Early twentieth-century hagiographic sources tell us that when Shirdi Sai Baba (d. 1918) arrived in Shirdi as a teenaged youth, no one knew where he came from; who his parents were; or what caste and religion he belonged to. These sources also tell us that Sai Baba became notable for two main reasons: his combination of Hindu and Islamic traditions, which has made him into a modern-day symbol of Hindu-Muslim unity; and his reputation as a powerful and efficacious miracle-worker. In hagiographic texts like G.R. Dabholkar’s Sri Sai Satcarita (1929) and films like Ashok Bhushan’s Shirdi ke Sai Baba (1977), we see a number of encounters between the saint and proud, purity-minded Brahmins and find that one pattern clearly emerges. The Brahmins initially oppose Sai Baba for a variety of reasons, but eventually come to see the error of their ways, as a result of miraculous experiences engineered by the saint.

Jonathan Loar’s presentation approaches these encounters as a way to understand the inclusion of Brahmins into the Sai Baba devotional community, a context where one’s high-caste status would be more of a social liability than an advantage. In doing so, it shows that the Shirdi Sai Baba hagiographic tradition contains elements of anti-Brahminism that manifest in miracle stories that critique Brahminical excesses, while simultaneously subordinating this critique to the construction of Sai Baba as a saint through whom anyone and everyone can be morally and spiritually rehabilitated.