



CHAPTER VI

RAM NAVAMI FESTIVAL AND MASJID REPAIRS

Efficacy of the Touch of the Guru's Hand – Ram Navami Festival – Its Origin, Transformation etc. Repairs of the Masjid.

Before describing Ram Navami Festival and Masjid repairs, the author makes some preliminary remarks about Sadguru as follows :

Efficacy of the Touch of the Guru's Hand

When Sadguru is the helmsman he is sure to carry us safely and easily beyond the worldly ocean. The word Sadguru brings to mind Sai Baba, the Perfect Master. He appears to me, as if standing before me and applying Udi (sacred ashes) to my forehead and placing his hand of blessing on my head. Then joy fills my heart and love overflows my eyes. Wonderful is the power of the touch of Guru's hand. The subtle-body (consisting of thoughts and desires) which cannot be burnt by the gross fire, is destroyed by the mere touch of the Guru's hand, and the sins of many past births are cleaned and washed away. Even the speech of those, who feel agitated, when they hear religious and Godly talks, attain calmness. The sight of Sai Baba's handsome form chokes our throat with joy, makes the eyes overflow with tears and overwhelms the heart with emotions. It awakens in us "I am He" (Soham) Brahma consciousness, manifests the joy of self-realization and dissolving the distinction of I and Thou, makes us one with the Supreme (One Reality). When I begin to read scriptures, at every step I am reminded of my Sadguru, Sai Baba, Who assumes the form of Rama or Krishna and makes me listen to His Life. For instance, when I sit to listen to Bhagwat, Sai becomes Krishna from top to toe, and I think He sings the Bhagwat or Uddhav Gita (song of teachings by Lord Shri Krishna to His disciple, Uddhav) for the welfare of the devotees. When I myself start to write anything, I cannot compose a few words or sentences; but when He of His own accord makes me write, I go on writing... and there is no end to it. When the disciple's egoism props up, He presses it down with His hand and gives him His own power, makes him achieve His object and thus, satisfies and blesses him. **If any one prostrates before Sai and**

surrenders his heart and soul to Him, then all the chief objects of life, viz., Dharma (righteousness), Artha (wealth), Kama (Desire) and Moksha (Deliverance), are attained easily and unsolicitedly. Four paths, viz., of Karma, Dnyan, Yoga and Bhakti lead us separately to God. Of these, the path of Bhakti is thorny and full of pits and ditches and thus, difficult to traverse; but if you, relying on your Sadguru avoid the pits and thorns and walk straight, it will take you to your destination (God), so says Sai Baba.

After philosophising about the self-existent Brahma, His power (Maya) to create this world and the world created, and stating that all these three are ultimately one and the same, the author quotes Sai Baba's words guaranteeing the welfare of the Bhaktas :

“There will never be any dearth or scarcity, regarding food and clothes in My devotee's home. It is my special characteristic, that I always look to and provide for, the welfare of those devotees, who worship Me whole-heartedly with their minds ever fixed on Me. Lord Krishna has also said the same in the Gita. Therefore strive not much for food and clothes. If you want anything, beg of the Lord, renounce worldly honours, try to get Lord's grace and blessings and be honoured in His court. Do not be deluded by worldly honour. The form of the Deity should be firmly fixed in the mind. Let all the senses and mind be ever devoted to the worship of the Lord, let there be no attraction for any other thing. Fix the mind in remembering Me always, so that it will not wander elsewhere, towards body, wealth and home. Then it will be calm, peaceful and care-free. This is the sign of the mind being well engaged in good company. If the mind is vagrant, it cannot be called well-merged in Him.”

After quoting these words, the author goes on to relate the story of Ram Navami festival in Shirdi. As Ram Navami is the most celebrated festival at Shirdi, another fuller account, as published in Sri Sai Leela Magazine of 1925, page 197, is also referred to and a summary of the festival, as related in both these accounts is attempted here.

Origin

One Mr. Gopalrao Gund, was a surveyor in Survey dept. at Kopergaon. He was a great devotee of Baba. He had three wives but had

no issue. With Sai Baba's blessings, a son was born to him. In the joy that he felt due to this, an idea of celebrating a fair or 'Urus'¹ occurred to him in the year 1897, and he placed it for consideration before other Shirdi devotees, viz. Tatyapa Patil, Dada Kote Patil and Madhavrao Deshpande (Shama). They all approved of the idea, and obtained Sai Baba's permission and blessings for it. Then an application was made to get the Collector's² sanction for celebrating the Urus, but as the village Kulkarni held against holding the fair the sanction was refused. But, as Sai Baba had blessed it, they tried again and ultimately succeeded in getting the Collector's sanction. The day for the Urus was fixed on Ram Navami, after having consultation with Sai Baba. It seems He had some purpose behind this, viz. the unification of the two festivals, the Urus and the Ram Navami and the unification of the two communities – the Hindus and the Mohammedans. As future events showed, this end or object was duly achieved.

Though the permission was obtained, but other difficulties cropped up. Shirdi was a village and there was scarcity of water. There were two wells in the village, the one in use dried up soon and the water from the second was brackish. This brackish water was turned into sweet water by Sai Baba, by putting flowers into it. As the water of this well was insufficient, so Tatyapa Patil had to arrange to get water from outside. Temporary shops were to be constructed and wrestling bouts arranged. Gopalrao Gund had a friend by name Damu Anna Kasar of Ahmednagar. He also was similarly unhappy in the matter of progeny, though he had two wives. He too was blessed by Sai Baba with sons and Mr. Gund prevailed upon his friend to prepare and supply one flag for the procession of the fair. He also succeeded in inducing Mr. Nanasahab Nimonkar to supply another flag. Both these flags were taken in procession through the village and finally, fixed at the two corners of the Masjid, which is called by Sai Baba as 'Dwarkamai'. This is being done even now.

The 'Sandal' Procession

There was another procession which was started in this fair. The

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1. Urus are celebrated at the tombs of Muslim Holy men. It is surprising that how Mr. Gund, a Hindu got this idea.
 2. District Magistrate. Since, he is responsible for the collection of land revenues, he is also called the Collector.

idea of 'Sandal' procession originated with one Mr. Amir Shakkar Dalal, a Mohammeden Bhakta from Korhla. This procession is held in honour of great Muslim Saints. Sandal i.e. Chandan paste and scrappings are put in the Thali (flat dishes) with incense burning before them and carried in procession to the accompaniment of band and music through the village and then, after returning to the Masjid, the contents of the dishes are thrown on the 'Nimbar' (niche) and walls of the Masjid. This work was managed by Mr. Amir Shakkar for the first three years and then afterwards, by his wife. So, on the same day the two processions, the 'Flags' by the Hindus and 'Sandal' by the Muslims, went on side by side and are still going on without any problem.

Arrangement

This day was very dear and sacred to the devotees of Sai Baba. Most of them turned up for the occasion and took part in the management of the fair. Tatyia Kote Patil looked to all outward affairs, while the internal management was entirely left to Radhakrishnamai, a female devotee of Baba. Her residence was full of guests on the occasion, and she had to look after their needs, and also arrange for all the paraphernalia of the fair. Another work, which she willingly did, was to clean and white-wash the entire Masjid, its walls and floor, which were blackened and were full of soot on account of the perpetual Dhuni (sacred fire) of Sai Baba. This she did during the night, when Sai Baba had gone to sleep every alternate night in the Chavadi. She had to take out all the things, including the Dhuni, and after thorough cleaning and white-washing replace them, as they were before. Feeding the poor, which was so dear to Sai Baba, was also an important item in this fair. For this purpose, cooking on a grand scale and preparing various sweet dishes, was done in Radhakrishnamai's lodging, and various rich and wealthy devotees took a leading part in this.

Transformation of Urus into Ram Navami Festival

Things were going on in this way and the fair was gradually increasing in importance till 1912, when a change took place. That year one devotee, Mr. Krishnarao Jogeshwar Bhishm (the author of 'Sai Sagunopasana'), came for the fair with Dadasaheb Khaparde of Amaravati and was staying (on the previous day) in the Dixit Wada. While he was lying in the verandah, and while Mr. Laxmanrao alias

Kaka Mahajani was going with Puja materials to the Masjid, a thought arose in his mind and he accosted the latter thus – There is some providential arrangement in the fact that the Urus or fair is celebrated in Shirdi on Ram Navami; Ram Navami is very dear to all the Hindus, then why not begin the Ram Navami festival – the celebration of the birth of Shri Ram on this day here? Kaka Mahajani liked the idea, and it was arranged to get Baba's permission in this matter. The main difficulty was how to secure a Haridas who would do 'Kirtan' and sing the glories of the Lord on the occasion. But, Bhishm solved the difficulty by saying that his 'Ram Akhyan', the composition on Rama's birth was ready and he would do the 'Kirtan' himself, while Kaka Mahajani should play on the harmonium. It was also arranged to get the 'Sunthavada' (ginger-powder mixed with sugar) as Prasad, prepared by Radhakrishnamai. So they immediately went to the Masjid to get Baba's permission. Baba Who knew everything and aware of what was happening there, asked Mahajani, as to what was going on in the Wada. Being rather perturbed Mahajani could not catch the purport of the question and remained silent. Then Baba asked Bhishm what he had to say. He explained the idea of celebrating Ram Navami festival and asked for Baba's permission and Baba gladly gave it. All rejoiced and made preparations for the Jayanti¹-festival. Next day the Masjid was decorated with buntings etc., a cradle was supplied by Radhakrishnamai and placed in front of Baba's seat and the proceedings started. Bhishm stood up for Kirtan and Mahajani began to play on the harmonium. Sai Baba sent a man to call Mahajani. He was hesitating to go, doubtful whether Baba would allow the festival to go on but when he went to Baba, the latter asked him as to what was going on and why the cradle was placed there. He answered that the Ram Navami festival had commenced and the cradle was put out for that purpose. Then Baba took a garland from the 'Nimbar' (niche) and placed it round his neck and sent another garland for Bhishm. Then the Kirtan commenced. When it came to a close, loud sounds of "Victory to Ram" went up and Gulal (colour-powder) was thrown up all around, amidst band and music. Everybody was overjoyed, when suddenly a roar was heard. The red-powder thrown promiscuously, went up and somehow fell into Baba's eyes. Baba got wild and began to scold and abuse loudly. People got frightened and took to their heels. The intimate devotees who knew Baba well, took these scoldings and outpourings of

1. Jayanti – Birthday of Lord Ram

Baba, as blessings in disguise. They thought that when Ram was born, it was proper for Baba to get wild and enraged to kill Ravan and his demons, in the form of egoism and wicked thoughts etc. Besides they knew that, whenever a new thing was undertaken at Shirdi, it was usual with Baba to get wild and angry and so they kept quiet. Radhakrishnamai was rather afraid and thought that Baba might break her cradle and she asked Mahajani to pull the cradle back. When he went to loosen and unfasten the cradle, Baba went to him and asked him not to remove it. Then after some time Baba became calm and that day's programme, including Mahapuja and Arati was finished. Later on Mr. Mahajani asked Baba for permission to remove the cradle, Baba refused the same saying that, the festival was not yet over. Next day another 'Kirtan' and Gopal-kala ceremony [an earthen pot containing parched rice mixed with curd is hung, to be broken after the 'Kirtan', and the contents distributed to all, as was done by Lord Krishna amongst His cow-herd (friends)], was performed and then, Baba allowed the cradle to be removed. While the Ram Navami festival was thus going on, the procession of the two flags by day and that of the 'Sandal' by night, went off with the usual pomp and show. From this time onwards, the 'Urus of Baba' was transformed into the Ram Navami festival.

From next year (1913), the items in the programme of Ram Navami began to increase. Radhakrishnamai started a 'Naam-saptah' (singing the glory of God's name continuously day and night for seven days), from (eleventh) day of Chaitra. For this all devotees took part by turns and she also joined it sometimes early in the morning. As Ram Navami festival is celebrated in many places all over the country, the difficulty of getting a Haridas was felt again. But 5 or 6 days before the festival, Mahajani incidentally met Balabua who was known as modern Tukaram and got him to do the 'Kirtan' that year. The next year (1914), another Balabua Satarkar of Birhad Siddha-kavathe, district Satara, could not act as a Haridas in his own town, as plague was prevailing there and so he came to Shirdi. With Baba's permission, which was secured through Kakasaheb Dixit, he did the Kirtan and was sufficiently recompensed for his labour. The difficulty of getting a new Haridas every year was finally solved from 1914 by Sai Baba, as He entrusted this function to Das Ganu Maharaj permanently and since that time he has been successfully and creditably conducting that function until now.

Since 1912, this festival began to grow gradually year by year. From the 8th to 12th of Chaitra, Shirdi looked like a bee-hive of men. Shops began to increase. Celebrated wrestlers took part in wrestling bouts. Feeding of the poor was done on a grander scale. Hard work and sincere efforts of Radhakrishnamai turned Shirdi into a Sansthan. (State) Paraphernalia increased. A beautiful horse, a palanquin, chariot and many silver items, utensils, pots, buckets, pictures, mirrors etc. were presented. Elephants were also sent for the procession. Though, all this paraphernalia increased enormously, Sai Baba ignored all these things and maintained His simplicity and modesty as before. It is to be noted that both the Hindus and Mohammedens have been working in unison, in both the processions during the entire festival, and there has been no confrontation or quarrel between them at all so far. First about 5000-7000 people used to gather, but that figure went up to 75,000 in some years, still, there was no outbreak of any epidemic disease nor any riots worth the name during past so many years.

Repairs to the Masjid

Another important idea occurred to Gopal Gund. Just as he started the Urus or fair, he thought that he should repair and renovate the Masjid. So in order to carry out the repairs, he collected stones and got them dressed. But this work was not assigned to him. This was reserved for Nanasaheb Chandorkar and the pavement-work for Kakasaheb Dixit. Initially Baba was unwilling to allow them to have work done, but with the intervention of Mhalsapati, a local devotee of Baba, His permission was secured. Baba took a small Gadi for His seat, discarding the usual piece of sack-cloth, used till then. In 1911, the Sabha Mandap (court-yard) was also put in order with great labour and effort. The open space in front of the Masjid was very small and inconvenient. Kakasaheb Dixit wanted to extend it and put a roofing on it. At great expense, he got iron-posts, pillars and trusses and started the work. At night all the devotees worked hard and fixed the posts; but Baba when he returned from Chavadi next morning, uprooted them all and threw them out. Once it so happened that Baba got very excited, caught a pole with one hand and began to shake and uproot it and with the other hand caught Tatyapa Patil's neck. He took by force Tatyapa's Pheta, struck a match, set it on fire and threw it, in a pit. At that time, Baba's eyes flashed like burning embers. None dared to look at Him. All got terribly frightened. Baba took out a rupee from his pocket and threw it there, as if it were

an offering on an auspicious occasion. Tatya was also much frightened. None knew, what was going to happen to Tatya and none dared to interfere. Bhagoji Shinde, the leper devotee of Baba, made a bold advance, but he was pushed aside by Baba. Madhavrao was also similarly treated, pelted with brick-pieces. So all those who went to intercede were similarly dealt with. But, after some time, Baba's anger cooled down. He sent for a shop-keeper, got from him an embroidered Pheta and Himself tied it on Tatya's head, as if he was being given a special honour. All the people were wonderstruck to see this strange behaviour of Baba. They were at a loss to know, what enraged Baba so suddenly and what led Him to assault Tatya Patil, and why His anger cooled down the next moment. Baba was sometimes very calm and quiet and talked sweet things with love, but suddenly, with or without any reason, got enraged. Many such incidents may be related; but I do not know which to choose and which to omit. I therefore, refer them as they occur to me.

In the next chapter the question, whether Baba was a Hindu or a Mohammeden will be taken up and His Yogic practices and powers and other matters will also be dealt with.

Bow to Shri Sai Baba – Peace be to all