



Amartithi Volunteer Program

Most Baba lovers are acquainted with the Amartithi Gathering that takes place over a three-day period at the end of January and the beginning of February each year, when Meherabad suddenly swells into a small city and scores of multi-colored pandals, like desert wildflowers after a rain, pop up all across the estate. But even those who have attended the event may fail to appreciate the extent to which its success rests on the shoulders of a small army of volunteers who take time off from their jobs, travel eight or twenty or thirty-six hours by train, and devote the greater portion of five days to the innumerable small acts of service that make this gathering possible.

Throughout Amartithi, though one might not notice them, volunteers are ubiquitous. They see to the vital task of security, standing guard at the tents, at the dining areas, along the paths, beside outlying structures. They park cars in the parking lot on the Hill. They greet pilgrims arriving at the Ahmednagar train and bus stations, help carry their bags, escort them to their Meherabad hostels or pandals, and serve as ushers there. Before Amartithi they deliver supplies throughout Meherabad, spread a flooring of tarpaulins under the pandals on the Hill, New Site, and Lower Meherabad, and at the end of the gathering pack it all up again. They sweep accommodation spaces, pick up trash and litter, scrub toilets and sinks, tote steaming buckets of hot water for baths, fill earthen pots with drinking water. They carry messages by bicycle between Lower Meherabad, the New Site, and the Meher Pilgrim Retreat.

They man the information centers, registering the twelve-thousand-plus incoming pilgrims and delivering announcements over the public address system. They monitor cleanliness and make sure that the previously-agreed-on price standards are being adhered to in the various shops and restaurants on the Hill and in the "Meherabad Mall" below. Qualified volunteer doctors and nurses help staff the hospital in Lower Meherabad, the medical room in the New Site, and the medical tent on the Hill. Volunteers set up microphones on the amphitheater stage, mix sound levels for the performances, and broadcast the event over the internet. And as an especially prized line of service, they manage the queue and usher pilgrims in and out of the Samadhi for their moment of darshan.

All this service enormously reduces Amartithi costs for the Trust. Over the last three years, for example, volunteers have taken over the electrification of the various pandals and outdoor spaces, and this alone saves one and a half lakhs (Rs. 150,000) per annum. But beyond the matter of costs, the volunteers bring to their work a feeling of love and *esprit de corps* that spreads everywhere. Since many of them return year after year, they know their jobs as hired workers never could, and act out of their sense of responsibility towards their Lord. The service and sacrifice of these volunteers, which passes in large part unnoticed and unmentioned on, is indeed a moving testimony in the practical sphere to what love can do.

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50th Anniversary of the 1958 Meherabad Sahavas

During February 1958, Meher Baba held His last major sahavas at Meherabad. The program divided into two parts. The first, from 15th through 19th February, was attended by about 700 lovers of His from the Hindi and Marathi groups; and the second part, from the 22nd through the 26th, hosted an equivalent number of Telugu and Gujarati speakers. While the previous Meherabad sahavas in 1955 invited men only, the 1958 sahavas welcomed men and women both—or rather, women who could bring men as their guests.

This 1958 Meherabad program inaugurated a sahavas that continued on through Baba's visits to Myrtle Beach and Australia in May and June. It was during the Meherabad gathering that Baba gave out His message entitled "My Wish." At a final meeting in Meherabad that following July before 200 invited guests, He had the "Universal Message" read out publicly for the first time.

While Baba held several large-scale gatherings in Poona during the 1960s—notably the Guruprasad gatherings in 1962 and 1965—the 1958 programs in Meherabad and the West marked an end to the phase of intimate sahavas and the beginning of a long period of seclusion for His universal work that extended through His physical passing in 1969.

2008 ANNIVERSARY CELEBRATION. While all Baba lovers were, of course, cordially invited to the

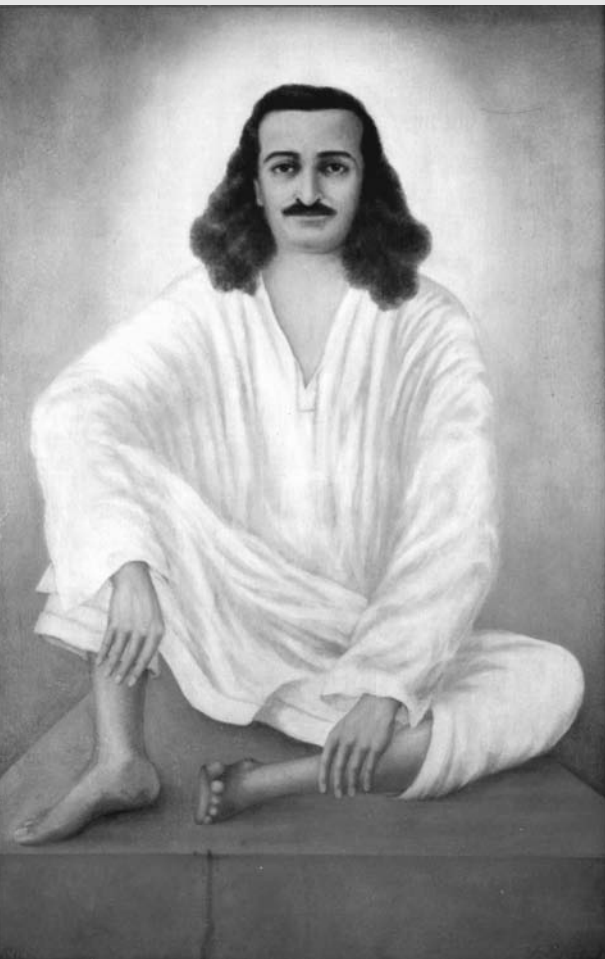
anniversary commemoration this past February, specially welcome were surviving attendees of the original sahavas fifty years ago. Of these, seventy came, and twenty-eight gave talks, which were translated into several languages.

The program began on the morning of 15th February and ran for three days, closing with a film just after sundown on the 17th. The first major talk was given by the Chairman, Bhau Kalchuri. On the next day Meherwan Jessawala provided a vivid and detailed history and chronicle of the original event. Many other moving stories and memories emerged from accounts of the various speakers, delivered from the amphitheater on Meherabad Hill before a crowd of several hundreds gathered under the pandal that had been erected for the occasion. Nearby, the Sabha Mandap (located a few steps from Baba's Samadhi) featured a beautiful display of charts, 1958 sahavas photos, and the magnificent messages "Seven Sahavas Sayings" and "My Wish," given out by Baba at that time and presented this year on large posters in the English, Hindi, Marathi, Gujarati, and Telugu languages.

In addition to the talks, bhajans, and other performances in the morning and afternoon sessions, each of the three-day programs concluded with a film. Specially created for this year's event was "Love-Feast Gathering," a seventy-minute cinematic presentation that chronicled the original gathering in 1958.



Scenes from the 1958 Sahavas at Meherabad (photos above on the top and bottom.)



Rano Gayley's Painting: "The Avatar"

For decades a painting by Rano Gayley, entitled "the Avatar," adorned the south wall of the Rahuri Cabin in Lower Meherabad. For its protection this priceless treasure has been moved to the museum in Meher Retreat on the Hill where it is available for pilgrim viewing. Its place in the cabin is now occupied by a high-quality digitally generated reproduction.

Rano describes the creation of the painting in a passage of her book, *Because of Love: My Life and Art with Meher Baba* (p. 82), that we reproduce below. In addition to the uses that Rano describes, we know that Baba had the painting sent around India for purposes of darshan by proxy, and that after Baba's passing, Padri would occasionally send visitors into the Rahuri Cabin to take Baba's darshan before His painted image there.

The second [of the two oil paintings], which much later I entitled "The Avatar," was done at Baba's request at Meherabad in 1940. Baba said he wanted a painting of himself seated and dressed in a sadra. The painting, Baba said, was intended for a festival in north India. His request gave me quite a shock, because I hadn't studied life drawing and for some reason a seated figure seemed much more difficult than a standing figure like "The Beloved."

Baba insisted that the painting be done on a piece of plywood on which there was already another painting which he didn't like. I begged to be allowed to get a fresh canvas, but Baba was adamant. The finished portrait pleased Baba and he had it framed. When I saw it again after many years, it looked to me like an early primitive.

The value of the painting to me is the use to which Baba put it. He had it brought several times to Mandali Hall at Lower Meherabad. On one occasion before the New Life, he had the men mandali say prayers of different religions before it, and Baba bowed before it, in effect bowing down to himself.

Waste Treatment at the MPR

In the two years since the inauguration of the Meher Pilgrim Retreat in June of 2006, the Trust has succeeded in putting into place treatment systems for wastewater and kitchen waste. Since water in particular is a scarce resource at Meherabad, and since Meher Baba Himself never liked carelessness and extravagance, Trust workers have made it their goal to treat waste materials in an environmentally friendly way where they are recycled back into usable forms.

WASTE WATER RECLAMATION.

Kitchen water and other effluents (including fecal matter) from toilets, sinks, and showers are rich in coliform bacteria and can provide the breeding grounds for cholera, typhoid, and hepatitis. By the "DEWATS" system ("Decentralized Wastewater Treatment Systems") recently put into operation, wastewater now passes through several



Food waste treatment (above) and fixed sewer treatment at Meherabad (below).



levels of treatment, involving both aerobic and anaerobic phases (that is, phases of contact with air and air deprivation), as well as exposure to sunlight.

Initially the wastewater collects in a traditional septic tank, where the solids are broken down anaerobically, some settling out and some liquifying. From here, the water trickles through a series of concrete baffles—serpentine channels contoured by ridges—where bacteria kills the harmful coliforms.

After the baffles, the water flows through gravel beds, about three feet deep and lined with semi-aquatic plants—canna lilies, cattails, papyrus, and alocasia. As it filters through the gravel, excess levels of nitrate are absorbed by the plants and oxygen is released into the water.

Finally, the water collects in a holding tank, where aeration and a blaze of Maharashtrian sunlight—aided by a multi-jet fountain—serve to further purify it while it awaits use. Laboratory tests have confirmed that MPR treated water falls well within the range that the World Health Organization has established as acceptable for purposes of irrigation.

From the holding tank the water is pumped back up the hill where it is used in the MPR gardens through a process of drip irrigation. Over the last year this treatment system has been yielding about

5,000–10,000 liters a day. Not only are the needs of the garden being fully satisfied without tapping into potable water reserves; but in addition, excess treated water will serve to irrigate a new plantation of trees east of the MPR that will eventually provide shade for pilgrims as they walk to Baba's Samadhi.

In addition to reclaimed waste water, MPR laundry water, which does not need such treatment, is collected in a tank and pumped directly to the trees. Rainwater from the MPR roof gushes through drain pipes and gutters to a large earthen collection pond which is now being lined with a waterproof membrane. One inch of rainfall should yield more than 60,000 liters, all usable for irrigation purposes.

FOOD WASTE HANDLING.

Feeding, as it does, about seventy pilgrims a day through a nine-month season each year, the MPR kitchen necessarily produces quantities of food waste and garbage. To deal with this problem, in late 2006 Trust workers in their environmental group installed a system of food waste treatment through vermiculture: that is to say, processing through the digestive activities of worms.

For this purpose, seven worm beds were created about fifty yards from the MPR kitchen, each capable of treating fifty kilograms per week. First, the food waste gets spread across the bed-of-the-day in a thin layer about a half inch deep; to keep it cool and moist for the worms, the garbage is covered with a mulch of millet (or *jawar*) stalks.

The process of decomposition begins with the work of bacteria. Since the food layer is thin, the heat of bacterial ferment does not rise to a degree such as to drive off the worms, who take over where the bacteria leave off.

Instead of ordinary earthworms, this treatment process uses what are called deep burrowing worms, who, during the off season (the Indian summer when MPR kitchen activities come to a halt), can burrow deep into the ground and lie dormant. These worms expel what are called worm castings, which every six months Trust workers shovel off and use to fertilize the gardens. Rich in nutrients, worm castings not only feed the trees and flowers but also attract more earthworms.

Since the initial seven beds could not handle the volume of MPR food waste, in February–March 2007 another seven were put into operation. Currently about 40–50 kilos of food waste get treated on a typical day, and 100 kilos or more during peak season.

Young Adults Sahavas in Early August

YOUNG ADULT BABA LOVERS from all around the world are invited to take part in the 2008 Meherabad Young Adult Sahavas, which will be held from the 3rd through 9th August.

During the sahavas 100 young adults from all over the world between the ages of nineteen and thirty-five will gather at Meherabad to spend six days together in the company of the Ancient One. The keynote is the celebration of Meher Baba's love through sharing, creative expression (such as art, music, and drama), and service at Meherabad. The Sahavas also offers many volunteer opportunities—not only for sahavasees but for persons over thirty-five as well.

For more information (including the application form), see the Trust web site at <http://ambppct.org/events/sahavas.php>. If you have specific questions, e-mail Jessica at mbyas@ambppct.org.

Restoration of Historic Meherabad Buildings

For slightly more than a decade now, the Trust has been channeling major efforts into the protection and preservation of visible repositories of Meher Baba's Avatatic legacy. One primary thrust has been in the area of manuscripts, old books, photographs, films, and other materials that record the story of His life and work. Another domain includes the objects and articles that Meher Baba personally touched and used. In Eruch's memorable phrase, these physical things will provide posterity with "tangible links" connecting Meher Baba the man with millions of people in the ages to come.

Yet a comparatively new line of preservation work now emerging into focus involves the historic buildings and sites at Meherabad. During the years prior to 2006 when most of the labor and resources were being poured into the construction of the Meher Pilgrim Retreat, it was not possible to devote to these historic structures much more than routine maintenance.

But since then the Trust has embarked on a major program of restoration and renovation that involves not only physical repair, but a carefully researched undertaking to bring these structures back into their mint condition at designated historic moments during Meher Baba's lifetime. So far as possible, this restoration work makes use of the same kinds of materials as were employed in the original construction. Meticulous to the last degree, workers spare no effort and bring all their best craftsmanship to the task. Several major restoration projects are already completed or in progress, and more are slated for the next few years.

THE SAMADHI. As the heart and center of Meherabad and the focal point of pilgrimage, Meher Baba's Tomb-Shrine is naturally the special object of concern. A major renovation of the interior murals was carried out in 1990–92.

Since then, international teams of Baba workers specially assembled for the task have seen to internal and external maintenance in projects completed during the summer seasons of 1994, 1998, 2000, 2001 and 2007. Unique in its importance, the Samadhi will be the subject of a separate article in a future issue of this newsletter.

RAHURI CABIN. Apart from the Samadhi, the first major restoration project, carried out during the 2007–08 pilgrim season, involved the Rahuri Cabin at Lower Meherabad.



As its name suggests, this structure was originally constructed in 1936 at Rahuri, a town about forty kilometers north of Meherabad, where for several months it served as Baba's own personal quarters. But when Baba shifted His ashram back to Meherabad in May 1937, He had Dr. Ghani disassemble and reconstruct it on its present site, just behind where the Main Bungalow currently stands. During the late 1930s and 40s Baba used the cabin for seclusion work and interviews. The great masts Lakhan Shah, Ali Shah, and Mohammed also stayed here at different times.

The Rahuri Cabin is a wood frame building in which the wooden skeleton was filled in with bricks plastered on both sides. Since some of the wood had suffered water damage, workers painstakingly replaced deteriorated bits while preserving as much of the original material as possible. Doors and windows were removed, repaired, and replaced. Where necessary the plastering was repaired. The entire external structure was, of course, repainted. For many years the Rahuri Cabin housed a painting by Rano Gailey; but now the painting has been moved to the Meherabad Museum on the Hill, where it is still available for pilgrim viewing. The original has been replaced in the Rahuri cabin by a very high quality digital reproduction. This copy has been encased in a frame that was found tied to a truss in the Main Bungalow and that probably served as the original frame for this painting before it was damaged.

Rano's account of the creation of this painting is reproduced as a separate article in this issue. (see p. 2)

MAIN BUNGALOW. The next major restoration project, still in progress at the time of this writing, represents a much larger undertaking. The Main Bungalow in Lower Meherabad, located just to the west of the Rahuri Cabin, was constructed in 1947–48 and inaugurated in a celebration captured on film on 23rd July 1948.

It includes a large meeting hall as well as living quarters, a kitchen, and bathing rooms originally intended for the men mandali. (see photo below)

Embarked upon immediately after the conclusion of the pilgrim season this past March, the first stage of the restoration involved removing the roof cover—that is, the old terra cotta tiles that lie on teakwood battens and an insulating layer of bamboo matting. This mesh of materials had to be carefully disassembled, spread out on the ground under the neem and gulmor and baobab trees in front of the building, and thoroughly dusted and scrubbed. Replacing worn out materials with others of the same make, particularly in the case of the old tiles, has challenged the construction market procurement skills of Trust workers determined to replicate the construction of the original as exactly as possible.

The stripping away of the roof cover exposed the teak trusses, beams, and rafters, which had to be thoroughly cleaned and repainted with linseed oil. By a stroke of good luck, the weather cooperated in this process with two unseasonable heavy rainfalls in late March. These downpours washed the beams more thoroughly than the workers could ever have done.

Meanwhile, the eaves around the edge of the building, in places where the old wood has rotted beyond repair, are being replaced. Happily, the village of Arangaon still trains high-quality carpenters with the traditional skills and hand tools to reproduce the original work. Since some of the original posts have rotted at the bottom where they touch the ground, many had to be jacked up and reinforced with a concrete base and steel braces.

With Baba's grace, all of this work will be finished and the roof replaced before the June onset of the 2008 monsoon. In August the interior will be rewired and electrified in compliance with the highest possible fire safety standards. Flagstones will then be repaired when necessary and new cement poured in the joints where the old cement has crumbled. Further work for the masons will include replacing and patching broken plaster; innumerable past coats of whitewash will have to be scraped away and a fresh coat put on. If all

goes well, midway through the next pilgrim season the old bungalow will be renovated and available again for use.

PHOTOS OF RESTORATION AND WASTE TREATMENT BY TED JUDSON



Restoration of the Main Bungalow at Meherabad began when the pilgrim season ended.

How to Contribute

The Avatar Meher Baba Trust is supported entirely by love-gifts from Meher Baba's lovers around the world. In truth, it is Baba Himself who gives through your hands, and it is Baba Himself who brings these objects to completion, objects that He Himself laid down in the Trust Deed, when it pleases Him to do so.

For those who have not taken the opportunity to contribute, here is how. In the UK, please send your tax-deductible contribution to Avatar Meher Baba Association c/o of Sue Chapman, 3 Whin Hill, Craster NE663TP, UK tel 01 665 57 69 57, e-mail suchapman@hotmail.com. In the United States, persons who wish to make tax-deductible contributions or wish to name the Trust as a beneficiary in their will, 401K, IRA, or insurance policy should contact Emory and Susan Ayers, P.O. Box 398, Mystic CT 06355 (tel. 860-535-0370, e-mail TrustPlan@ambppct.org); they will send you a list of eight Meher Baba tax-exempt organizations that have a grant in place to support the Trust Development Plan and other relevant information. Baba lovers from other parts of the world should send contributions directly to the AMBPPC Trust, Post Bag No. 31, King's Road, Ahmednagar 414001, Maharashtra State, India. Further information can be found in the Trust's web site at www.ambppct.org.

Amartithi Volunteers

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GROWTH OF THE VOLUNTEER PROGRAM. The Amartithi volunteer program has developed and expanded enormously over the years. The first Amartithi in 1970, attended by about 500 pilgrims, brought out fifteen to twenty of them. Each year thereafter the size of the gathering continued to grow. Until they passed away in the early and mid-1980s, most of the Amartithi arrangements were managed by Baba's great disciples Pendu and Padri.

But the huge expansion and diversification of the volunteer program has taken place over the last ten or fifteen years. Now managed by trustees Jal Dastur and Shridhar Kelkar, the volunteer corps in 2008 totaled 832 men and women, who work under the direction of their various group heads. Volunteers have to commit well in advance. In early October the Trust sends out a general invitation to groups throughout India; group heads from the different cities are required to send back a finalized list of volunteers by a 31st December deadline. Every year the Amartithi volunteer program launches with a large organizational meeting in the veranda of Hostel D in the afternoon of 28th January. Conducted on the eve of the arrival of the huge crowds, these meetings always carry a charged feeling. From then on each volunteer is responsible for two three-hour shifts, one during the day and one at night; but some of the supervisors and other volunteers work far more than this, as much as fourteen or sixteen hours a day.

The Amartithi program wraps up on 1st February, and most of the volunteers disperse on the 2nd. The final Amartithi event in recent years has been a lively entertainment in the theater after supper on the 1st, when solo singers and groups from throughout India cut loose with chants and bhajans and ecstatic songs and leave the late night air ringing with their repeated cries of "Avatar Meher Baba ki Jai!"



PHOTO BY WIN COATES

Aloba 1916–2002

Ali Akbar Shapurzman was born on 12th July 1916 in Yazd, a city in central Iran. At the age of seven, Ali was brought to Bombay where he served as a busboy and waited on tables in one of his uncle's restaurants. One day his uncle happened to read in a Persian newspaper an advertisement for a school that was offering a free academic and spiritual education to boys. He decided to enroll his nephew, now eleven years old, along with his own son.

In this way Ali joined the Meher Ashram in Meherabad and came into contact with the man whom he was later to accept as his Lord and Master.

Ali's uncle wound up withdrawing the boy from the school and bringing him back to Bombay. But Ali's destiny could not be so easily thwarted. After a chance encounter with Baba's disciple Baidul six years later, spiritual feelings began to surge in him. These eventually drove him to seek out Baba's darshan in Nasik in 1934, and he remained a lover and disciple of Baba's from that time on.

Ali Akbar's full-time residence as one of Meher Baba's mandali, however, began in 1949, when he joined Baba as one of His New Life companions. It was then that he acquired "Aloba" as his enduring sobriquet. During that period

violence was regularly breaking out between Hindus and Muslims. To forestall difficulties in Hindu-dominated regions, Baba renamed Dr. Ghani and Ali Akbar, the two Muslims in the party, as "Ghanoba" and "Aloba," respectively.

And in Aloba's case the label stuck, even though over the years he picked up other nicknames—such as "General," "Snake Killer," "Electric Man." For Aloba was an exceedingly colorful character with memorable idiosyncrasies, and these comic titles from Baba reflected this. One of Aloba's "electric" qualities was the immediacy with which he carried out Baba's orders—sometimes without even waiting to find out what the order was!

It so happened one day, while conversing with the mandali in the large front veranda facing Bund Garden Road, that Baba's attention was drawn to a man

walking along the roadside. "Have you noticed this fellow passing by each morning?" Baba gestured. "He carries a satchel, and his eyes are always turned to the ground. He seems oblivious to where he is going or what is happening around him. I wonder who he is?"

Baba glanced around Him, and His gaze settled on Aloba. "Find out . . ." He began. But before Baba could complete the sentence, Aloba had already crossed the verandah, vaulted the banister, and jumped down to the ground about five or six feet below. Landing on both feet, he dashed along the driveway until he reached the gate of Guruprasad that had steel spikes jutting from the top. Rather than go around, Aloba climbed the gate, leaped over the spikes, and continued to chase down the street until he caught up with the mysterious stranger.

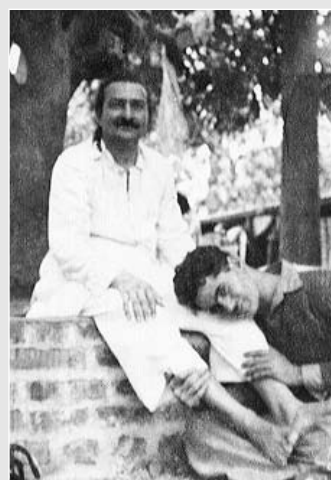
Baba and the mandali were watching all this from the verandah. "Now look at this fellow," Baba gestured. "He gives me palpitations. I feel frightened to give him an order!" Shortly thereafter Aloba returned. "What did you find out?" Baba inquired.

Aloba answered with a complete history of the man. In just a few minutes' conversation with a stranger he had accosted on the street, Aloba had succeeded in extracting from him his name, his nationality, what he did, and how he came to be there.

Baba then turned to the men mandali seated around Him and said, "See how well Aloba has done My job! Could any of you have accomplished this?"

Though short in stature, Aloba's commanding personality, coupled with his childlike faith and conviction in Meher Baba's divinity, not only endeared him to all who came into his contact, but in later years created highlights in the Meherasad pilgrim routine. Who could ever forget Aloba's shrill whistle, his flinging open the doors of Mandali Hall with the military-like command "Rush out for tea!" or his reminder to Meherasad pilgrims at the end of a day's session to "leave your longings, but take your belongings."

Aloba rejoined His Beloved Lord Avatar Meher Baba on 13th August 2002.



Aloba with Baba in Nask, 1935

WHAT IS THE AVATAR MEHER BABA TRUST?

CREATED IN 1959 under Meher Baba's direction and bearing His signature on its Deed, the Avatar Meher Baba Trust had at its founding two purposes: to provide means of subsistence to certain named disciples of Meher Baba's, and to fulfill certain charitable objects. Today, the first of these functions is discharged under "Avatar Meher Baba Trust, Firstly," and the second under "Avatar Meher Baba Perpetual Public Charitable Trust."

The Trust Deed calls for maintenance of Avatar Meher Baba's Tomb and the creation of pilgrim facilities; for educational, medical, veterinary, and other charitable services; for estate development and procurement of sources of water; for the

promulgation of Avatar Meher Baba's love-message through melas, lectures, publication, and the arts; and for spiritual training. The Trust's current Development Plan focuses on the creation of new facilities for pilgrim accommodation at Meherabad and other goals.

Inquiries and contributions can be sent to: The Chairman, Avatar Meher Baba Trust, King's Road, Post Bag 31, Ahmednagar 414 001, M.S., India. Subscriptions to this newsletter can be sent to that address or to: Avatar Meher Baba Foundation, PO Box 398, Mystic, CT 06355-0398, USA (tel. 860-535-0370, e-mail TrustPlan@ambppct.org). To subscribe to *Tavern Talk* (the Trust's

electronic newsletter), send an e-mail to Listserv@ambppct.org and include in the text of your message the words: "subscribe tavern-talk." Further information about the Trust can be found on its web site at www.ambppct.org and www.avatarmeherbabatrust.org. Subscriptions to *In His Service* or *Tavern Talk* can be submitted through the web site in its "Events and News" section.

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