

Sathya Sai Baba

It is said that “the only person in India who can draw larger crowds than Sai Baba is the prime minister” (Swallow 125). Also known as Satya Sai Baba, Sai Baba has risen in the last century as an important figure in modern day India. It is difficult to know the amount of followers that Sai Baba has, but it is estimated that there are at least twenty million adherents worldwide (Rodrigues 487). His name, when broken down, gives meaning, *Satya* means truth, *Sai* is the divine mother, and Baba mean father. His name stands for the union of the male and female aspects in the world (Bassuk 87). Sai Baba’s most powerful technique to draw people to his cause is the use of miracles, especially materialization (Babb 1986: 181). Over the course of his life, Sai Baba has attracted many followers, but he has also received his fair share of negative attention. Scepticism and doubt have been cast on the legitimacy of his miracles, and controversy has risen in his inner circle with accusations of murder and pedophilia. Examining his life, his miracles, his cult, his divine “connection”, as well as the criticism of others, are all important for understanding who Sathya Sai Baba is, and his importance to the modern Hindu society.

Sathya was born in the state of Andhra Pradesh in the village of Puttaparthi in 1926 (Babb 1983: 116). He was born into the Raju caste, his birth name Satyanarayana Raju (Bassuk 87). At his birth special signs occurred to mark his coming, one of which was a cobra mysteriously appearing under Sai Baba’s bed, and another was a Tambura magically had its strings plucked (Urban 78). Sai Baba attended school like a normal child where he focused on drama and *bhajan*, which are devotional songs (Babb 1986: 163). In 1940, Sai Baba had an epileptic seizure and began acting in a bizarre manner.

Exorcists were brought in to try to cure the boy, but failed (Urban 79). This was explained to be the possession of his body by Shirdi Sai Baba (Bassuk 88). Shirdi Sai Baba was an Indian healer and miracle worker who had died in 1918 (Babb 1983: 117). Through claiming to be the reincarnation of Shirdi Sai Baba, Satya had proclaimed his avatarhood (Bassuk 87) and gave his miraculous powers legitimacy (Urban 79). It was at this time that Satya left his family and began attracting devotees to his cause. Ten years later, he constructed his ashram in Puttaparthi and his influence began to be felt across the country (Urban 79). In 1963, Sai Baba had another forceful seizure, was diagnosed with tubercular meningitis, and went into a coma. He was brought before a crowd for a festival and he miraculously cured himself and began proclaiming himself as the Lord Siva and his consort Sakti in embodied form (Babb 1986: 165). He claimed that the illness was caused by Sakti, as she had caused the sage Bharadvaja to become ill, and Siva had cured him by sprinkling water. Sai Baba claimed that by sprinkling the water on himself he had cured his disease (Babb 1986: 165). After his proclamation, Sai Baba began travelling around the Indian sub-continent spreading his message through lectures, speeches, festivals and special pujas (Urban 79). He also founded a number of “Sathya Sai Colleges” and has been active in charitable and philanthropic activities (Babb 1986: 168). Sai Baba has stated that his goal in his current incarnation is to combat social evils and spiritual degeneration present in the modern day (Urban 87). Sai Baba has also prophesied his own death, at the age of 96 in the year 2022 (Babb 1986: 166).

An important aspect of Sai Baba legitimacy is his claim that he is an *avatara*, a god in human form. The idea of *avatara* arose through the complex polytheism occurring in the Vedic period, the idea that a god has descended into a human form (White 865).

The Buddha is a common example of one considered to be an *avatara*. Sai Baba uses the idea of the *avatara* to draw legitimacy to his powers. He claims that in his current form, he is Siva and Sakti together in human form. Sai Baba suggests that there are three Sai incarnations, Shirdi Sai Baba who was Sakti alone, Satya Sai Baba who is both Siva and Sakti, and the future Sai incarnation Prema Sai who will be Siva incarnate alone (Babb 1986: 166). Many of the miracles that Sai Baba performs also play an important role in connecting him with Shiva. One of the most common objects that Sai Baba materializes is *vibhuti*, sacred ash that has a connection with Siva (Babb 1983: 119). Another materialization miracle of producing a *lingam* out of his mouth draws strong symbolic connections with Siva who is primarily associated with the *lingam* (Swallow 138 and 146). The festival of *Mahasivaratri* becomes an important annual activity for Sai Baba's cult. This festival is known as the great night of Siva and Sai Baba is worshipped as a living *lingam* (Swallow 146).

The main reason for the success of Sai Baba is his ability to perform miracles. The miracles that Sai Baba performs are crucial for recruitment and maintenance of the cult. Sai Baba himself has even called his miracles *nidarshan* ("evidence") of his divine character and important for influencing the spiritual being of his devotees (Babb 1983: 117). Some of the miracles that have been attributed to Sai Baba include the curing of illnesses, being able to leave his body and be in more than one place at once, raising the dead, knowing intimate details of those he helps without being told, being able to fly, and multiplication of loaves of bread and fish (Spurr 119 and Babb 1986: 174). However, the most important type of miracle that is performed is materialization. It is believed that he can materialize practically anything (Babb 1986: 179). The most common object

materialized is *vibhuti*, and it is said that he produces a pound a day (Babb 1983: 117). These miraculous powers are known in Hinduism as *siddhis* which are supernormal powers that can be obtained through yoga (Rodrigues 204). It is important to note that the absence of Sai Baba does not mean that a “miraculous” event could not be attributed to him, but rather increases his authority by creating an essence of the miraculous (Babb 1986: 180). An example of this would be the mysterious and sudden presence of *vibhuti* within the devotee’s household (Babb 1986: 179). This miraculous element is at the foundation of Sai Baba’s movement.

An understanding of Sai Baba can also be obtained by examining the practices of his cult. Participation can be as simple as placing a picture of Sai Baba in the family shrine, to the more devout practices, in which devotees will fill their homes with images of the Baba. Committed members will also take part in the education and social service systems that the cult takes part in (Babb 1986: 170). Education and social service are important goals of the cult, with members partaking in sponsored charitable and philanthropic activities. These activities are funded by donations of wealthy devotees. Sai Baba himself does not receive the donations, but rather a trust called the Central Shri Sathya Sai Trust receives all donations. This has made the donation process very simple, as devotees can make donations at any branch of the Canara bank (Urban 81). The cult and Sai Baba have established four “Sathya Sai Colleges”, as well as putting major efforts into *Bal vikas*, which are child development programs (Babb 1986: 168). In general, the individuals most drawn to Sai Baba’s cause are the well educated middle class (Urban 81). Sai Baba has gained western attention by becoming the guru to the owner of the “Hard Rock Cafe”, Isaac Tigrett (Urban 74).

Like most religious figures Sai Baba, has not escaped the criticisms and skepticisms that come with the role. Two types of skeptics have arisen. Some completely dismiss Sai Baba and view his miracles as sleight-of-hand tricks. Others do not dismiss his abilities, but rather dismiss the idea of him being divine, and attribute his abilities to the *siddhis* of a yogic adept. In an eye witness account of “materialization”, Michael Spurr carefully watched the process by which Sai Baba materialized goods for his devotees. Spurr suggests a simple sleight-of-hand trick, in which the “materialized” object was held in the left hand, concealed by a stack of paper. When the time is right, he transfers the object to his right hand, holding it between his fingers. He then spins his hand palm down and “materializes” the object for the devotee. Spurr also saw objects in between the cracks of Sai Baba’s left hand and saw him drop a pellet that could be the *vibhuti* that is materialized (201). Spurr also had an eye witness account where Sai Baba recalled incorrect details about two of the devotees whom he was talking with. This was rationalized by other devotees as Sai Baba joking around (205). Other areas of controversy have arisen around Sai Baba. In 1993, six members of Sai Baba inner circle were killed in Sai Baba’s room, two of which were murdered, and four, who were bearing knives, gunned down by police. The motive of the murders was suggested to be an internal conflict, and Sai Baba was never interrogated about the murders (Gogineni 58). Accusations of pedophilia have also surfaced surrounding Sai Baba. A book called “Avatar in the Night”, released by a former devotee of Sai Baba, accuses Sai Baba of having homosexual interest in young boys (Gogineni 58). All copies of the book were burned.

Sathya Sai Baba is a complex figure and although he has come under intense criticism, he has had an important role in the shaping of modern day Hinduism.

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