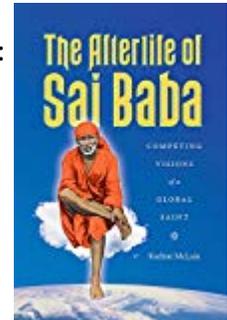


Karline McLain. *The Afterlife of Sai Baba: Competing Visions of a Global Saint.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2016. 278 pp. \$95.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-295-99551-9.



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Karline McLain's multilayered, multitextual, and multisited study, *The Afterlife of Sai Baba*, vividly and compellingly depicts the complex and evolving 100-year legacy since the death of famous Maharashtrian saint, Sai Baba from Shirdi (aka Shirdi Sai Baba). Tracing the development of the movement centered upon the saint since his death in 1918, McLain effectively offers readers a window into how a local saint's devotional cult may grow to national and global prominence. Shirdi Sai Baba, a religiously composite saint whose own religious belonging is difficult to pin down, seems to have begun his religious journey as a Sufi, but countless Hindu devotees also were drawn to his remarkably syncretic theological teachings and practices, and importantly, still are. Previous researchers have demonstrated what is termed the "Hinduization" of the Muslim/Hindu composite saint, a process through which the religiously fluid figure has become a Hindu deity (avatar) in death. However, none have demonstrated the complexity of this so-called Hinduization, nor have they asked about what McLain sees as a more productive in-

quiry: what can Sai Baba's Hinduization tell us about modern Hinduism and modern Hindus? McLain explores this convincingly, instructively, and in such accessible language that her book will be useful not only to scholars and other specialists in South Asian history, culture, and religion but also to undergraduate students, and possibly to general readers as well.

In *The Afterlife of Sai Baba*, McLain draws upon foundational academic studies on Shirdi Sai Baba by Antonio Rigopoulos and Marianne Warren; while not denying the fact that "Hinduization" has occurred, and in fact, building upon this established claim, McLain "decenters" her study from the saint himself and his own religious belonging to focus on the multiple interpretations of him (pp. 6, 217).[1] In doing so, the author reveals an intricate process of development, through proselytization of the saint in different, particularized contexts of several of Shirdi Sai Baba's champions, both humanoid and celluloid, which culminates as

a pan-Indic and, via the Hindu diaspora, even a global phenomenon.

McLain's methodologies include critical textual and archival examination (in Marathi, Hindi, and English), visual culture analysis, and ethnographic fieldwork, making hers the most multilayered study of this important modern saint that we have. McLain examines each media artifact within its particular historical context—whether that be British colonial India, the anticolonial struggle, newly independent India, or contemporary North America—and for its complicated interweaving of caste, religious, and sectarian communal belonging. At the book's most substantive layer, it examines the major devotional biographies about Sai Baba, paying crucial attention to the saint's various hagiographers themselves—some gurus in their own right—as well as the temples, trusts, and legacies they built. The book engages another significant layer, popular culture, to survey the growth of Sai Baba's fame and development of his after-death persona in printed image and film. The monograph's ethnographic layer, from fieldwork conducted in Shirdi and in the US, frames the research and keeps readers cognizant of Sai Baba's continued relevance across the globe. McLain's book begins in Maharashtra, India among pilgrims visiting Sai Baba's Samadhi Mandir in Shirdi, and ends in the United States, at two temples to Sai Baba recently established in Chicago, Illinois and Austin, Texas. Aside from its framing in the contemporary, the book follows a mostly linear historical chronology, beginning in chapter 1 with Sai Baba's earliest devotee biographers, who personally knew the saint, one a Hindu and one a Muslim Sufi, then tracing the lives of two more of Sai Baba's "key Hindu interlocutors" in chapters 2 and 3 before examining Bollywood's "visual hagiographies" in chapter 4 (p. 11). Chapter 5 takes readers to present-day temples to Sai Baba in America, in what may at first seem a bit like a leap out sync with the rest of the work but

nonetheless proves to be quite a useful contribution.

In chapter 1, McLain draws in readers in much the same way that many devotees are first drawn to Shirdi Sai Baba, through his iconic print images. Her rich discussion of these provides an entrée for comprehension of the saint's composite Hindu-Muslim identity. This continues through an examination of Sai Baba's two earliest biographies and their authors—one, Abdul Baba, a Muslim who understood Sai Baba to be his Sufi master, and the other, Govind Dabkholar, a Hindu who took Sai Baba as his guru. The author traces the early history of the movement, from the time of the saint's passing to the establishment of the tomb housing his remains. This sacred site, at first, served as both a *dargah* to Muslims and *samadhi* shrine to Hindus and was managed by Abdul Baba until his death, after which Hindu trustees of the Sai Baba Sansthan Trust installed a divine image of Sai Baba for worship (*murti*), establishing the site as a Hindu temple and thus alienating the saint's remaining Muslim devotees. Significantly, after Abdul Baba's death, Dabkholar's biography takes on a new life of prominence and precedence at the saint's shrine and beyond, being translated into multiple languages and distributed widely, while Abdul Baba's diary is kept in the shrine's museum. The chapter lays out important and related events that together, previous scholars contend, mark the beginning of the composite saint's Hinduization.

Pedagogically, this chapter sheds light on the deification of saints in India and serves as a notable example of fluid boundaries in Indian religiosity in a world that tends to highlight more polarized and polarizing forms of Hinduism and Islam. For faculty teaching religion courses, this and following chapters provide a notable example of the ways in which deceased saints' (or founders) lives and teachings can be molded to fit those left behind, shaped by the understandings of particular important devotees close to the saint, and folded

into the particular needs of people among their devotional followings.

Chapter 2 takes readers on a deep dive into Maharashtrian *bhakti* traditions in its study of Das Ganu, a crucial Hindu proselytizer for the movement, both during Sai Baba's lifetime and long after the saint's life ended. A police inspector employed in colonial British service and part-time composer of nationalist and other secular songs when he met Sai Baba, Das Ganu, upon influence of the saint, turned into a full-time *kirtankar*, a composer and performer of devotional hymns (*kirtan*), and eventually brought many followers into Sai Baba's fold through his public performances. Today, Das Ganu's kirtan lives on in Sai Baba temple liturgy. McLain examines the fascinating life and work Das Ganu through his many writings and hymns; biography written by own disciple, Athavale; and Narasimhaswami's biographical account in which Das Ganu figures prominently, in a book recounting experiences of Sai Baba's close devotees.

Das Ganu's own position in regard to his Brahmin caste brings to the fore issues relevant to caste injustice within Maharashtra's religio-political environment during colonial rule. Adding to the book's teachability in courses on modern South Asia, McLain connects Das Ganu's concern with caste to the alternate movements addressing the scourge of untouchability during pre-nationhood—Gandhian reform versus Ambedkarite abolition. Das Ganu's complicated relationship with caste, embodying what Novetzke has called "Brahmin double" (p. 59), allows McLain to consider limitations on high-caste Hindus' ability to reform caste.

In chapter 3, McLain examines the life and writings of Narasimha Iyer, aka Narasimhaswami, arguably the greatest of all Shirdi Sai Baba's Hindu proselytizers. Narasimha's profound experience of the already eighteen-years deceased Sai Baba, at his Samadhi Mandir in Shirdi, shapes the remainder of his life, inspiring him to author more than three books (one of them four volumes)

about Sai Baba, adding to his expansive corpus of biographies of saints living during his time, and to establish the All India Sai Samaj in 1940, an institution responsible for constructing eighty temples in India by the time of his death in 1946. McLain complicates theories that blame Narasimhaswami, most among others, for "Hinduizing" Shirdi Sai Baba. According to McLain, Narasimha's writings reveal his understanding that Sai Baba had two missions, the "spiritual uplift of individuals and the temporal uplift of India" (pp. 93-94). Whereas authors have previously overlooked Narasimha's passionate concern with this second mission, McLain emphasizes both missions. Despite experiences with many great saints of his day, Narasimha's own personal uplift comes from his intimate connection to the saint whose grace did not succumb to limitations of the grave. In terms of temporal uplift, Sai Baba's composite body, teachings, and actions, for Narasimhaswami, must be interpreted as the future of religion, a plea to Hindus to embrace religious pluralism and see "that Sai Baba was instrumental to the peaceful cohabitation of Hindus and Muslims in the newly independent and pluralistic nation of India" (pp. 118-119). Would this pluralistic religion be Hinduism? Narasimhaswami calls for a nation built upon a composite religiosity, monistic and inclusive, yet as McLain qualifies, "less a synthesis ... and more a liberal recasting of Hinduism" (p. 132).

The book as a whole, and chapter 3 in particular, is a gem for scholars and students interested in guru devotion. Narasimha envisioned Sai Baba as his *samartha sat* guru, and McLain shares the contours of his devotion and his understanding of the efficacy of the guru/disciple relationship as a way to attain god-realization. Narasimha's iconic long search for a master, in which he meets one great teacher after another, each somehow pointing him elsewhere, eventually right to Sai Baba's Samadhi Mandir, speaks to a number of elements common to the guru path (*guru-marga*). As a bonus, the chapter also reveals information about teachers Narasimha spent substantial time with, including

Ramana Maharishi, Meher Baba, and Upasini Maharaj, all prominent twentieth-century gurus about whom scant scholarship exists.

In chapter 4, McLain brings readers to the 1970s, a golden age for Bollywood and one of turmoil for Indian politics. The year 1977 brought two Hindi-language films that magnify Sai Baba's fame, one a mythological film about the saint, titled *Shirdi Ke Sai Baba* and modeled on the success of 1975 film *Jai Santoshi Maa*, which sparked pan-Indian devotion to a little-known goddess, and the other the year's biggest blockbuster film, *Amar Akbar Anthony*, in which three brothers separated in early childhood and raised alternatively in Hindu, Muslim, and Christian settings are reunited through the grace of Shirdi Sai Baba. McLain explains that in *Shirdi Ke Sai Baba*, filmmakers display the inappropriateness of religious and caste identity, utilizing cinematic conventions, notably elite upper-class and upper-caste villains, to suggest that "Hinduism needs to be reformed" (p. 149). In *Amar Akbar Anthony*, the salvific and pluralistic vision of Shirdi Sai Baba, which one devotee-interlocuter calls the "darshan-ic pull" (p. 153), miraculously brings the family back together. While the separation occurs in front of Gandhi's statue, the film suggests that Shirdi Sai Baba may be able to accomplish a religious pluralism and uplift of the destitute that Gandhi could not.

In chapter 5, McLain introduces C. B. Satpathy, whose life path stands as testament to the power of film to transform. New Delhi police officer Satpathy, "on a whim," rented *Shirdi Ke Sai Baba* in the 1980s and felt so transformed by the film that he left for Shirdi the next morning, where he vowed to build 108 temples to Shirdi Sai Baba (p. 191). He has since founded over two hundred temples in India and has collaborated with devotee-temple-builders around the globe, including some of the temple founders in the United States.

The primary task of this chapter, however, turns to the construction of Sai Baba temples in

the Hindu diaspora, with special emphasis on new temples in Chicago, Illinois and Austin, Texas, the latter with connections back to Satpathy. This final chapter, set across the globe in the 2010s, may seem somewhat out of sync with the rest of the book, which has focused on the tensions between composite spirituality and Hinduism majoritarianism that have played out in the "Hinduization" of Sai Baba. Even in the US, where Hinduism is a minority religion, however, some of the same tensions play out in new ways. Looking at two very differently styled and founded temples, McLain finds a related tension in what she terms "the paradox of ritual" in which Sai Baba devotees purportedly not concerned with Hindu ritualism nonetheless find themselves succumbing to it in particular ways, revealing "an important ambivalence about ritual" (p. 209). Ethnographic details from this chapter underscore again the importance of film and printed image media in Sai Baba devotion. This circling back, alongside rich new ethnographic content, merits this chapter's inclusion and makes it less an add-on or start to a new study than an invitation, a call for scholars of diaspora Hinduism to include Shirdi Sai Baba Hindu in their conversations.

This book offers important scholarship about Sai Baba that incorporates multiple viewpoints of the major hagiographers and proponents of Sai Baba faith. Importantly, McLain's "decentering" in this study, from the saint to the movement that burgeoned after his death, allows readers to comprehend the ways in which Hindu devotees have variously interpreted the saint and have sought, through their understandings of him and his teachings, to reinterpret Hinduism. Like previous scholars, McLain reveals a process of Hinduization that is ongoing, yet McLain's depiction allows readers to see the complexity of this process, one in which this composite saint's Hindu interlocutors not only Hinduize him but also redefine the contours of what we might call Hinduism. Instead of "lamenting" the "Hinduization" of the religiously composite saint, McLain finds it "more productive to ask

why Hindus have turned to Sai Baba for their spiritual fulfillment and what this choice tells us about their relationship with modern Hinduism” (p. 13). This work reveals how Hindu devotees, despite their “Hinduization” of Sai Baba, have also sought, through the composite saint’s example and their own devotional models, to critique society, reform caste, promote a pluralistic nation-state, provide service initiatives, and create intercommunal peace and open temples. One important reality *The Afterlife Sai Baba* points us to is the inclination of many modern Hindus away from majoritarianism toward more cosmopolitan, spiritual, and religiously composite theologies.

McLain contextualizes well the “competing visions” she refers to in her subtitle, to examine not just the fact that the composite saint was Hinduized, but how so, why, and for what reasons. She asks us to consider what the saint’s Hinduization can tell us about the ways that Hindus have sought to envision Hinduism in increasingly globalizing contexts, from the time of the saint’s death through the twenty-first century.

Note

[1]. Antonio Rigopoulos, *The Life and Teachings of Sai Baba of Shirdi* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993); Marianne Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma: Shirdi Sai Baba in the Light of Sufism*. Rev. ed. (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers, 2004).

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