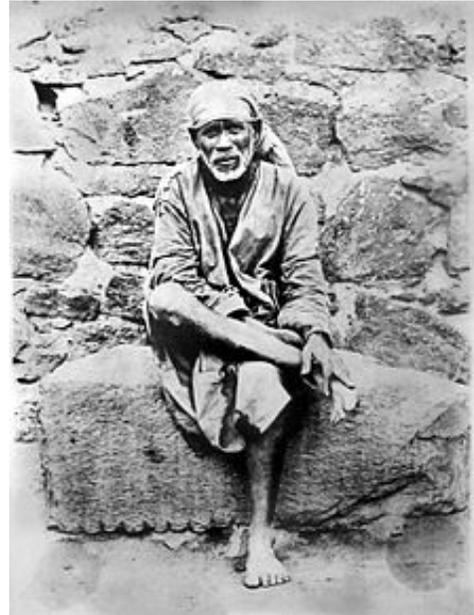


Sai Baba of Shirdi

Sai Baba of Shirdi (1838 – 15 October 1918; resided in [Shirdi](#)), also known as **Shirdi Sai Baba**, was an Indian spiritual master who was and is regarded by his devotees as a saint, *fakir*, and *satguru*, according to their individual proclivities and beliefs. He was revered by both his Hindu and Muslim devotees, and during, as well as after, his life it remained uncertain if he was a Hindu or a Muslim himself. This however was of no consequence to Sai Baba himself. Sai Baba stressed the importance of surrender to the guidance of the true *Satguru* or *Murshid*, who, having gone the path to divine consciousness himself, will lead the disciple through the jungle of spiritual training.



Sai Baba remains a very popular Master, especially in India, and is worshiped by people around the world. He had no love for perishable things and his sole concern was self-realization. He taught a moral code of love, forgiveness, helping others, charity, contentment, inner peace, and devotion to God and guru. He gave no distinction based on religion or caste. Sai Baba's teaching combined elements of [Hinduism](#) and [Islam](#): he gave the Hindu name *Dwarakamayī* to the mosque he lived in, practised Muslim rituals, taught using words and figures that drew from both traditions, and was buried in [Shirdi](#). One of his well known epigrams, "*Sabka Malik Ek*" ("One God governs all"), is associated with [Hinduism](#), [Islam](#) and [Sufism](#). He also said, "*Trust in me and your prayer shall be answered*". He always uttered "*Allah Malik*" ("God is King").

Background

No verifiable information is given regarding Sai Baba's real name, place or time of birth. When asked about his past, he often gave elusive responses. The name "Sai" was given to him upon his arrival at [Shirdi](#), a town in the west Indian state of [Maharashtra](#). Mahalsapati, a local temple priest, recognised him as a [Muslim](#) saint and greeted him with the words 'Ya Sai!', meaning 'Welcome Sai!'. *Sai* or *Sayi* is a [Persian](#) title given to [Sufi](#) saints, meaning 'poor one' and in Banjara language, "sayi" means good one. The honorific "Baba" means "father; grandfather; old man; sir" in most Indian and Middle Eastern languages. Thus Sai Baba denotes "holy father", "saintly father" or "poor old man". Alternatively, the [Sindhi](#) and [Urdu](#) word "sāī.n" an honorific title for a virtuoso, a saint, or a feudal lord (i.e. a patron), is derived from the [Persian](#) word "sāyeh", which literally means "shadow" but figuratively refers to patronage or protection. The [Hindi-Urdu](#) word "sāyā" comes from the same borrowing. Thus, it could also mean "Master Father." However, *Sāī* may also be an acronym of the [Sanskrit](#) term "Sakshat Eshwar", a reference to God. *Sakshat* means "incarnate" and Eshwar means "God".

Some of Sai Baba's disciples became famous as spiritual figures and saints, such as Mahalsapati, a priest of the [Khandoba](#) temple in Shirdi, and Upasni Maharaj. He was revered by other saints, such as Saint Bidkar Maharaj, Saint Gangagir, Saint Janakidas Maharaj, and Sati Godavari Mataji. Sai Baba referred to several saints as 'my brothers', especially the disciples of [Swami Samartha of Akkalkot](#).

Early years

Sai Baba's biographer Narasimha Swamiji claims that Sai Baba was born as the child of Brahmin parents:

"On one momentous occasion, very late in his life, he revealed to Mahalsapathy the interesting fact that his parents were Brahmins of Patri in the Nizam's State. Patri is Taluk in Parbhani district, near Manwath. Sai Baba added, in explanation of the fact that he was living in a Mosque, that while still a tender child his Brahmin parents handed him over to the care of a fakir who brought him up. This is fairly indisputable testimony, as Mahlsapathy was a person of sterling character noted for his integrity, truthfulness and vairagya." —Narasimha Swamiji, *Life of Sai Baba*.

According to the book *Sai Satcharita*, Sai Baba arrived at the village of [Shirdi](#) in the [Ahmednagar District](#) of [Maharashtra, British India](#), when he was about 16 years old. He led an ascetic life, sitting motionless under a [neem](#) tree and [meditating](#) while sitting in an [asana](#). The *Shri Sai Satcharita* recounts the reaction of the villagers:

The people of the village were wonder-struck to see such a young lad practising hard penance, not minding heat or cold. By day he associated with no one, by night he was afraid of nobody.

His presence attracted the curiosity of the villagers, and he was regularly visited by the religiously inclined, including Mahalsapati, Appa Jogle and Kashinatha. Some considered him mad and threw stones at him. Sai Baba left the village, and little is known about him after that.

There are some indications that he met with many saints and fakirs, and worked as a weaver. He claimed to have been with the army of [Rani Lakshmibai](#) of [Jhansi](#) during the [Indian Rebellion of 1857](#). It is generally accepted that Sai Baba stayed in Shirdi for three years, disappeared for a year, and returned permanently around 1858, which suggests a birth year of 1838.



Return to Shirdi

In 1858 Sai Baba returned to Shirdi. Around this time he adopted his famous style of dress consisting of a knee-length one-piece [Kafni robe](#) and a cloth cap. Ramgir Bua, a devotee, testified 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, and that he never had his head shaved. It was only after Baba forfeited a wrestling match with one Mohiddin Tamboli that he took up the kafni and cloth cap, articles of typical Sufi clothing. This attire contributed to Baba's identification as a Muslim fakir and was a reason for initial indifference and hostility against him in a predominantly Hindu village.

For four to five years Baba lived under a [neem](#) tree and often wandered for long periods in the jungle around Shirdi. His manner was said to be withdrawn and uncommunicative as he undertook long periods of meditation. He was eventually persuaded to take up residence in an old and dilapidated mosque and lived a solitary life there, surviving by begging for [alms](#), and receiving itinerant Hindu or Muslim visitors. In the mosque he maintained a sacred fire which is referred to as a [dhuni](#), from which he gave sacred ashes ('Udhi') to his guests before they left. The ash was believed to have healing and [apotropaic](#) powers. He performed the function of a local [hakim](#) and treated the sick by application of ashes. Sai Baba also delivered spiritual teachings to his visitors, recommending the reading of sacred Hindu texts along with the [Qur'an](#). He insisted on the indispensability of the unbroken remembrance of God's name ([dhikr](#), [japa](#)), and often expressed himself in a cryptic manner with the use of [parables](#), [symbols](#) and [allegories](#).

Sai Baba participated in religious festivals and was in the habit of preparing food for his visitors, which he distributed to them as [prasad](#). Sai Baba's entertainment was dancing and singing religious songs.

After 1910 Sai Baba's fame began to spread in [Mumbai](#). Numerous people started visiting him, because they regarded him as a saint with the power of performing miracles or even as an [Avatar](#). They built his first temple at [Bhivpuri](#), [Karjat](#).

Teachings and practices

Sai Baba opposed all persecution based on religion or [caste](#). He was an opponent of religious orthodoxy – Christian, Hindu and Muslim. Although Sai Baba himself led the life of an [ascetic](#), he advised his followers to lead an ordinary family life.

Sai Baba encouraged his devotees to pray, chant God's name, and read holy scriptures. He told Muslims to study the Qur'an and Hindus to study texts such as the [Ramayana](#), [Bhagavad Gita](#),

and [Yoga Vasistha](#). He was impressed by the philosophy of the Bhagavad Gita and encouraged people to follow it in their own lives. He advised his devotees and followers to lead a moral life, help others, love every living being without any discrimination, and develop two important features of character: devotion to the Guru (*Sraddha*) and waiting cheerfully with patience and love (*Saburi*). He criticised [atheism](#).



In his teachings, Sai Baba emphasised the importance of performing one's duties without attachment to earthly matters and of being content regardless of the situation. In his personal practice, Sai Baba observed worship procedures belonging to Hinduism and Islam; he shunned any kind of regular rituals but allowed the practice of [namaz](#), chanting of [Al-Fatiha](#), and Qur'an readings at Muslim festival times. Occasionally reciting the Al-Fatiha himself, Baba enjoyed listening to [mawlid](#) and [qawwali](#) accompanied with the [tabla](#) and [sarangi](#) twice daily.

Sai Baba interpreted the religious texts of both Islam and Hinduism. He explained the meaning of the Hindu scriptures in the spirit of [Advaita Vedanta](#). His philosophy also had numerous elements of [bhakti](#). The three main Hindu spiritual paths — [Bhakti Yoga](#), [Jnana Yoga](#), and [Karma Yoga](#) — influenced his teachings.

Sai Baba encouraged charity, and stressed the importance of sharing. He said: "Unless there is some relationship or connection, nobody goes anywhere. If any men or creatures come to you, do not discourteously drive them away, but receive them well and treat them with due respect. Shri [Hari](#) (God) will certainly be pleased if you give water to the thirsty, bread to the hungry, clothes to the naked, and your verandah to strangers for sitting and resting. If anybody wants any money from you and you are not inclined to give, do not give, but do not bark at him like a dog. Other favourite sayings of his were "Why do you fear when I am here" and "He has no beginning... He has no end.

Sai Baba made eleven "assurances" to his devotees:

1. No harm shall befall him, who steps on the soil of Shirdi.
2. He who comes to my Samadhi, his sorrow and suffering shall cease.
3. Though I be no more in flesh and blood, I shall ever protect my devotees.
4. Trust in me and your prayer shall be answered.
5. Know that my spirit is immortal, know this for yourself.
6. Show unto me him who has sought refuge and has been turned away.
7. In whatever faith men worship me, even so do I render to them.
8. Not in vain is my promise that I shall ever lighten your burden.
9. Knock, and the door shall open, ask and it shall be granted.

10. To him who surrenders unto me totally I shall be ever indebted.
11. Blessed is he who has become one with me.

Worship and devotees

The Shirdi Sai Baba movement began in the 19th century, while he was living in Shirdi. A local [Khandoba](#) priest, Mhalsapati Nagre, is believed to have been his first devotee. In the 19th century Sai Baba's followers were only a small group of Shirdi inhabitants and a few people from other parts of India. The movement started developing in the 20th century, with Sai Baba's message reaching the whole of India. During his life, Hindus worshiped him with Hindu rituals and Muslims considered him to be a saint. Many Hindu devotees – including Hemadpant, who wrote the famous *Shri Sai Satcharitra* —consider him as an [incarnation](#) of Lord [Krishna](#) while other devotees consider him as an incarnation of Lord [Dattatreya](#). In the last years of Sai Baba's life, Christians and [Zoroastrians](#) started joining the Shirdi Sai Baba movement.

Because of Sai Baba, Shirdi has become a place of importance and is counted among the major Hindu places of pilgrimage. The first Sai Baba temple is situated at [Bhivpuri, Karjat](#). The Sai Baba Mandir in Shirdi is visited by around 20,000 pilgrims a day and during religious festivals this number can reach up to a 100,000. Shirdi Sai Baba is especially revered and worshiped in the states of [Maharashtra](#), [Odisha](#), [Andhra Pradesh](#), [Karnataka](#), Tamil Nadu and [Gujarat](#). In August 2012, an unidentified devotee for the first time donated two costly diamonds valuing Rs 11.8 million at the Shirdi temple, Saibaba trust officials revealed.

The Shirdi Sai movement has spread to the [Caribbean](#) and to countries such as the United States, Australia, [United Arab Emirates](#), [Malaysia](#), and Singapore. The Shirdi Sai Baba movement is one of the Hindu religious movements in English-speaking countries.

Sai Baba left behind no spiritual heirs, appointed no disciples, and did not even provide formal initiation (diksha), despite requests. Some disciples of Sai Baba achieved fame as spiritual figures, such as [Upasni Maharaj](#) of [Sakori](#). After Sai Baba left his body, his devotees offered the daily [Aarti](#) to Upasni Maharaj when he paid a visit to Shirdi, two times within 10 years.

Claimed miracles

Sai Baba's disciples and devotees claim that he performed many miracles such as [bilocation](#), [levitation](#), [mindreading](#), [materialisation](#), [exorcisms](#), making the river [Yamuna](#), entering a state of [Samādhi](#) at will, lighting lamps with water, removing his limbs or intestines and sticking them back to his body ([khandana yoga](#)), curing the incurably sick, appearing beaten when another was beaten, preventing a mosque from falling down on people, and helping his devotees in a

miraculous way. He also gave Darshan (vision) to people in the form of Rama, Krishna, Vithoba and many other gods depending on the faith of devotees.

According to his followers he appeared to them in dreams even after he left his body and gave them advice. His devotees have documented many stories. Even today if one prays to baba and ask him any question with full devotion, he answers through his biography "sai satcharitra". Not only that he may give an exact answer through any book.

Historical sources

Biographers of Sai Baba (e.g., Govindrao Raghunath Dabholkar, Acharya Ekkirala Bharadwaja, Smriti Srinivas, Antonio Rigopolous) have based their writing on primary sources. One such source is the *Shirdi Diary* by [Ganesh Shrikrishna Khaparde](#), which describes every day of the author's stay at Shirdi.

Speculation about the unknown episodes of Sai Baba's life are primarily based on his own words.



The most important source about Sai's life is the *Shri Sai Satcharita*, written in [Marathi](#) in 1916 by Govindrao Raghunath Dabholkar, whom Sai Baba nicknamed 'Hemadpant'. Consisting of 53 chapters, it describes Sai Baba's life, teachings, and miracles. The book compares Sai Baba's love to a mother's love: caring and loving, but reprimanding when needed. It describes Baba's lifestyle, his selfless attitude, and his love for his devotees. The book describes how one should surrender one's egoism at God's feet and trust one's guru. It explains how God is supreme and His devotees should trust Him and love Him. It teaches that God is omnipresent in all living things, so that everything on Earth must be treated with love and respect.

Sai Baba of Shirdi and His Teachings by Acharya Ekkirala Bharadwaja is an in-depth study of Sai Baba's life routine and activities. Shortly after Sai Baba's passing, devotee B.V. Narasimhaswamiji compiled accounts by eyewitnesses such as *Sri Sai Baba's Charters and Sayings* and *Devotee's Experiences of Sai Baba*.

Regarding the original photographs of Shirdi Sai Baba, research still needs to be done to identify the authentic ones, as there are also paintings as well as photographs of other persons of similar appearance in circulation besides the few genuine photographs.

In various religions

Hinduism

During Sai Baba's life, the Hindu saint Anandanath of Yewala declared Sai Baba a spiritual "diamond". Another saint, Gangagir, called him a "jewel". Sri Beedkar Maharaj greatly revered Sai Baba, and in 1873, when he met him he bestowed the title [Jagad guru](#) upon him. Sai Baba was also greatly respected by [Vasudevananda Saraswati](#) (known as [Tembye Swami](#)). He was also revered by a group of [Shaivicyogis](#), to which he belonged, known as the *Nath-Panchayat*. According to B.V. Narasimhaswami, a posthumous follower who was widely praised as Sai Baba's "apostle", this attitude was prevalent up to 1954 even among some of his devotees in Shirdi.



Zoroastrianism

Sai Baba is worshiped by prominent [Zoroastrians](#) such as [Nanabhoy Palkhivala](#) and [Homi Bhabha](#), and has been cited as the Zoroastrians' most popular non-Zoroastrian religious figure.

[Meher Baba](#), who was born into a [Zoroastrian](#) family, met Sai Baba once, during [World War I](#), in December 1915. Meher Baba was a youngster named Merwan Sheriar Irani, when he met Sai Baba for a few minutes during one of Sai Baba's processions in Shirdi. This event is considered as the most significant in Meher Baba's life. *Shri Sai Satcharita* (Sai Baba's life story), makes no mention of Meher Baba. But in *Lord Meher*, the life story of Meher Baba, there are innumerable references to Sai Baba.

Meher Baba credited his Avataric advent to Upasni, Sai Baba, and three other Perfect Masters: [Hazrat Babajan](#), [Hazrat Tajuddin Baba](#), and [Narayan Maharaj](#). He declared Sai Baba to be a *Qutub-e-Irshad* (the highest of the five [Qutubs](#), a "Master of the Universe" in the spiritual hierarchy).

Islam

From a Sufi perspective, Sai Baba of Shirdi is considered as a Pir or Fakir. Sai Baba's teachings attracted a lot of Muslim devotees as his teachings and lifestyle was severely influenced by Sufism like uttering "Allah Malik" (God is King) and "Sabka Malik Ek" (One God Governs All) continuously. Baba was extremely well-versed in Quran. He occasionally quoted passages from the Quran. His devotee Abdul Baba went on writing down what Baba used to utter which is mentioned in the book (in Mahratti and Modi script) which contains the gracious utterances of Baba. He gave spiritual

experiences to many Muslim devotees about eternal spiritual love for God as explained in Quran. Shirdi was one among the very few places in British India, where the Hindus and Muslims lived peacefully even during the intense communal riots. Many fundamentalists left behind their fanaticism being in contact with Sai Baba. Hindus and Muslims devotees never realized any differences between them in their spiritual journey.

In culture

Sacred art and architecture

In India, it is a common sight to see a Sai Baba temple in any city or town; in every large city or town there is at least one temple dedicated to Sai Baba. There are also temples located in countries outside India, including in the United States, [Netherlands](#), [Kenya](#), [Cuba](#), Canada, [Pakistan](#), Australia, United Kingdom. In the mosque in Shirdi, in which Sai Baba lived, there is a life-size portrait of him by Shama Rao Jaykar, an artist from [Mumbai](#). Numerous monuments and statues depicting Sai Baba, which serve a religious function, have been made. One of them, made of marble by a sculptor named Balaji Vasant Talim, is in the Samadhi Mandir in Shirdi where Sai Baba was buried. In Sai Baba [temples](#), his devotees play devotional religious music, such as [aarti](#).