest in India. It is second only to the Tirupati Devasthanam Trust at Andhra Pradesh.

Shirdi Sai Baba in Television Serials and Films

Shirdi Sai Baba, being such a hugely popular figure, has been portrayed in several television serials in various languages around India. His story has been the subject of many Indian films as well. One of the most popular films is "Shirdi Ke Sai Baba", which was released in 1977. This film was directed by Askok V. Bhushan and acclaimed actor Sudhir Dalvi played the title role of Sai Baba. It went on to become a mega hit, after which other similar films also came into being.

Footnote - My Own Experience of Shirdi Sai Baba's Grace

Before winding up this article, I would like to share my own experience of Shirdi Sai Baba's grace. My parents had always wished to have a girl child. However, my mother had been told that she would not be able to bear another child (I have an older brother); either medically and astrologically.

This is when my parents decided to visit the Shirdi Temple to pray for a daughter. Miraculously, my mother was given the due date for the coming Vijayadashami (Dusshera), which also happens to be the Samadhi Day of Shirdi Sai Baba.

Though she faced some complications during her pregnancy, all went well and I was born, 13 years after my brother! As a gesture of gratitude to Sai Baba, my parents named me Saipriya.

Not only that; my parents tell me that my very first trip out of Mumbai, when I was merely 5 months old, was to Shirdi. There, they placed me at the feet of the idol of Sai Baba, as an act of both thankfulness and surrender to the Saint-Seer of Shirdi.

This article was written by Priya Viswanathan, a teacher/performer of Bharata Natyam, Classical Music and Classical Instrumental Veena. A recipient of several awards for both music and dance, Priya is also a freelance writer online. She currently writes for About.com, a subsidiary of the New York Times Company (<http://mobiledevices.about.com>)

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