

Arati – Worshiping Methods of Shri Shirdi Sai Baba

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Abstract -- Arati is a mode of congregational worship, in which the devotees stand facing the image of a deity or a deified Saint or, the personage (living idol) of an exalted Saint singing devotional songs in unison. Normally, the singing is accompanied by musical instrument such as bells, gongs and cymbals. The object of worship is devoutly decorated with posy garlands and aromatic incense and musk are kept smoldering. While the devotees sing Psalms, either an efficient or a devotee revolves clockwise, (usually) a fivefold oil lamp-consisting of the five oil traylets round the object of adoration, such performance of arati with a fivefold oil lamp is called Pancharati. According to the vedic tradition, Agni (Fire) is the divine priest and the conveyer of offerings to the Gods. The fire of the arati lamp is conceived as a receptacle conveying the arduous prayers of the devotees to the deity to the devotees. The introduction of arati as a regular congregational worship at Shirdi is to be seen as marking a new phase in the evolution of the worship of Sri Sai Baba.

Index Terms: Deified Saint, Psalms, Pancharati, Agni, Congregational worship.

I. RECEPTACLE OF GRACE

At time arati performed with a single, three or eleven fold lamps. A lamp with wicks burning clarified butter (ghee) is the most preferred. Sometimes, instead of an oil-lamp, ignited camphor placed on a tray is waved. All such details as the number of wicks, the kind of fuel, etc., carry their own esoteric symbolism. After the devotional singing, the flame of the arati lamp is offered to the devotees, who pass their hands by turns over the sacred flame and quickly draw them to their faces and heads as a gesture of drawing unto themselves the auspicious energy emanating from the receptacle of grace, i.e. the flame. This custom of arati, as a form of congregational worship, is more in vogue in northern India, especially in Maharashtra. In the south, usually it is done as a concluding part of the ritualistic worship, (both public and personal) which is called “mangala arati” or “neerajana”.

II. THE SEED-BED OF SAI WORSHIP

The introduction of arati as a regular congregational worship at Shirdi is to be seen as marking a new phase in the evolution of the worship of Sri Sai Baba. Even from the day of his advent at Shirdi, people though a handful in the beginning looked upon him as a holy man, a Fakir (a muslim ascetic). To pious Hindus, an ascetic, whether he is a Hindu or a Muslim, is a holy man worthy of reverence. As Sai Baba’s fame soon started spreading, people mostly Hindus were drawn to him in galore from far and wide. It is the pious custom of the Hindus to bow down or prostrate in reverence before a Saint by touching his feet, as a mark of humility and self abnegation. Obviously Baba did not object to the pious usage. Strictly speaking, that was the Seed- bed upon which the glorious tree of Sai worship begun to grow.

III. THE PRIEST PRIMAL OF SAI WORSHIP

Chand Bhai Patil was the first who experienced and recognised the power and grace of Sri Sai Baba. He venerated him in the Muslim way. It was Mhalsapati, the priest of the Khandoba shrine at Shirdi, who first worshiped Sai Baba in the Hindu fashion. It is interesting to note that the same orthodox priest of Khandoba, who is said to have refused even the entry of “Sai Fakir” into the Khandoba Shrine, later turned out to be his first worshiper. The process of the transformation and the actual mode in which Mhalsapati used to worship Sai Baba are shrouded in the hazy past. For according to the recorded details even Mhalsapati was allowed to apply sandal paste only to Baba’s throat. In the temples of Maharashtra it is customary that the priest smears sandal paste on the foreheads of the devotees as a mark of divine Prasad. Subsequently, as Mhalsapati’s Faith in Baba grew, he would have extended the same puja, which he was

doing in the Khandoba Shrine, to Baba also, of course, to the extent Baba permitted. But, as already has been admitted, this is only conjecture.

IV. DENGLE'S DEVOTION

Taking the precedence of Mhalsapati, another devotee by name Nanasaheb alias Sitaram Dengle of Jali Nimgaon, a local landlord, wanted to worship Baba. But Baba brusquely brushed his request aside and suggested that Dengle might rather offer his worship to the pillar in the masjid. Dengle did as directed by Baba but he was not contented. Again he approached Baba with the same appeal and Baba too reiterated his stance. But this time Dengle was adamant on his purpose and with the support of another devotee by name Dhaggu Bhai, proceeded worshipping Baba. Baba did rant and rave at it. And, Dengle reckoned them all as Baba's blessing! Long after that, Bapurao Chandorkar, son of Nanasaheb Chandorkar, seems to have enjoyed the privilege of worshipping Baba by applying sandal paste to his forehead almost in the manner of Mhalsapati.

V. THE "URS" ENIGMA

It seems easy to account for the apparent paucity in the growth of Sai worship in its initial stages. One is Baba's attitude itself. For a long time Baba had taken a hard line over favouring and conventional expressions of devotion to his person. His Muslim men seems to be the another reason that produced an almost congenital resistance among his Hindu devotees to embark upon a congregational mode of worship to Sri Sai Baba according to Hindu customs. The very first proposal for a public celebration in Shirdi, of course, proposed by his Hindu devotees themselves, was "Urs" – Muslim Religious celebration! It was proposed by one Gopalrao Gund and seconded by other local devotees of Shirdi. When the devotees asked Baba to suggest a date, Baba ingeniously advised them to make it coincide with Sriram Navami, one of the most important Hindu festivals. Thus the first public function, "Urs-Cum-Sriram Navami was celebrated in 1897. It might be surprising to note that the devotees who proposed and organised the "Urs" on Sriram Navami were all Hindus. But the wonder wanes as we take note of the fact that most of the direct devotees of Sri Baba, though they cherished the intellection that Baba's

creed was a veritable mystery which cut across all religious denominations, yet in all practical dealings with regard to him, they look him to be a Muslim. But this peripheral recognition did not affect their innermost awareness of Baba's real nature as the Universal Spirit, which transcended all corporeal confines. All the Zealous efforts to strip the Muslim trappings off the public image of Sri Sai Baba, and Put a Hindu grab on it, were patently a later development.

VI. PERFORMING FIRST ARATI

It is a familiar notion among many Sai devotees that the arati tradition at Shirdi was started by Shri K.J.Bhishma, which is in a way off the mark. Swami Sai Sharan Anand, who had direct association with Baba for about eight years, i.e., from 1911 to 1918, informs, "In the beginning only Mhalsapati and Mahadev, son of Nanasaheb Chandorkar used to worship Baba. Afterwards the tradition of arati was started. Morning (Kakad) and Night (Shej) Aratis were conducted in the Chavadi. Only Noon arati was performed in the Dwarakamai. The Arati tradition was first started by Noolkar, a Retd. Mamledar of Pandharpur." Shri Kakasaheb alias H. S. Dixit says, "Before, Baba never allowed anybody to perform arati to him. But, after Sometime, (Lakshman Krishnaji) Tatyasaheb Noolkar had the honour of giving arati to Shri Sai Baba for the first time."

So it was to Shri Tatyasaheb alias (Laxman Krishnaji) Noolkar that the laurels of setting up the arati tradition in Shirdi go. Shri Noolkar was a Sub-judge at Pandharpur. Shri Nanasaheb Chandorkar was also working there in 1908 as Mamledar. The first Shri Noolkar heard of Shri Sai Baba was from Nanasaheb, with whom he visited Shirdi for the first time in 1909. He was overwhelmingly impressed with Shri Sai Baba even at the first sight.

VII. NOOLKAR – THE FATHER OF SHIRDI ARATIS

As he was already on the verge of his superannuation, he resolved to settle at Shirdi for good. Shortly after, he obtained voluntary retirement from service and lost no time repairing to the holy feet of Baba. He remained there adoring his beloved Sadhguru till he pass away in 1911. It was a long cherished dream of many a devotee at Shirdi to

perform regular congregational worship (arati) to Shri Sai Baba. But Baba did not countenance such a fanfare of ritualistic exuberance to his person and used to be adamant in turning down all the buoyant appeals of the devotees. At last, devotees succeeded in obtaining Baba's sufferance to perform aratis. Unfortunately the actual circumstance that surrounded the event went off the record. By the look of it, it seemed as though Baba had to give into the devout sentiments of Shri Noolkar out of his deep affection towards the latter. Once the permission was given, the devotees lost no chance to set it up as an Ongoing tradition. Tatyasaheb turned out to be the lucky officiating priest of the daily arati services. Shri Noolkar took to the seva (devout services) with enthusiasm and, carried it out as the most precious good fortune in his life.

VIII. EXPLORING THE DATE

The exact date, month in which the regular custom of performing aratis commenced is not clear. Shri Sai Satcharita (Chapter-4, page-21) states that Night (Shej) Arati commenced on 10/12/1910. It is also recorded that two more incidents took place on that day, i.e., on 10/12/1910. One is Shri G. S. Khaparde got permission from Baba to leave Shiridi and the other was the laying of the foundation stone of Dixitwada.

IX. A GLIMPSE OF SAI ARATI

In Shri Sai Satcharita we find a passing glimpse of how the aratis were conducted during Baba's time. "Before the midday-meal, the bell in the Masjid rings announcing the performance of the noon worship and arati to Shri Sai Baba. All devotees assemble at the Masjid. First Baba is worshiped ceremoniously with Gandhashatas (sandal and rice mixed with vermilion and turmeric). Then Bapusaheb Jog performs arati with love and devotion. As women stand up in the Masjid, men assemble in the open courtyard below. All the devotees loudly sing arati psalms in unison to the accompaniment of gongs, bells and cymbals. Baba sits in his seat as usual smoking his chillim. At the end of the arati all devotees say ghosanna loudly chanting "Shri Satchidananda Sadhguru Sainath Maharaj Ki Jai!" After the devout singing is over, Jog waves ignited camphor (neerajana), reverentially prostrates before Baba and then offers sugar candy as naivedya to Shri Sai Baba.

As Baba stretches his hands to receive, Jog places in Baba's hands the candy, in a quantity as much as it fits in Baba's hand. The rest is distributed among the devotees as Prasad."

X. THE LIVING IDOL

To the devotees, offering ritual worship and arati to Shri Sai Baba was not a 'mere' gesture of reverence to the Saint. To them Sai Baba was their chosen deity, divinity personified, and 'living idol' of their abstract 'idea of God on earth'. It would be interesting to note the role played by the living idol during the arati sessions. During the arati, Baba was usually found sitting quietly smoking his chillim or conversing with some devotee, as if, unmindful of the ritual exuberance shown to his person. Baba's moods were quite unpredictable and he used to suddenly flare up with rage. Devotees were constantly apprehensive that Baba might disrupt the arati at any moment. Sometimes, Baba exhibited great grace accompanied by hard words. "At times, when he was in a pleased mood, he danced as he left the Chavadi and went towards the Masjid." Even though Baba let the arati pass off easy, after the arati was over it was his usual custom to use hard words against the internal enemies by naming them as Appa Kote, Telin, Waman Taty, etc., as if to fulfil the devotees' prayer in the arati "Kam Krodh mad matsar attunee Kakada kela" – oh! Lord Sainath, we offer Kakad Arati to thee!. I make my lust, anger, pride, envy and hatred as wicks, etc.

XI. SPARKS FROM THE MYSTIC FIRE OF ARATI

Though Baba seemed unmindful of the ritual expression of the devotees' loving veneration, he did reciprocate their love in his own unique style. It was during the time of arati that many a devotee was blessed with rare and wonderful glimpses of Shri Sai Baba. Shri Khaparde describes the aratis as 'edifying' and noticed that Baba was particularly gracious at the time of arati and sent out wonderful moments of joy and instruction! Shri K. J. Bhisma articulated this fact when he signs in one of the arati psalms, "Now seen with help of the light (emanating from the flames of the Pancharati), Sadhguru Sainath is shining forth with brilliance. That illumination destroys the darkness of

duality, both the seer and the seen shine as one without any shade of difference. Many remarks made by Shri G. S. Khaparde in his Diary bear testimony to this truth. In 17/1/1912... “We went to the Chavadi for Kakad Arati. Megha was too ill to attend. So Bapusaheb Jog did the Arati. Saying Baba shored his face and smiled most benignly. It is worth while spending years here to see it even once. I was overjoyed and stood gazing like mad.” Thus, it is clear that Baba, in his own inimitable way, made the otherwise routine ritual into a lively course of spiritual instruction and a veritable vehicle of grace.

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