

# A Liberal Saint

A review of

Kevin R. D. Shepherd

## *Sai Baba of Shirdi: A Biographical Investigation*

(New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 2015)

I

This is the third of Kevin Shepherd's books describing Shirdi Sai Baba. The publication history includes *Gurus Rediscovered: Biographies of Sai Baba of Shirdi and Upasni Maharaj of Sakori* (1986), and *Investigating the Sai Baba Movement: A Clarification of Misrepresented Saints and Opportunism* (2005). There are also some online features, including '[Shirdi Sai Baba and the Sai Baba Movement](#)', which can be located via the author's full [bibliography](#).

*Biographical Investigation* is the first book that Shepherd has devoted solely to Shirdi Sai Baba. This is his most comprehensive treatment of the subject to date, with 340 pages of text, including an Appendix on 'Narasimhaswami's *Life of Sai Baba*'. Plus over 700 annotations, a bibliography, and a comprehensive index (the entry on Shirdi Sai Baba is four pages long). The 34-page index is substantially longer than the index appearing in Warren's *Unravelling the Enigma*, and is of closely comparable extent to that found in the Sai Baba coverage by Rigopoulos (published by SUNY Press, with an index of 32 pages).

*Biographical Investigation* is well illustrated with many old photographs (and paintings) of interest, both in the text and in plates. There are 81 chapters, ranging between one and fifteen pages in length, many of these comprising descriptions of devotees who came into contact with Shirdi Sai Baba. This material affords an insight into the character and behaviour of the enigmatic mystic.

I should make clear that my own academic background is in philosophy, and not the history and sociology of religion, although I have maintained a nonspecialist interest in the latter for almost thirty years. I first read *Gurus Rediscovered* towards the end of the 1980s, and it was clear to me even then that Shepherd's approach was a scholarly one, very far removed from devotional and other popular idioms, an appraisal that appears to have been confirmed by academics in the field.

For instance, in his 1993 *The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi* (an adaptation of his 1987 doctoral thesis), Dr Antonio Rigopoulos referred to *Gurus Rediscovered* as a 'ground-breaking work presenting Sai Baba as a Muslim and a Sufi adept ... thus countering the "Hinduizing" tendency of all past Indian authors' (xxvii). Another academic, Dr Marianne Warren (d. 2004), also converted her doctoral thesis (1996) into a publication, *Unravelling the Enigma: Shirdi Sai Baba in the Light of Sufism* (1999, revised edition 2004). Warren notably says of Rigopoulos that although he 'acknowledges the saint's Muslim *Sufi* aspect, he does not pursue it, and never academically questions the obvious Hindu bias in his assessment and interpretation of Sai Baba' (p. 18). In contrast, she writes: 'Prior to Shepherd, the perennial question was whether Sai Baba was Hindu or Muslim, with most of the secondary writers emphasizing the Hindu interpretation. Shepherd was the

first author to question this Hindu bias and to redefine the broad “Muslim” category, dividing it into the orthodox Islamic law or *sharia* and *Sufi* mysticism ... Shepherd observes many links between Sai Baba and the strong *Sufi* tradition in the Deccan. He notes that since his death, the saint has been totally embraced by the Hindus and that in the process the Muslim minority in Shirdi has been eclipsed’ (p. 15).

Both Rigopoulos and Warren were followers of Sathya Sai Baba (1926–2011), whose own career is relevant to research on Shirdi Sai. Ratnakaram Satyanarayana Raju assumed the name of the Shirdi saint in the 1940s, the latter’s celebrity in India having been on the increase since his death in 1918. Unlike the aforementioned academic authors, Shepherd has always distinguished the original Sai Baba from his namesake, who claimed to be a reincarnation of the *faqir*. Shepherd plausibly described Sathya Sai as an opportunist, in his detailed book *Investigating the Sai Baba Movement* (a work still not assimilated by some academic commentators, who merely cite *Gurus Rediscovered* because that earlier and much shorter book was mentioned by Dr. Warren and Dr. Rigopoulos; the lack of appropriate reading is all too obvious). Shirdi Sai Baba was an impoverished *faqir* who lived in a dilapidated mosque and begged for minimal daily sustenance, while Sathya Sai Baba was an ostentatious commercial guru who acquired considerable wealth and who claimed an ability to perform dramatic miracles.

The reputation of Sathya Sai Baba became tarnished by strong allegations of fraud, sexual misconduct, and collusion in murder. Warren recorded the consequent shift in her own outlook, as found in her ‘Author’s Preface’ to the revised 2004 edition of her book (pp. xvii–xviii). In his online ‘[Marianne Warren and Shirdi Sai Baba](#)’, Shepherd relays that Warren intended to go further in writing an expose of Sathya Sai Baba (a draft introduction is available [here](#)), but she died before this was accomplished. Chapters 79 and 80 of Shepherd contain information on the so-called ‘Sai Baba Movement’ and Sathya Sai Baba respectively.

Shepherd now represents a significant aspect of the argument concerning Sufi dimensions of Shirdi Sai Baba. In an earlier work, Shepherd has already addressed certain confusing comments of Warren. This issue has implications for orthodox and unorthodox forms of ‘Sufism’, variations in usage of the term *majzub*, and familiarity with alternative sources (*Investigating the Sai Baba Movement*, pp. 49–58).

In his new book, Shepherd again outlines some revealing differences of approach (*Biographical Investigation*, pp. 41–2, 345–6 n.34). His presentation further diverges from Warren by giving far more attention to the liberal attitude of Sai Baba towards Hinduism. Shepherd closely details events in relation to Hindu devotees. In fact, his book strikes an unusual balance between coverage of the Hindu devotees and information about the Muslim followers and contacts. This is a refreshing feature difficult to find elsewhere.

## II

*Biographical Investigation* analyses various source materials, including those of Dabholkar, Narasimhaswami, V. B. Kher, and other influential Indian devotee writers. Significant contrasts and complexities emerge. There are also chapters describing encounters between Sai Baba and specific individuals.

Shepherd writes that his objective is 'to probe diverse sources and materials on Shirdi Sai Baba, in an attempt to fathom the nature of events in his biography' (p. v). He is not concerned with miracle stories, and says that his own inclination is 'to pursue historical details, insofar as these can be charted' (p. vi). As we shall see below, his use of specialist historical research provides an informative background to the life of the Shirdi saint. More significantly, perhaps, he supplements the 'canonical' Sai Baba literature with references from another corpus of source material: published works by writers associated with Meher Baba that have been generally obscured by the Sai Baba canon (see Chapter 9, 'The Meher Baba Literature', for a detailed discussion; and p. 256 and Chapter 70, for further examples).

As far as basic historical facts are concerned, there is no evidence for the pre-Shirdi phase, other than what Sai Baba himself said. His habit of using figurative speech means that such statements are difficult to accept at face value. Estimated dates for his birth range from 1836 to 1858 (see p. 4). His original name is unknown. The early Shirdi period remains largely obscure, despite some ingenious reconstruction by Kher. 'Detailed coverage only applies to the last decade or so of this biography, from *circa* 1910' (p. 4). The sources for this period nevertheless have drawbacks that include conflicting versions of the same event and a tendency to hagiography. 'A century after his death, there are different versions of his life in evidence. These include scholarly accounts and devotee epics, pronounced variations and disagreements, and the complication of a mythology devised by Sathya Sai Baba' (p. 40).

The date of Sai Baba's arrival in Shirdi is uncertain, with alternative chronologies being favoured (see pp. 7–8). That means the 1850s or 1868–72. In this village of Maharashtra, the population was predominantly Hindu. Sai Baba eventually settled in a dilapidated mosque. 'For a long time, many of the Shirdi villagers continued to regard Sai Baba as a stranger, and as a mad *faqir*' (p. 18).

A following gradually developed, which included many Hindus. Sai Baba was not eager to convert people to his own views. He was not a preacher, but instead a retiring and eccentric ascetic. He was unpredictable in his reactions to diverse visitors, many of whom sought material benefits.

A daily routine evolved that included a begging round (see Chapter 66). At the mosque, visitors arrived for *darshan* (a Hindu term for meeting). In his last years, Sai Baba would ask affluent visitors for a monetary donation or *dakshina*. A crucial point is, however, that all *dakshina* monies were redistributed to those in need by the end of the day – there was no accumulation of wealth (see Chapter 52). Sai Baba also redistributed much of the food that he begged. The abstemious nature of his lifestyle is rather striking.

Hindu visitors substantially outnumbered the Muslims. The Hindu devotees imported elements of their own tradition, including the ceremonial worship known as *puja* and *arati*. Shepherd's book has considerable detail culled from numerous sources. There were strong variations in Sai Baba's response to individuals. Several chapters reveal this. Consider, for example, Chapter 61, which is entitled 'Swami Narayan and High Teaching'.

Tozer (or Thoser) was a civil servant who first visited Sai Baba in 1910. He later became a *sannyasin* and was known as Shri Narayan Ashram (or Swami Narayan). Interviewed by Narasimhaswami in

1936, his testimony included the following statement: ‘Many people who approached [Sai] Baba cared for material things only, and hardly any came to him for the highest spiritual benefit of *Atma Nishtha*’ (quoted on p. 238). Narayan also referred to a spiritual experience gained at Shirdi. ‘Sai Baba conveyed to him, without any words, the feeling that all differences were unreal, the one reality underlying all else’ (p. 239).

Narayan reported that Sai Baba was ‘mostly silent’ when he first encountered him in 1910, just before the increase in visitors from Bombay commenced. The latter trend resulted in Sai Baba ‘being pressed into new habits and ways; devotees, to suit their own taste, forced numerous forms and observances’ (quoted on p. 239). Narayan also observed that Sai Baba employed parables when communicating with the crowds that flocked to see him, in contrast with the ‘few direct and plain words’ that he spoke to Narayan and some other individuals. Shepherd comments: ‘There was no doctrine, no system, no set of religious practices to be followed, no meditation agenda, no Vedanta, no Yoga’ (p. 240).

Two other contacts were Meher Baba (Chapter 69) and Upasani Maharaj (Chapter 78). Merwan Irani (1894–1969), later known as Meher Baba, achieved a significant reputation in India and abroad, but ‘is not mentioned in most accounts of Sai Baba’ (p. 269). A Zoroastrian born at Poona, in 1915 he came into contact with Sai Baba, after Hazrat Babajan had prompted him to visit Shirdi. It is evident that Babajan knew about Sai Baba, and held him in high regard, saying cryptically that Sai possessed a ‘key’ which she herself could not give Merwan (p. 269).

In later years, Merwan (by then known as Meher Baba) was critical of the devotee attitude towards reputed miracles of Sai Baba. ‘This has been mistakenly understood by some as a negative reflection upon Sai Baba. Confusion about this subject is pronounced. In reality, Meher Baba acknowledged Shirdi Sai as the leading spiritual master of his time’ (p. 271). Shepherd also remarks that when Merwan visited Sai Baba and Upasani Maharaj (at the Khandoba temple), there were at Shirdi ‘three men who became legends in their lifetime’ (p. 271).

The chapter on Upasani Maharaj (1870–1941) is brief. The author informs that a compressed account cannot do justice to the complexity of events relating to this figure. Shepherd explains that a separate book on the subject is in preparation. Meanwhile, he refers the interested reader to his ‘preliminary’ attempts at biography of Upasani in two earlier books, one of these being *Investigating the Sai Baba Movement*. Upasani arrived at Shirdi in 1911, and thereafter stayed for a few years at the deserted Khandoba temple, following the instruction of Sai Baba.

Chapter 70 profiles Gustad Hansotia, an atypical follower of Sai Baba. As a Zoroastrian who settled in Shirdi, he was distinct from the rest of the population, which was either Hindu or Muslim. Gustad was entirely neglected in the Sai Baba literature until the 1986 publication of *Gurus Rediscovered* (see p. 272; and p. 390, n. 631). The present reviewer can add that, seven years later, the well known book by Rigopoulos included a very fleeting reference to Gustad in an annotation of three lines, and solely deriving from Australian poet Francis Brabazon, one of Meher Baba’s devotees (see Rigopoulos 1993, p. 219, n. 178). Warren’s contribution in this respect is more substantial, but her data is derived from Shepherd’s *Meher Baba: An Iranian Liberal* (see Warren 1999, pp. 112–13; and

p. 128, n. 40, where she gives the copyright date of 1986 instead of the publication date of 1988). Shepherd has since devoted a chapter to Gustad in *Hazrat Babajan: A Pathan Sufi of Poona* (2014).

During his teens, Gustad became dissatisfied with orthodox Zoroastrianism. Living in Bombay, he first visited Shirdi in 1910. He was deeply impressed by the *faqir*, and thereafter visited Sai Baba every month. In 1918 Gustad left his employment in Bombay and moved to Shirdi. His only possessions were a bedding roll and a trunk. Gustad had no accommodation and slept on a verandah, with permission from the owner. Sai Baba at first ignored him, but Gustad 'accepted this, not having any status complex'. Two months passed before the *faqir* 'acknowledged his presence, as though he had just arrived' (p. 273). Enduring much travail, but in the process getting closer to Sai Baba, Gustad remained at Shirdi until the saint's death in October 1918, being one of the coffin bearers at the funeral.

Shepherd pointedly remarks: 'Gustad Hansotia was forgotten in all the standard versions of Sai Baba. The fact remains that Gustad is the only man known to have been in close contact with four of the most famous twentieth century mystics in Maharashtra, namely Sai Baba, Upasani Maharaj, Hazrat Babajan, and Meher Baba' (p. 276).

The demise of Shirdi Sai was attended by an increase in what Warren's Sufi paradigm disapprovingly called the 'Hinduizing' influence, to some extent associated with the influx of Hindu visitors from Bombay beginning about 1910. Shepherd does not disagree with this complaint, but nevertheless adopts a different approach to some materials. One discrepancy in the format of Warren was to promote the Hinduizing lore of Sathya Sai concerning Shirdi Sai. Shepherd evidently perceived the anomaly, but deficient assessors assumed that Warren was superior (and therefore correct) because she was an academic and he a citizen author.

Uninformed persons (e.g., some Wikipedia editors) failed to grasp that Warren herself eventually repudiated the extravagant lore created by Sathya Sai. The disavowal occurred after the year 2000, and after her lengthy book was published. This factor contradicts her supposed accuracy, and was a cause of acute embarrassment to her. Shepherd now provides far more information about Shirdi Sai and his devotees than did Warren, and without the disconcerting concessions to miracle lore likewise found in Rigopoulos.

A preoccupation with the miraculous is also found in some Indian devotee accounts. This factor boomed in the career of Sathya Sai Baba, whose claim to be a reincarnation of the charismatic *faqir* assisted the confusing popular image of Shirdi Sai as a miracle worker. According to Warren, Shirdi Sai 'demonstrated many miraculous powers' (*Unravelling the Enigma*, p. 29). Shepherd, in contrast, finds proof that Shirdi Sai did not claim miracles (Chapter 41). He emphasizes that we may gain a more accurate picture of events if we examine the Shirdi saint in a different way: 'It is possible to approach Sai Baba in a more rational spirit without reducing his significance' (p. 204).

### III

Like the equally enigmatic Hazrat Babajan (d. 1931), Shirdi Sai Baba resists straightforward categorization. Both of these entities favoured the description of *faqir* in relation to themselves. Other terms that have since been employed for Sai Baba include 'Sufi' and 'guru', which may be too

generalizing, concealing rather than revealing nuances. Shepherd emphasizes that ‘some flexibility is required in the effort to comprehend him’ (p. 2).

A context for Shirdi Sai’s renowned religious liberalism is afforded by the syncretism between Bhakti Hinduism and Sufism that occurred in Maharashtra over centuries (see p. 3 and Chapter 6). The attire of Sai Baba was that of a Muslim *faqir*, and he spoke the Muslim language of Urdu. However, Sai Baba was reticent on the issue of his religious affiliation, and was not concerned to promote himself in religious terms. His predilection for allusive speech (Chapter 17) is a complication for straightforward assessment. He did not give discourses, and preferred stories.

One of the key factors in comprehending Shirdi Sai is his relationship to Sufism (on page 22, for example, Shepherd describes him as ‘an independent Sufi’). The significance of this subject to Shepherd may be gauged from the fact that the longest chapter of his book (*Faqirs, Sufis, and Majazib*) is devoted to this topic (see pp. 22–37). By drawing on the scholarship of specialists such as Richard M. Eaton and Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, he underlines the complexity of the religious situation in India between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries: ‘This neglected subject can serve to illustrate the marginalised sectors of independent Sufi mysticism existing in the Deccan’ (p. 26). Shepherd’s use of this material is in contrast to the interpretation of Warren.

Shepherd complains that a tendency of Warren was to associate Shirdi Sai with Sufi Orders (see pp. 22, 36, 63; also p. 35 for a similar observation about Rigopoulos). The term ‘Sufi’ could often designate a member of an established Order, involving a penchant for orthodox beliefs and political assimilation to a ruling elite. Among such established Orders, there was a trend towards accumulation of property and prestige, and also the hereditary transmission of leadership roles. In other situations, ‘Sufi’ could mean an independent liberal mystic trying to avoid persecution by a ruling elite. ‘The variations in Sufi role can be striking; in this respect, the word Sufi is a blanket term covering many dispositions and beliefs’ (p. 27).

Such historical context may help to explain certain statements of Sai Baba appearing in the notebook of his Muslim disciple Abdul Baba (see Chapter 5). This largely Urdu text was neglected for over eighty years, a casualty of the Hinduizing process. Warren deserves credit for commissioning a translation of the notebook, which is included in her own 1999 book. Apart from confirming the deep familiarity of Sai Baba with the Islamic and Sufi traditions, the Urdu notebook evidences that the saint was critical of those he described as ‘false *pirs* and *faqirs*’.

Any attempt to do justice to Shepherd’s detailed treatment of these matters would add to an already lengthy review, and instead I refer any interested reader to the relevant Chapter 7. However, I should mention that Shepherd pioneered the association of Sai Baba with the *majazib* (singular: *majzub*), a factor astounding some Eastern and Western academics who read his early work *Gurus Rediscovered*. Warren reacted, and tried to reduce his credibility on this point, regarding him as a rival to her own Sufi-based theory. However, her arguments in this direction are not convincing, and even less so, her attempt to demean Shepherd’s early criticism of Narasimhaswami (a criticism deriving from Meher Baba, and in part relating to the subject of miracles).

In his new book, Shepherd again argues for the relevance of the *majazib* to his subject, but not in any unqualified manner. On the one hand he acknowledges Sai Baba's affinity with the *majazib* in the 'independence from religious doctrine' (p. 19) and the *faqir*'s 'aloof, disconcerting, and unpredictable' behaviour (p. 24; see also p. 35). On the other hand, Shepherd finds that the label is 'very inadequate for specifics, merely amounting to a well known signifier of abstracted God-absorption', and that it 'fails to qualify the diversity of temperament in evidence ... Different types of *majzub* (including superficial imitators) are discernible in the process of liberal Sufism' (p. 35).

Therefore, although the term *majzub* is 'evocative' (p. 35) and the *majazib* 'are a useful reference point in the study of unorthodox Sufism' (p. 36), Shepherd finds that 'the subject lacks definition' (p. 36). 'To some extent, Sai Baba can be viewed as a *faqir* exemplar of the tangent from "orthodox Sufis," a trend which goes back many centuries in both Indian and Iranian milieux. It is not necessary to describe him as a *majzub*, that term having become a popularised label denoting eccentricity. Furthermore, some academic commentators have mistakenly treated the *majzub* role as an indication of clinical madness' (p. 37).

The emerging profile is one of an unorthodox 'Sufi' whose tolerance of Hinduism was exceptional. 'Distinctive figures like Shirdi Sai Baba, Hazrat Babajan of Poona, and Tajuddin Baba of Nagpur were mystics living well outside the network of Sufi Orders. Criteria conventionally applied to Sufi Orders do not work for such exceptions' (p. 35).

There are widespread misconceptions as to what Shirdi Sai Baba taught. The significant Chapter 73 in *Biographical Investigation* counters the confusion. For instance, Sai Baba did not teach Vedanta. However, he was 'a supporter of reincarnation, a theme mentioned frequently in the sources' (p. 294).

Chapter 77 ventures a commentary on the scenario of Nath Yogis versus Sufi Orders. To the best of my knowledge, this treatment is unprecedented in the Sai Baba literature. Shepherd here employs reference to the significant research of Professor Carl W. Ernst. The point is being made by Shepherd that Sai Baba bypassed preoccupations strongly associated with both the Naths and the Sufi Orders, religious contingents whose rivalry persisted over centuries in India. 'Sai Baba ignored the practices favoured by the Nath Yogis and a number of Sufi Orders' (p. 312). The angle of realistic interpretation is here very different to earlier speculations of Charles White, a 1970s innovator of 'Sai Baba movement' theory whose influence proved confusing.

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