

THE GLOBAL GURU: SAI BABA AND THE MIRACLE OF THE MODERN

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Photos of Satya Sai Baba, with his flowing saffron robes and prodigious curly locks, adorn the worship rooms, public businesses, and vehicles of millions of Indians. Out of some of these photos, devotees say, flows a stream of sacred ash, just one example of the thousands of miracles this popular guru is said to perform every year. While his message is instructive in understanding Sai Baba's appeal, it is his public displays of extraordinary power that his followers cite as evidence for his divinity, and that his detractors ridicule as only the most obvious example of his manipulation of superstitious Indian minds. Scholarly analysis has likewise focussed on his miraculous displays. It is tempting to treat his message and his magic as distinct components of his teaching, where magic is the carrot that draws people into the community of devotees, the message being the more sober, edifying, and enduring aspect of his mission. However, the enormous hagiographical literature on Sai Baba links these two aspects of his public life, and even his long-term devotees continue to cite, and often to experience, his miracles. I will assume, then, that his speeches suggest valuable ways to interpret his magic, and I will proceed by interweaving examination of his discourses with analyses of his magic. I will argue that his discursive message is most succinctly expressed in his magic, which distil and express many of the features of his popularity in captivating and succinct performances.

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Despite his ubiquitous visage and fame throughout India, Sai Baba's following is drawn from a fairly narrow cross-section of Indians, largely comprised of educated, upper middle-class Indians, non-resident Indians, and Westerners. While the image he fosters appears to represent traditional India, this is contrasted by the global nature of his message and by the concerns of his audience. It is this contrast between the local and the global that I will explore in this paper. I will argue that Sai Baba's message and magic express the tensions of globalisation, which are strongly reflected in the demographics of his urban following.² These tensions are contained in his message, which one might call neo-traditionalist, as well as in the concrete expressions of his miracles, when he proclaims his divinity through his materialisation of Rolex watches, or when mass produced glossy photographs produce *vibhuti*, ash that has indicated the presence of divinity in South Asia for millennia.

Religion, Globalisation and Anti-Globalisation

The complexity of the role of religion in globalisation is due in large measure to the variety of histories and contexts through which globalisation progresses, and also to the multiplicity of benefits and problems inherent in globalising forces. That religion has been employed to both encourage and resist global processes is clear. Christian missionaries, for example, were among the pioneers of the spread of European cultures, and they were primary sources of Western knowledge about societies around the world. Ivan Strenski points to the use of Catholic traditions by the Portuguese and Spanish to justify their exploration and colonisation of new worlds, and more importantly to shape the behaviours and beliefs of those they encountered in these lands.³

On the other hand, if we follow Roland Robertson in conceiving of globalisation as a modern process through which the world is increasingly becoming a single place, religious leaders often play key roles in resisting globalising processes and their cultural and material effects.⁴ While globalisation entails the spread of particular cultural forms throughout the world, often effected through multi-national corporations, this has not led to the wholesale homogenisation of culture. In practice, the spread of specific cultures has resulted in the coexistence of a plurality of cultural expressions

² Donald Taylor puts the number of Sai devotees at ten million in 1987. "Authority in the Sathya Sai Baba Movement," in *Hinduism in Great Britain: The Perpetuation of Religion in an Alien Cultural Milieu*, ed. Richard Burghart (New York: Tavistock Publications, 1987), 119. This number is repeated on http://www.adherents.com/adh_rb.html, accessed July 15, 2005.

³ Ivan Strenski, "The Religion in Globalisation," in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 72.3 (2004): 631-52.

⁴ Roland Robertson, *Globalization: Social Theory and Global Culture* (London: Sage Publications, 1992).

and values within societies. Such cohabitation often creates tensions and conflicts, as particular cultural expressions and the agents who perpetuate them express hegemonic and counter-hegemonic agendas.⁵ However, to describe this process as one in which distinct cultural systems alternately parry and cooperate reifies cultural boundaries which in practice are fluid. Indeed, these boundaries indicate the aspirations of cultural purists more than they do the complexities of social interactions.

The proliferation of scientific beliefs in India has exacerbated and brought to the fore tensions that have been expressed most often as a conflict between tradition and religion, on the one hand, and science on the other. In examining Sai Baba's following, I hope to shed light on how one group deals with this tension. I should clarify at the outset that I do not view the challenge expressed in Sai Baba's magic as a traditional challenge to modernity, but I rather see it as the contestation of modernity, as the opposition of one notion of modernity by another. Nor do I mean to rigidly juxtapose science and Europe, on the one hand, and belief in the miraculous and India on the other. After all, there have been materialist critiques of religious belief in India for millennia, and belief in the miraculous is common throughout the world. Furthermore, scientific disciplines that originated in Europe and America – for instance, biomedicine and the natural sciences – are highly valued in India, and as any cursory glance at the science, mathematics, medical and engineering faculties of European and North American universities will attest, Indians are among the world leaders in these disciplines. I seek to challenge Orientalist dichotomies, then, by articulating these processes neither as rational nor as superstitious, both of which emerge from a framework that assumes that cognition, or considered judgment, is the primary motivation for action. Rather, I consider narratives of Sai Baba's miraculous acts to be more performative than descriptive. That is to say, they are rhetorical, discursive acts that seek to move an audience in specific ways.⁶

This is not to say, however, that Sai Baba and his devotees do not themselves employ the categories of science and divinity, or East and West, or rationality and superstition. They characterise particular cultural forms as Western and exogenous, and oppose these to what is indigenous and Indian. Contrary to their rhetoric, I hope to show in this paper that Sai Baba provides an apt example of the complexities of cultural globalisation, and the difficulties in maintaining such dichotomies. He is, after all, a prophet of the jet-set more than he is a guru of peasants. While he carries on a critique of Western capitalism, materialism and science in his public rhetoric, this rhetoric contains features and traces of the very discourses and processes that it appears to resist. In utilising many of the symbols and criteria of authority of cultural forms he seems to oppose, Sai Baba demonstrates that the spread of global cultural forms can provide both the challenge to be resisted, and at

⁵ Peter Beyer, *Religion and Globalization* (London: Sage Publications, 1994), 2.

⁶ J.L. Austin, *How To Do Things with Words*, Second Edition (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1975).

the same time the very grounds through which this resistance might be effective. This, in the end, might be the particular force of global hegemonies, which become essential to all aspirations to global authority.

The Sai Baba Purana

Sai Baba was born as Sathya Narayana in the South Indian state of Andhra Pradesh in 1926. According to one biographer, his childhood was enchanted from its beginning. The mysterious sounding of drums in his house signalled his impending birth, and a snake was found under his cradle, evoking the divine image of the Hindu god Vishnu reclining on his snake-bed Adishesha.⁷ At the age of fourteen, Sathya was bitten by a scorpion. He soon recovered, yet his behaviour changed. He began to sing Sanskrit verses, a language of which he had no prior knowledge, and his body would become rigid, apparently in response to his astral wanderings. His parents sent for the district medical officer, who diagnosed the illness as a form of hysteria and prescribed a regimen of medication, but with no positive effect. Then, after exorcists failed to heal Sathya, an “expert in devil-craft” was brought in, “a gigantic figure, terrible to behold, with blood-red eyes and untamed manners.”⁸ He subjected the boy to an extremely painful treatment to no avail. Finally, one morning Sathya rose and began to materialize candy and flowers for his family and neighbours, his first public display of magic. Alarmed, his father rushed at him with a stick with the words “Are you a God, or a ghost, or a madcap?” At this, Sathya calmly announced, “I am Sai Baba.”⁹

The reference he made was to Sai Baba of Shirdi, a holy man in Maharashtra who had died eight years before Sathya was born. This was only the first of Sathya’s surprising declarations of self-identity – later he would identify himself with the god Shiva. At this early stage of his public career as a divine figure, the importance of his announcement and of his magical virtuosity is that he appeared to transcend death and the physical limitations of the body. He claimed to remember his past life, an ability demonstrated by accomplished holy men in India, most notably the Buddha. According to Kasturi’s biography, Sai Baba’s behaviour after the snakebite confounded medical practitioners using both Western medical techniques and local methods. Likewise, his act of materialization defied logical explanation. These stories are still circulated by his followers, and they set the backdrop for his magical demonstrations throughout his career.

⁷ N. Kasturi, *The Life of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba* (Bombay: Sri Sathya Sai Education Foundation, 1969), 8-10.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 42.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

Sai Baba's Following

In the hagiographical literature which they produce in volumes, his devotees celebrate the greatness not only of Sai Baba, but they also proudly reflect on their own status within Indian society.

Baba's devotees include, most important government ministers, central and state ambassadors, judges, educationists, medical men, psychiatrists, religious leaders of all denominations, social workers and many more eminent personalities in India and abroad. They are rendering very splendid social service to the down-trodden and needy. These eminent men should come forward and find out ways and means to give this single desire of Baba, to put men of character in charge of levels of power, a concrete shape.¹⁰

The "down-trodden and needy," i.e., the uneducated, economically and socially disenfranchised, are explicitly excluded in this description of his following, functioning as the object of the group's benevolence. While Sai Baba certainly attracts the devotion of some of the less economically or politically well-positioned strata of Indian society, the above account of his powerful constituency as the majority of his devotees seems no exaggeration, noted as well by many less partial observers.¹¹ His divinity is affirmed by the renown of his followers, and their special status within Indian society is highlighted by their association with the greatest guru in contemporary Hinduism. As they have heeded their guru's call to use their elevated social positions as a springboard to institute his social vision, their effect on Indian politics, education, and other social institutions has been significant.¹²

David Harvey has recently written poignantly and convincingly of the injustices of what he calls "uneven geographical development."¹³ It is one of the necessities of global capitalism, he holds, to continue to seek new territories and peoples to exploit, in order to satisfy that economic desideratum of constant growth. From the perspective of geographical globalisation, this has meant that countries outside of Europe and North America have been increasingly drawn into a global economic system. Likewise, the world's working poor is primarily located today in developing

¹⁰ S. D. Kulkarni, *Sri Sathya Sai: The Yugavatara (The Scientific Analysis of Baba Phenomenon)*, (Bombay: Shri Bhagavana Vedavyasa Samshodhan Mandira, 1990), 165.

¹¹ Charles S. J. White, "The Sai Baba Movement: Approaches to the Study of Indian Saints," *Journal of Asian Studies* 31.4 (Aug., 1972), 868; Lawrence A. Babb, "Sathya Sai Baba's Magic," *Anthropological Quarterly* 56.3 (July, 1983), 116; D. A. Swallow, "Ashes and Powers: Myth, Rite and Miracle in an Indian God-Man's Cult," *Modern Asian Studies* 16.1 (1982), 123.

¹² Indeed, it is likely that this has already taken place, as many of Sai Baba's followers are now in powerful positions and their devotion to his person and commitment to his teachings run deep.

¹³ David Harvey, *Spaces of Hope* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 31-50.

countries such as India. While Harvey does not give sufficient attention to stratification within developing countries, it is clear that as global labour grows with global capitalism, local elite who orchestrate these processes also increase in number. In India, it is these elite who are most drawn to Sai Baba's teachings and public performances.

The "splendid social service" that his followers provide to India's poor should not be taken as a socialist effort to empower India's millions of labourers. Indeed, Sai Baba urges his already privileged followers to consolidate their powerful positions in society. As Hugh Urban has recently pointed out, many of these devotees are actively anti-Marxist and anti-communist, which they equate with atheism.¹⁴ Their impulse to do limited social work may be read as a response to upper-class guilt, or as a strategy to legitimate their claims to powerful social positions. They also cite their status in support Sai Baba's claim to divinity, as suggested by the frequent interchange in this hagiography of exclamations of Sai's powers with the respectability and status of his following. As Weber indicated long ago, the success of a speaker's charismatic claims depend on the acceptance of an audience.¹⁵ One might add to this that the degree to which the claims of a charismatic figure are accepted among a broader section of a society will depend on the social status of the group's devoted core. While prior analyses of Sai Baba's teaching and magic have insightfully queried what he does for his followers, they have not asked what his followers do for him. If his magic and message serve to re-enchant the world for a disaffected cosmopolitan clientele, as Babb among other have pointed out, it is equally true that the scientific credentials and social status of his following in turn imbue Sai Baba with an authority that enables him to capture a global audience and authority.¹⁶

The Miraculous Message of Sai Baba

That Sai Baba's magic plays a major role in his attraction and retention of devotees is undeniable. For the most part, the literature that his followers disseminate is a storehouse of tales of his extraordinary feats. Every devotee, it seems, has not only heard about or witnessed several of his public displays of supernatural ability, but also has perceived his direct, extraordinary intervention into their personal affairs on many occasions. When one multiplies this number by his millions of devotees, the sheer number of

¹⁴ Hugh B. Urban, "Avatar for Our Age: Sathya Sai Baba and the Cultural Contradictions of Late Capitalism," in *Religion* 33 (2003), 86-87.

¹⁵ Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, edited by Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978), 215.

¹⁶ This reciprocity of authority is common to the guru/devotee relationship in South Asia, and it also reflects the relationship between god and devotee, a relationship characterised by *bhakti* in its most literal sense of sharing. Indeed, *bhakti* indicates a recognition that gods and gurus need devotees as much as devotees need them.

magical acts perceived by his followers is staggering. It is said that Sai materializes at least one pound of sacred ash every day, amounting to several tons in his career thus far. Clearly, in this case it is not merely the quality, but just as importantly the quantity of his magical acts that contribute to his mystique. Furthermore, while the personal nature of these acts attracts new devotees, the frequent public displays reaffirm his divinity in the minds of his constituency.

Sai declares his mission in these general terms: “I have a ‘task’: to foster all mankind and ensure for all of them lives full of Ananda [bliss]. I have a ‘vow’: to lead all who stray away from the straight path, again into goodness and save them.”¹⁷ While the general force of this patent statement seems uninspiring, it is the particular way in which humankind is erring and what values this straight path embodies that are interesting. Like many other contemporary religious leaders and sects in India, Sai Baba combines a critique of materialistic pursuits with a vision of the re-establishment of a golden age hearkening back to ancient Vedic texts. This teaching is not entirely new in South Asia – religious figures as far back as the Buddha and Mahavira have denounced the accumulation of material wealth. Yet the terms in which Sai Baba communicates his message are contemporary, severely criticizing India’s modern economy and secularism. As one follower writes: “Materialism ... has again reared its head. Not only this, but it has received respectability by the backing of the scientific community.”¹⁸ The “so-called rationalists” of the scientific community, declaring “that the Nature [sic] is everything and there is no conscious being who guides the destiny of this universe,” are irrational, while “Baba’s miracles, though, have disturbed the scientists [...] Baba’s living example would work out the miracle of weaning away the scientific community from their rigid and irrational stand.”¹⁹

His critique of the influence of Western institutions has motivated Sai Baba to establish his own educational and medical institutions. He and his devotees have founded secondary schools, hospitals, and universities.²⁰ In a program for college teachers, Sai Baba urged the return to the values (*dharma*) found in the Vedas, decrying those who, “enamoured of modern civilisation and bearing the respected designation of social reformers and reconstructors, are trying in manifold deceptive attractive ways to pollute Society itself, by depriving it of Dharma.”²¹ He idealizes ancient Indian forms of education, which he asserts have been supplanted by atheistic Western education. “When Westerners became the rulers, many were lured to the study of their language, for, thereby they could secure the ‘second’ of the four goals of man, namely, riches. Thus they were transformed into

¹⁷ Kulkarni, 16.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 106.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

²⁰ Taylor, 129.

²¹ N. Kasturi, compiler, *Sathya Sai Speaks*, vol. 1 (Tustin, CA: Sri Sathya Sai Baba Book Center of America, 1975), 23.

supporters of the Western system of education.”²² This form of education has shaped “the simple innocent students for the villages into votaries of the English language, devoid of the virtues of humility and fidelity, politeness and faith”²³ The British model of education prepares students for financial success, and therefore it is intimately tied to materialism and the modern Indian and global economies.

The general thrust of all of Sai Baba’s critiques are institutions and frameworks of knowledge that are contrary to the neo-Hindu tradition that he promotes. It is perhaps no surprise, then, that he and his followers often appear to suggest an outright dismissal of science. Science is a “cancerous growth” lacking “humanity” and “filling people with emptiness, loneliness, hatred.” This “colossal and all-pervasive” growth has “infected” India, which has “accepted the highly capitalized science of the West as her goal.” What is humanity to do in the face of this seemingly immanent fate? “Bhagavan [Sai Baba as god] has the answer. He has come for this very purpose, to save humanity from the tentacles of unchecked science.” Yet it is only “unchecked” science, i.e., science which does not accept its limitations, which is dangerous; Sai Baba “encourages the scientific spirit of inquiry,” and he is “fully aware of the benefits that science and technology has showered on mankind.”²⁴

While Sai Baba’s critique of global processes seems uncompromising, his response is a nod to the hegemony of these very institutions, as his hospitals and universities resemble the objects they are meant to critique. Indeed, his schools teach subjects common in British schools, and biomedical doctors perform operations and prescribe antibiotics at his hospitals. The critique, then, is of those things that Western institutions neglect, not of their accomplishments. There is no critique of English, science or technology in and of themselves – education fails when it neglects to teach spiritual values alongside the hard sciences. Insofar as scientific education implies that human concerns are limited to its teachings, it discounts any phenomenon which falls beyond the scope of its explanatory powers. It is in asserting a monopoly on explanatory truth that science challenges Sai Baba’s claims of divinity, and so it is the universal claims of science that Sai and his followers challenge.

Sai Baba’s magical performances reflect this compromise with globalising forces. The following is typical of accounts of his extraordinary displays:

There was a young girl whose eyesight was hopeless. She could not go out of her house. Because even in the house she could move about only by touching the wall. She had such allergy for sunlight that it would burn her eyes and give her excruciating

²² Ibid., 24.

²³ Ibid., 25.

²⁴ S. P. Ruhela and Duane Robinson, ed., *Sai Baba and His Message: A Challenge to Behavioral Sciences* (Delhi: Bell Books, 1976), 70-71.

headaches. She consulted many ophthalmic surgeons. But it was not useful to her. So she went to Prasanthi Nilayam [Sai Baba's ashram] and spent her days in prayer to Baba. At long last, one day Baba told her that she could go home as she was completely all right with her eyes and if any trouble were to arise later to apply the drops when she could be freed of the trouble. Baba materialised medicine in a bottle and gave it to her, asking her to apply the drops every day in her eyes which would get complete cure for her. Thus she had regained her eyesight by the Grace of Baba.²⁵

The narrative structure of this story is a familiar one in stories of his healing powers: Sai Baba intercedes after other means fail, means which are usually scientific. Yet, he materialises a bottle of medicine, rather than simply fixing her eyesight, producing a familiar biomedical form. This combination of divinity and the scientific is typical of these stories, indicating that he can achieve everything that biomedicine aspires to achieve, yet instantaneously and without effort.

Healing is one of the central features of Sai Baba's magical prowess. As his power cannot extend to all in need, he and his followers have established hospitals throughout India. These hospitals employ Western medical practices, but Sai Baba's miraculous healing power gives these practices an efficacy greater than that of other hospitals. Indeed, his doctors claim to successfully perform operations that would be inconceivable even in hospitals with the most modern technology.²⁶ Like education, Sai Baba does not reject Western medical practice as in some way inherently flawed; rather, it is limited in its scope and therefore falls short of the healing efficacy of those institutions which utilize divine supernatural power alongside Western science, or more precisely, institutions which supplement divine power with science. Not only does Sai not demand that his followers renounce the world, but he establishes educational and medical institutions in which his followers can find employment. He provides them with a way to maintain their positions of power in Indian society, while at the same time they can live as his devotees and carrying out his mission.

It is undeniable that part of Sai's appeal is that he provides his followers the spectre of the miraculous in a disenchanted world, asserting Hindu divinity and tradition in a secularising India. But this is not all, as Sai Baba's message is not only a discourse about divinity, but just as importantly it is a discourse about science. He does not simply add an indigenous supernatural element to a rationalising India, but he also works to shape the way his followers think about science, producing a view of science that allows for divinity.

²⁵ A. B. Sarma, *Baba: The Super Human* (Madras: A. B. Sarma, 1994), 86.

²⁶ Taylor, 129.

A well-known scientist, Dr. S. Bhagavantam, former director of the All India Institute of Science, met one day with Sai Baba on the banks of the Chitravati river. Sai told him that he would materialize some objects from the sand, and Mr. Bhagavantam was to choose the spot for the miracle to avoid any possibility of deception. This done, Sai began to goad the scientist, deriding the scientific community's "complacent all-knowing attitude." He then proceeded to pull a Sanskrit text out of the sand, reducing Bhagavantam to "stunned silence."²⁷ Both the act in and of itself and the object produced, an ancient Sanskrit text, are symbolic of Sai's views of rational science's rejection of traditional religious knowledge and supernatural phenomena. The scientist's reaction demonstrates the basic tension in his position when confronted with Baba's act. He came to the defence of his scientific colleagues, asserting that not all hold on to such an exclusive "materialistic outlook." At the same time, however, he struggled to reconcile this miraculous act with his scientific work and views.

I was a fairly lost person at that time, for all this [the materialization of the book] was in utter contradiction to the laws of physics for which I stood *and still stand* ... Having learned the laws of physics in my youth, and having taught others for many, many years thereafter, about the *inviolability* of such laws – at least so far as any known human situation is concerned – and having put them into practice with such a belief in them, I naturally found myself in a dilemma. [*italics mine*]²⁸

Bhagavantam wanted to believe Sai's divinity, but found it impossible to rationally accept the magical act in the face of the "inviolability" of scientific laws. Yet he *must* accept it, as it was undeniably performed in his presence. For Sai's followers, the evidence of Sai's miracles necessitate their abandonment of any science which does not allow for supernatural possibilities.

As Sai's followers need not reject the benefits of hospitals, capitalist accumulation, or political power, they can also accept a revised view of scientific law. Sai Baba objects only to the claim of science to hold *universal* truths, and to its denial of mysterious forces which contradict its natural laws. Indeed, his followers often write of the scientific and rational nature of his magic, and of the irrationality of limited scientific views. Some hagiographical writings attempt to give Sai's divinity and miracles a scientific basis.

This is the first scientific attempt to understand the phenomena of Sai Baba. The contributors are sociologists, historians, psychologists, and psychiatrists, who, coming in contact with

²⁷ Howard Murphet, *Sai Baba: Man of Miracles* (London: Frederick Muller, 1971), 177-78.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 178.

Baba's unique spiritual presence, found their concepts, theories, values, and ideologies reduced to ashes. Clearly his existence poses a challenge to scientists and philosophers to develop new tools to understand a higher order of things.²⁹

The important point is that science must be reconfigured to allow for supernatural phenomena, not rejected. His teaching, then, does not entail the flight from the modern world, but rather the opposite – his followers must recognize the benefits and the truth of scientific knowledge and projects, which in turn should be directed by dictates that fall outside the scope of science.

It is somewhat perplexing, perhaps, that Sai Baba's most common public act is the materialisation of goods, when he also warns against the lure of rampant materialism. Again, his limited acceptance of science is mirrored in his approach to capitalist production and accumulation. In fact, his miraculous acts demonstrate the possibility of capitalist accumulation without the onerous and divisive work of capitalist production. If just a twist of the hand of Hindu divinity can produce a Rolex watch, belief in Sai Baba offers freedom from the drudgery of industry. Implicit in his materialisations, then, is a critique of Western modes of industrial production, which can be effortlessly matched by Hindu tradition. Furthermore, the products of Sai's miracles are not ordinary goods, but are prasadam, goods that have come into contact with divinity and which are then passed to devotees for their consumption. Which is to say that while Sai can produce anything offered by industrial modes of production, the obverse is not the case, as those modes of production will never produce anything but mundane goods.

Globalisation, Localisation, and Religion

In attempting to reconcile science and religion in his formulation of modernity, Sai Baba has localized global processes in complex ways. He does not simply insert an exogenous set of modern ideas into a traditional, ancient, local framework. After all, globalisation has affected the meaning of a range of South Asian traditional categories, such as the Vedas, supernatural power, religious education, etc. The category of "tradition" itself, which is frequently employed by Sai Baba, is constantly reconfigured, and so is no less modern than its scientific counterpart. Sai Baba has articulated a model of society that encompasses what he feels are positive aspects of global knowledge and institutions, while representing values derived from Indian sources. This model has strong appeal for Indian scientists, educators, and business people who find their lives defined by the confluence of global and

²⁹ S. P. Ruhela and Duane Robinson, ed., *Sai Baba and His Message: A Challenge to Behavioral Sciences*, (Delhi: Bell Books, 1976), introductory note.

local influences. It is this model which makes it possible for a person educated in English schools to accept the credibility of the story of Sai Baba performing a lumbar puncture on a boy's skull to surgical perfection with a hollow surgical needle materialized out of thin air.³⁰ While science has been incorporated into Hindu hagiography, it is not viewed on equal terms with religious belief, but is clearly the handmaiden of Sai Baba's supernatural powers. In the Sai Baba community, science is not a dominant paradigm but is localized as one aspect of worldly knowledge, limited in its scope and possibilities. Miraculous feats point to the limited nature of science, compelling the believer to accept the superior power, potential, and moral teachings of Sai Baba and his institutions.

In fact, the presence of scientific rationality as an influential source of beliefs in India makes Sai Baba's miracles appear even more extraordinary to his believers. His power transcends a system of rationality that is a dominant global source of authority and policy. In Sai Baba, god has chosen the body of a local Indian through which to lead the world back to a spiritual and moral path. In spite of all appearances to the contrary, in the eyes of the Sai Baba community, the future path of humanity has as its highest goal not scientific achievement, but a moral community with Sai Baba as its centre. Their hope is that India will increasingly be an important global player, as spiritual power overshadows material influence. In his miraculous performances, Sai Baba demonstrates that as a fount of ideas and influence, India is second to no one.

As Sai Baba's followers assert that his magic reveals flaws in scientific rationality, this critique is extended to inadequacies in Western education, medicine and government. A further move is made here: in engaging these international processes, Sai Baba's mission itself becomes universalised and globalised. His magic confronts, challenges, and eclipses science in the eyes of his followers, and therefore his mission has relevance beyond India. Sai Baba's worldwide following attests to the viability of this global mission, and to the relevance of his critiques of science outside of India. His popularity and mission extend to diaspora communities from England to Trinidad to New Zealand.³¹ Giving even a greater sense of his global appeal is his extensive Western following, as Americans, Europeans, and Australians are some of his most ardent devotees.³² A follower writes that there are over one million children in one hundred countries receiving a "Sai Education."³³ The internet has countless homepages devoted to Sai Baba, maintained by both Indian and Western followers. In the eyes of his devotees, this global following lends credence to the force of Sai's critiques of dominant global industrial and epistemological paradigms.

³⁰ Murphet, 178-79.

³¹ See Taylor, Klass.

³² For literature written by these non-Indian devotees, see Brooke, Murphet, Ruhela and Robinson, Salgado.

³³ S. P. Ruhela, *The Educational Theory of Sri Sathya Sai Baba* (Faridabad, India: Sai Age Publishing, 1994), 120.

Sai Baba himself sees the scope of his mission as worldwide. After all, the absolutist claims of mundane science threatens the entire world, not just India. Sai claims to be not just the god of India, or of Hindus, but the one and only God, and his responsibility is to all the world's people. A devotee writes:

Baba's conception of India's future is that India has again to take up its destined role of becoming the Jagat Guru, Teacher of the Whole Mankind, and lead the world with the light of its spiritual knowledge and radiant values [...] He is building the base for the emergence of the Golden age of humanity now and His global Sai Seva Organization is trying to serve as the instrument to bring about the spiritual and social-economic and cultural changes in the world.³⁴

To his devotees, Sai's mission is global because a worldwide spiritual revolution is immanent, a revolution which Sai Baba himself has set in motion. When one considers the institutions throughout the world devoted to his person and mission, the advanced media technologies utilized to spread his message, and that his constituency is not limited to those born as Hindus, Sai Baba's degree of success in realising this mission is substantial.

Conclusion

The character of Sai Baba's global appeal is not unique to Indian gurus. He was famously preceded by the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, who gained worldwide attention through his association with the Beatles, and by Rajneesh or Osho, whose American following was enormous and wealthy. These are just a few examples of a broader process of the globalisation of Indian spirituality. Throughout Europe and America, people disillusioned with what they perceive as their own morally and religiously bankrupt societies find meaning in Hindu symbols and values. As is the case with scientific rationality and technology, the apparently exogenous nature of these religious symbols and values make them volatile: they are mysterious to those who welcome newness, and foreign and dangerous to less open-minded critics. In the global exchange of ideas, religion must be included alongside the more often considered globalizing forces of capitalism, technology, or political ideologies, to name a few. Yet while global flows based in material consumption, or in economic and political ideologies, clearly flow more powerfully from west to east (in the sense that the economic policies of Europe and America, for instance, have far more influence on India that India's policies have on Europe and America), the

³⁴ Sathya Pal Ruhela, *Sri Sathya Sai Baba and the Future of Mankind* (New Delhi: Sai Age Publications, 1991), 219-220.

flow of religion appears to be more equally weighted. Hindu and Buddhist religious concepts, such as karma, reincarnation, and enlightenment, have entered English parlance and imaginations, and Indian religious figures like Sai Baba continue to win non-Indian followers. If Sai Baba's vision of extending his teachings to all humanity appears too optimistic, one must acknowledge that his influence stretches to all corners of the globe. As the global becomes localized, so the expansion of technologies that encourage globalisation creates the potential for the local to be magnified on a global scale. In economic and political arenas the balance is clearly tilted to the West, while with culture global exchanges might flow more evenly in all directions.

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