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The Miracle Man and His Mission

I did not visit Sai Baba's ashram in Puttaparthi until I had already completed the bulk of my fieldwork in Malaysia. Ideally, I would like to have travelled with a group of Malaysian pilgrims, but this was not possible and so I went to India alone. When I arrived, I asked at the ashram administration office for information regarding numbers of visitors and countries of origin. I was told: 'Swamy [Sai Baba] knows everything, so we do not need to keep written information'. From this moment on I seemed to be absorbed into a world of rumours and hearsay. Devotees were mainly interested in discussing Sai Baba's caprices and their hidden meaning. Hindu locals spoke of his enormous powers, but Muslim merchants in the village expressed a mixture of fascination, scepticism and even fear of police reprisal if they should spread compromising stories about him.

In the main worship hall where Sai Baba makes two daily appearances, the wait brings an enveloping tension. For his early appearance, at 7am, people begin queuing beside the hall from around 5.30am. They sit silently in the cool morning air, cross-legged on the concrete floor until the ashram volunteers usher them through a metal detector into the hall – a concession to security requirements following incidents of sabotage and threats of violence at the ashram. The congregation is organized into rows, seated again cross-legged on the floor. The volunteers roll out thick-pile red carpets on a walkway through the crowd, leading from the gate through which Sai Baba is to enter, through the women's section on the right, and then on to the men's on the left. Ashram volunteers fastidiously brush down the carpets and no one may walk on them. When the preparations are complete and Sai Baba is ready to enter, softly piped music begins as he exits his house, next to the hall, and advances towards the entrance



Figure 1. *The village of Puttaparthi with a gate to the ashram in the background*

gate. He is a small figure with a startling crop of fuzzy black hair. Standing framed at the gateway he strikes a dramatic image, clothed in glimmering orange silk. When he enters the hall the entire congregation turns to face him, some smile, some wipe tears from their eyes. All eyes are focused on the small orange figure who then begins to walk slowly and deliberately along the red carpet. Sometimes he stops to stare at a devotee, or to take a letter from one. He may exchange a word or two with a devotee or even call them for an interview.

Many devotees have described to me their intense anticipation at these moments, and how his every gesture, even if not directed at them, seems to them to be a signal. As I sat in the crowd, I too noticed how captivating his sudden movements are. On one occasion, when I was sitting in the front row, he stopped immediately in front of me, then stared for a moment at the person behind me. Then he quite suddenly broke the spell and walked away. Afterwards everyone tried to analyse the meaning hidden in this particular display of seeming capriciousness.

When he has completed his circuit of the hall, and possibly picked out some devotees for interviews, he walks slowly up to the raised platform at the front of the hall. He may stand there a moment and stare out at the crowd, or he may go straight into the interview room. As

he disappears from view, his hold over the audience is released and people begin to relax. Some get up to go and find breakfast, others remain sitting in meditation for a while.

What is it about this extraordinary diminutive figure that has captured the imagination of so many diverse people? I want now to turn to Sai Baba's life, imagery, miraculous powers and teachings and explore how they address the crisis of modernity, both in its personal and its socio-political dimensions. Paradox and ambiguity are celebrated rather than resisted by Sai Baba and these features not only reaffirm the paradoxes of modern life but also potentiate sublimation and transcendence. Ultimately, Sai Baba and his powers operate within the strictures of modernity, yet finally reject the supremacy of modern expertise and knowledge.

The tendency of modern experts to work within fields of supra-personal knowledge derived from rational, reflective human thought and activity ignores ambiguous areas of experience. This can leave individuals and groups estranged as the natural continuity between self and world is sundered and is no longer primeval but becomes a task (Bauman 1995: 75). For instance, the establishment of nationhood forces citizens into an unambiguous territorial attachment, though they may in fact feel they belonging to several territories and the nation may not feel like a natural extension of selfhood at all. Not only political but other modern definitions of the person, be they medical, psychological or educational, also tend to standardize and regulate while rejecting the polysemous as disorder. Modern experts, whose role is to bridge the chasm between people's innermost feelings and legitimate fields of supra-personal knowledge, largely deny the indefiniteness of lived experience.

What then of contemporary experts who claim supra-personal knowledge derived from ancient and non-rational sources? This is the case with modern Hindu god-men who insist upon the eternal verity of Vedic teachings and use magical powers. Their recipe harmonizes personal desire with an order that refuses to be constrained by rational, modern experts. Revitalized Hinduism, particularly that delivered by Sai Baba, delights in ambiguity and with this claims to transcend and finally encompass the fixity of modern order. It provides the estranged individual with a cosmos that recognizes the paradoxes of his life.

Sai Baba is one of the best known and most influential of today's Indian gurus. He has had great success in articulating revitalized

Hinduism for a modern audience. His following is registered in at least 140 countries and comprises largely middle class, cosmopolitan members. Like other modern Hindu god-men, he promotes internalized but also universalized religious experience.

Although Sai Baba facilitates the re-ennoblement and spiritual empowerment of Indian communities, this is secondary to the way in which he reconstitutes individuals. This means that emergent social and ideological coagulation of the movement, which tends to limit ambiguity, is always potentially dissoluble into individualistic polysemous religiosity, which expands ambiguity. Sai Baba's religion can reconstitute individuals and mend the rupture between their selfhood and the socio-cultural strictures of their world.

IMAGERY AND SPIRITUAL HERITAGE

Sathya Sai Baba was born in 1926 in a village named Puttaparthi, in Andhra Pradesh, India. He was the son of a Raju caste family (who claim *kshatriya*, or warrior status), who worked a smallholding of land. His name was Sathya Narayana Raju, Narayana being a name of the god Vishnu and referring to the image of him reclining on a snake. His birth was heralded by mysterious sounds in the family home. A seer priest interpreted these as a sign of a beneficent presence and he foretold an auspicious birth. The birth was symbolically marked by a cobra in the bedclothes, and the new baby became the '... pet of the village, loved for his beauty, ready smile and sweet nature' (Murphet 1975: 52).

The family was skilled in the histrionic arts, and the boy too became an adept during childhood. According to his official biographer (Kasturi 1973–1975), the young Sai Baba exhibited extraordinary powers from the time of his birth and he would materialize objects for his friends and locate possessions they had lost. He also showed unusual talents in drama, music, dance and writing. He became a leader among his school friends and gained a reputation for being able to see into the future and past and for materializing sweets and fruit at prayer rituals he conducted. The singular event, however, that set him apart from others and suggested that his existence might be divinely ordained took place when he was 14 years old. There are various accounts of this. Some claim he was bitten by a scorpion, others that he suffered an epileptic attack. He fell unconscious and remained so for several hours. After he awoke his behaviour became bizarre, alternating between elation and depression. The family tried various healing methods, but

to no avail, and on 23 May 1940 the symptoms culminated with his disclosure of his divine identity. The boy called the household members to him and began materializing sugar-candy and other items. His father was furious when he heard of the goings-on. He was afraid his son was bewitched and working black magic. He took a stick to beat the boy, but when he reached the room the people who had gathered there ordered him to wash his hands, feet and face in preparation for meeting the 'Giver of Boons'. Incensed, the father threatened his son with the stick and shouted: 'Are you a God, or a ghost, or a madcap? Tell me!' The boy replied with his calm and firm declaration: 'I am Sai Baba' (Murphet 1975: 56).

With these four words the boy had claimed a position in a spiritual lineage that had broad symbolic ramifications and suggested the continuation of timeless spiritual values. The contemporary Sathya Sai Baba, or Sai Baba of Truth, is understood to be the second of three incarnations. The first was Shirdi Sai Baba (Shirdi simply refers to the place where he spent his life), a saint who is still popular in central India. The third incarnation of this trinity will be Prema Sai Baba, or Sai Baba of Love.

SHIRDI SAI BABA

Osborne (1994), who has published the life story of Shirdi Sai Baba, describes how the saint originally appeared at about the age of 16, in the town of Shirdi in Maharashtra in 1872. His origins and childhood are shrouded in mystery and little is known of them with any certainty. Osborne notes that he identified his teacher as Venkusa, a Hindu, but some believe he also spent time learning under a Muslim fakir. After being refused accommodation at a Hindu temple, he moved into a small disused mosque, where he remained until his death in 1918. Statues and pictures of Shirdi Sai Baba can be found on altars today. They depict a simple-looking man wrapped in white cloth, striking quite a different chord from the ornate and luxuriant imagery of Sathya Sai Baba. Shirdi Sai Baba's religious practices emphasized the performance of miracles. He kept a fire perpetually burning in his mosque and would take from it ash known as *udhi*, which he used for healing and other miracles. This was viewed with disapproval by the orthodox, but the Baba himself claimed he only used his preternatural powers to attract people to the path of spirituality. He would give them what they desired so that they would later desire what he wanted to give them.

Shirdi Sai Baba refused to reveal his caste, religion or natal family. When asked for the name of his religion, he answered 'Kabir', the name of a wandering Hindu devotionalist saint of the fifteenth century. Kabir professed sympathies with the Islamic Sufi tradition and he promoted harmony between Hinduism and Islam and other non-Hindu religions. Shirdi Sai Baba sometimes claimed to be the reincarnation of Kabir. While Kabir referred to the God of his inner experience as Guru, Shirdi Sai Baba used the term fakir to describe the Godhead (White 1972: 869). Both Shirdi Sai Baba and Kabir thus shared an interest in furthering a syncretistic approach to the Hindu and Muslim faiths. Shirdi Sai Baba's perpetually burning hearth also drew upon the practices of a sect of Shaivite ascetics known as the Nathpanthis and the connection with this sect provides a further conceptual linkage between Hindu Shaivism and Islam.

As the reincarnation of Shirdi Sai Baba, Sathya Sai Baba represents a new physical mould animated by the same essence or soul as that of his predecessor. This spiritual genealogy links Sathya Sai Baba into a chain of syncretistic ideas that has relevance for the Malaysian Islamic context. The contemporary Sai Baba has dropped the explicit Islamic associations in favour of forging international links that concentrate more upon the bridging of the Hindu/Christian divide. This new interpretation of Hindu religion opens a channel to both Western spiritual seekers and those Indians who are involved in educational, administrative, business and political systems that are derived from Western models.

THE EROTIC ASCETIC: THIS-WORLDLY RENUNCIATION

Sathya Sai Baba refers to this age as the *kaliyuga*, the fourth age in Puranic history. The *kaliyuga* is characterized by the progressive breakdown of civilization and morality and this can only be remedied by a new divine incarnation. His imagery of worldly ascetism directly confront the ideals of the cosmopolitan middle classes because, he claims, these are the people most in need of spiritual regeneration if the world is to be reformed.

One of the difficulties modern Hindus face is that of reconciling capitalist, materialist interests with ancient Hindu values of renunciation and detachment. Commitment to the one may seem to preclude the other. The modern god-men, and Sai Baba in particular, manage to reconcile the two:

One should respect all others as one's own kin, having the same Divine Spark, and the same Divine Nature. Then there will be effective production, economic consumption and equitable distribution, resulting in peace and the promotion of love. Now, love based on the innate Divinity is absent, and so there is exploitation, deceit, greed and cruelty (Sathya Sai Speaks Series n.d.: X, 9).

Sai Baba's imagery concentrates on the Hindu potential for resolution of paradoxes. In Hindu cosmology, the differentiation of the phenomenal world increasingly collapses as one advances up the cosmic hierarchy towards unity. One of the most explicit explorations of this process is found in the mythology of Siva (see O'Flaherty 1973). The god Siva is both creator and destroyer. In his dancing form, Siva Nataraja, he is the deity who dances at the funeral pyre, linking ash to purity and dissolution. He may manifest as half-man and half-woman. Sometimes he is represented as the *lingam*, an elliptical stone form that may be interpreted as a phallus, which speaks both of eroticism and chastity, creation and the withholding of creation. In a sense, Siva is the tension between the cultivation and the conquest of desire. He is often depicted posing in deep meditation, his matted locks coiled above his head – a combination of symbols suggesting both sexual power and supreme control. He is the great lover but also the deity who threatens the universe with his austerities and his ability to withhold his seed. In Siva all differentiation dissolves into final unity, and from his unity all difference emerges.

Siva's ambiguity is reborn in Sai Baba. On Guru Purnima day in July 1963, he declared that he was the incarnated form of Siva-Sakti. A week earlier, he had had a seizure and become paralysed on his left side. But at the end of the week, on Guru Purnima day, he performed a dramatic cure on himself in front of a huge crowd of devotees. Using his less affected right hand, he poured water onto his left arm and leg and then declared: 'I am Siva Sakti ... [and explained] ... The illness had to be borne by Sakti for she incurred the ire of her Lord ... Siva sprinkled restorative water and cured him. Today you saw the illness of Sakti cured by Siva by the same means. These matters are beyond human ken' (Kasturi 1973: II: 88–89). By portraying himself as the androgynous Siva-Sakti couple, Sai Baba claims to be an incarnation of the subsuming deity Siva.

Bowen (1988) has also examined Sai Baba's use of ambiguity in his iconological analysis. He describes how Sai Baba creates a sumptuous, erotic appearance with his shimmering silk gown, which suggests

glamour, royalty and sensory pleasure. But Sai Baba also weaves in the symbolism of ascetism by wearing the ascetic colour orange. He is surrounded at his ashram by glittering, decorative architecture. His portraits often show him in flagrantly indulgent or even royal poses. He may be shown seated on a throne of velvet and gold, under a parasol, seated on a swing or surrounded by flowers, and the images are often strikingly effeminate. Bowen remarks on the theatrical effect of these portraits, the gaudy surrealism, their movie starlet appearance and their fundamentally sensuous tone, which plays on the merging of femaleness and maleness.

His hair is also intriguing and devotees often comment on it. A thick mass of afro-style hair forms a halo around his head. This is quite different from the normal appearance of Indian men. But it occupies a middle ground between ascetism and worldliness; it is not wild and unkempt like that of the world-renouncer, but nor is it trimmed and controlled like that of worldly Indian men. The style also recalls the hairstyle of the Vedic fire-god, Agni and the goddess Kali – suggesting a forcefulness and activity in the world. Not only does this ‘afro’ hair suggest indefinite sexuality and play on the tension between indulgence and detachment, but Klass (1996: 78) notes that in Trinidad it can even suggest ambiguous ethnic status.

Sai Baba’s flamboyant appearance is, however, coupled to a disciplined and ascetic lifestyle and to teachings that emphasize detachment. Despite a number of allegations that have been levelled at Sai Baba of sexual misconduct, devotees maintain that he is celibate, he is not married, he spends his days delivering blessings to devotees and meditating. He travels little and has only once left India. This subtle combination of symbols of indulgence and ascetism takes seriously the sensory conditions of modern existence and the dilemmas of living in an increasingly heterodox and materialistic world. By bringing Siva’s resolution of paradox to life, he offers the possibility of resolving the dilemmas of modernity. The ancient ideals of Siva are redelivered through a new erotic/ascetic filter in a way that does not negate sensuality and desire but instead promotes their transformation within the individual.

ECUMENISM AND HEGEMONY

By stressing the possibility of renunciation from within rather than in opposition to the modern world, Sai Baba actually extends the *bhakti* devotional tradition of Hinduism and applies it to the dilemmas of

modernity. *Bhakti* emphasizes a religiosity based on intense emotion rather than intellectual or ritual training. It enables the transformation rather than rejection of the world. Renunciation is transcended by becoming internalized; it is no longer necessary to leave worldly activity; detachment and disinterestedness are sufficient. One can '... leave the world from within' (Dumont 1980: 282).

Throughout Hindu history, *bhakti* traditions have offered oppressed groups a path towards freedom and re-enchantment. For the Indian diaspora *bhakti* rekindles access to spirituality. Through *bhakti*, lack of, or disillusionment with Brahminic ritual expertise can be transformed from the token of Hinduism's demise into the proof of its regeneration; ritual becomes dispensable since personal devotion is the only requirement for *bhakti* salvation. In the same move, the ethnic exclusivity of Brahminic ritual is overcome and Hinduism is universalized for all to enjoy since an internal attitude rather than the practice of ethnically specific customs becomes the key to purity. But the universalizing move, although it expresses tolerance, carries with it overtones of imperialism and hegemony.

Sai Baba claims that he is one with Krishna, with Jesus Christ, with the Buddha, with Muhammad, with Zoroaster and so on. At some Sai Baba shrines this is clearly depicted by the presence of various religious symbols. A Christian cross, a Buddha statue, a figurine of Kuan Yin (the Chinese goddess of mercy) and the Virgin Mary may all be included. Sai Baba himself claims that all religions are of equal value, all are simply different yet parallel paths, but: 'All these paths offer a journey back to the Godhead ... there is only one ultimate God, the Lord and Creator of the universe' (in Ralli 1990: III, 63). Thus he makes it possible to ratify a limitless number of specific forms through their ultimate connection to universal Oneness, of which he is the contemporary manifestation. As a form of Oneness that subsumes all opposites, Sai Baba represents the resolution and creation of all difference: 'All men are Mine; the World is My Mansion ... You will soon see that ... [my name] ... is adored in every inch of space all over the World' (Sai Baba in Kasturi 1973: II, 266).

Although Sai Baba ostensibly opens the possibility for all to participate in this new form of spirituality, using their own familiar cultural forms, in practice his imagery and the style of worship adopted by his devotees are often read as distinctly Hindu. For instance, in Trinidad and Tobago the Sai message provides Indo-Trinidadians with a religious framework for their rejection of Afro-Trinidadian proposals for political and ethnic unity through 'Black Power'. Conversely, it fails



Figure 2. A Christian Sai Baba devotee and her shrine

to attract Afro-Trinidadians in spite of its proclaimed universalism. It is received as a form of Hinduism, not as an ethnically or religiously neutral movement (Klass 1996: 164). Klass relates this to the imperialistic or hegemonic implications of universalistic messages and he points out that the tolerance proposed by Sai Baba is one in which the various faiths are recognized only insofar as they do not oppose the 'flame of unity' formulated through Sai; Sai ecumenism tolerates only that which it may embrace and consequently subordinate.

Sai Baba's version of universal Oneness is delivered primarily through a set of terms and forms that derive from Hindu tradition, although they resonate with other traditions. No matter what their faith or social position, his devotees bow to touch the feet of their god-man and in so doing demonstrate submission to a formulation of Divinity risen from Hinduism. His universalistic appeal thus contains within it the seed of its own inversion. The very forms through which his encompassing tolerance is expressed invite the possibility of Indianizing

rigidification. This may lead towards exclusivity and threaten the global, modern adaptiveness that gives this movement its special edge.

GLOBAL FAMILY

Sai Baba followers greet each other with kinship terms. For Indians this is in keeping with their own traditions, but for Westerners it may be novel. Indians and non-Indians thus become conceptually united in a single family of brothers and sisters, aunties and uncles. Devotees also use the Sai greeting 'Sai Ram'; Sai refers to the divine mother and Ram to the hero of the Ramayana and the epitome of male righteousness. Through this and the metaphor of the family, the Sai Baba movement creates itself as a united, global community. Sai Baba represents a divine father and mother for his devotee offspring and as such he is the pinnacle of the community, worldwide.

The movement summons up a sense of commonality among members, extending beyond the territorial and political limitations of the nation and its internal classifications of people. For those estranged within the nation this offers a means to reconnect individual selfhood with an imagined community that confirms those dimensions of selfhood denied or ignored in nationhood. Members of diaspora groups that are politically and numerically weak in their respective nations, or who are oppressed by state leadership, become redefined as members of a powerful global community that not only includes internationally influential figures but is also headed by a genitor they consider to be the final arbiter of fate.

Following the classic Hindu conflation of virility and femininity, Sai Baba presents himself as both the divine father and the divine mother, and as the progenitor of all that happens in the universe:

Universal Sai is Sai, for Sai is universal, everywhere, everything. I am the Divine Mother and Father of all, the creator of everything. There is nothing that is not of Sai ... Live in Sai, live with Sai, live for Sai, then both you and the world will be transformed (in Ralli 1988: II, 125).

He is the single source of humanity for his worshippers, the source of a kindred community that recognizes but transcends social boundaries. Through Sai Baba, followers can recognize and experience their fundamental similarities without denying their essential differences. Dislocated minorities, particularly Indians, may thus gain a sense of diasporic strength as they become united to one another via an essential connection to the *bharat* (sacred motherland India).

DARSHAN AND BHAJANS – GAZE OF LOVE, SONGS OF LOVE

Sai Baba overcomes not only the disintegrative forces of nation, ethnicity and religion, but also the atomizing forces of modernity that conceptually privilege the individual over the collectivity. For although the Sai Baba religion promotes personal commitment and focuses on the individual conscience, it also enables transcendence of individualism by cultivating ecstatic experiences and a sense of oneness with the Godhead.

In *bhakti* devotionalism, the believer is conceived of as an individual who cultivates his relationship with an individualized, personal Lord. In this way, it presupposes the primacy of the individual while simultaneously promising to overcome its disintegrative tendency:

Love, a total devotion to the Lord, suffices for salvation. Divine grace answers the appeal of the pure and humble heart ... by loving submission, by identifying themselves unreservedly with the Lord, everybody can become free individuals (Dumont 1980: 282–283).

At the ashram in Puttaparthi the main events of the day are the two appearances Sai Baba makes, one in the early morning and one in the early afternoon. These appearances are known as *darshan*, the opportunity for devotees to meet the gaze of their Lord and in so doing to experience a special kind of communication. This divine gaze differs radically from the objectifying and standardizing gaze of modern experts, such as the clinical gaze described by Foucault (1973).

Eck (1985) has written extensively on *darshan*, and describes how, in the Indian context, exchange of vision is a form of touching and knowing. She remarks that the connection between sight and insight is not unique to Indian culture. The didactic value of seeing images and achieving wisdom through sight has been exploited in many non-Indian contexts as well. However, in Indian culture the eyes play a particularly prominent role in the apprehension of the sacred. The *bhakti* movements cultivated first the notion of the image, and later the avatar, as embodiments of the deity. These were charged with the presence of the god and therefore evoked people's affections. Since the eyes of statues and icons represent a channel between devotee and deity, a great deal of ritual attention is paid to their preparation and creation. Seeing the materialized form of the divine is not simply a matter of spectatorship but is a form of participation.

'Seeing' has resonance not only with Western religious traditions. It is a focus of European philosophy as well as modern Western cultural

forms that recognize the emotive force of the gaze. The social philosopher Dolar (1996), for instance, examines the notion of 'Love at First Sight', where:

[The] myth of the first encounter ... is present in all our narrations, from the legends of times immemorial throughout the bulk of the world literature to its modern versions in cinema. It has crossed millennia and traversed all boundaries between cultures ... Its core has remained remarkably the same ... the chance encounter has miraculous consequences, it becomes the foundational moment that has the power to entirely transform the subjects who assume the contingent as the very essence of their being, something to rule their destiny, and no power can be equal to it (p. 132).

Seeing can be an act of seduction that induces unconditional surrender and love in the other.

The devotional love of *bhakti*, however, is not romantic love. Its power comes from its association with renunciation, just as Siva's erotic potential is fuelled by its containment. But the connection between renunciation and the sublimation of love is, again, not unique to Hinduism. It is common in Western cultural forms as well, as criminology researcher Salecl notes in her contribution to cultural studies: 'Whereas romantic love strives to enjoy the Whole of the Other, of the partner, the true sublime love renounces ...' and the pleasure of this sublimality is created through discipline and obedience (1996: 193).

Sai Baba cultivates human emotions and senses as a prelude to their sublimation through renunciation. At the ashram, feelings of love are powerfully generated for Indians and non-Indians alike by the experience of *darshan*. Feelings of sublimation by the strict regulations of ashram life, too, are shared. The ashram codes of behaviour and policing by ashram volunteers force upon visitors the kind of heightened discipline and control of body and mind that may excite sublime experience. As Sai Baba meanders slowly through the hall, it is he who decides where his gaze will fall. Though devotees may long to meet his eyes or touch his feet they must accept that no one may make demands of God. They must even recognize that desire is itself a breach of self-regulation:

Desire remains until the spirit grows stronger and rises into the ascendant ... Man should constantly search for the truth and strive to purify his soul so that he may enter the kingdom of heaven ... today, the Ceiling on Desires programme and the teachings which go with it show you the way to deal with the problem (Sai Baba in Ralli 1988: II, 29).

One devotee explained to me that Sai Baba's repeated disinterest in him in spite of his regular attendance at *darshan* was a favour that would help him overcome self-interest. Because Sai Baba is an embodiment of both compassion and disinterest, his behaviour, however capricious, is understood to be designed to stimulate devotion and, finally, similar compassionate disinterest in his followers. The combination of passionate longing and self-denial in waiting for Sai Baba's unpredictable displays of divine beneficence primes devotees for deeply meaningful experience.

Sublime experience of Sai Baba together with sublimation of selfhood through intense feelings of community can help individuals overcome feelings of isolation. The intense sense of participation, through touch and gaze, with Sai Baba himself, the melting of the differences between devotees and the establishment of feelings of commonality all help overcome individuality.

Sharing conviction about Sai Baba's paranormal powers is the most important way in which devotees establish their commonality. Sai Baba also encourages certain ritual performances to help maintain and strengthen feelings of spiritual oneness. An important worship performance is devotional singing, which allows other traditions to be incorporated.

The use of sound as a culturally framed aid to altering consciousness has been discussed in detail by anthropologists such as Laderman (1991) and Stoller (1996). Sai Baba exploits the emotive and transformational powers that inhere in sound. For instance, he links Hindu images, scriptures and human emotional responses through the sound om (aum), chanted in Hindu and Sai Baba worship:

Obviously our passions and prejudices have to be calmed before we can hear *om*, the song of the Lord that wells up from the heart ... Krishna's flute is the expression, the elucidation, of the four Vedas and *om* is their quintessence. 'A', 'U', 'M' and the dot (signifying the reverberation of the Sound in the depth of the heart), are symbolic of the four Vedas (Sathya Sai Speaks Series n.d.: X : 200–201).

The power of sound is clearly exploited in the singing of the devotional songs known as *bhajans*. Devotees are encouraged to sing with as much passion and verve as possible. In this way each person contributes to a body of sound that transcends him and in turn affects him as well as others. The only physical expression encouraged among devotees in accompaniment to the songs (apart from playing instruments) is clapping the hands loudly to strengthen the vibrations.

Although the exact procedures carried out at different Sai Baba centres vary in details, *bhajan* singing is usually the main event. At the ashram, *darshan* is followed by an hour of singing and at the centres the singing usually immediately follows the chanting of introductory mantras.

Bhajans are simple verses sung in a particular manner. Lead solo singers, from either the women's or men's side of the worship hall, sing a line of the song first and are followed by the rest of the congregation. *Bhajans* sometimes consist simply of the repetition of various names of the deities, or sometimes they make reference to the Hindu scriptures or to Sai Baba's teachings. They may be sung in a variety of languages: Sanskrit, Tamil, Hindi and other Indian languages as well as English and, in Malaysia, Chinese. The singing and simple rhythm is usually accompanied by percussion instruments such as Indian drums and castanets, and usually also a harmonium. The stanzas are repeated several times quite slowly but the beat then successively gathers momentum until sometimes, when the power or 'vibrations' of the singing reach a sufficient crescendo, '... a kind of rock mass' (Patel 1976 in Bowen 1988: 59) is achieved, engaging the passions of the self-restrained congregation in a kind of common ecstasy.

Devotees often describe *bhajans* as crucial in their faith. Some say they were first attracted to the Sai Baba centres by the pleasure of singing and many claim that the *bhajans* constitute the most important part of their worship practice. Some Western devotees claim that it is the singing alone that stimulates a sense of common spirituality, and they criticize the tendency of Hindu devotees to include aspects of Hindu ritual in Sai Baba worship, which makes non-Hindu devotees feel foreign. Sai Baba urges his devotees to sing *bhajans* regularly and he himself composes numbers of them. Singing them is said to bring peace of mind but also emotional release, especially when the experience of divinity through sound is enhanced by the Divine image. The American Jewish psychoanalyst devotee Sandweiss writes:

Electrifying! The singing spoke of a love and gratitude beyond measure ... Oblivious to pain, thousands had been sitting for hours on hard, cold concrete, transfixed in the chanting, awaiting his appearance. Now a heightened excitement rose in the music ... There he was, standing quietly, absolutely at one with the music ... All eyes were glued to the Master now, all voices in touch with his heart. He was in the music now, intoxicating our souls with the awesome grandeur of the miraculous moment – that is Darshan (1975: 147).

Devotees sometimes find themselves inspired to write their own songs, and the inclusion of these or devotional songs from non-Hindu traditions may be encouraged at Sai Baba centres. The very act of singing *bhajans* thus combines the rigour of physical discipline, cleanliness, humility and chastity with the stimulation of highly charged emotional experience and sense of togetherness. The physical restraint and obedience to 'puritanical' rules of propriety recall Siva's yogic accumulation of spiritual power, yet the delivery of this through songs makes the Hindu principle physically reverberate in the hearts of Sai Baba's diverse following. The fact that songs are welcomed from all traditions, or even individual imagination, expresses the broad spectrum of self-affirmation that Sai enables. The combination of ecstasy and restraint manifested in singing opens the experiential field of erotic ascetism. Like the songs themselves, this draws diverse traditions together into a common Hindu symbolic framework.

MAN OF MIRACLES

Magical or miraculous power is another area in which a variety of traditions converge. Since miracles are a feature common to many religious traditions, they provide a vehicle for bypassing the symbols and ideologies of specific communities. Experience of a miracle, particularly in the form of healing, transcends modern intellectual and social schemes of order and instead is highly personalized. Magic resists the hegemony of human reason and the supremacy of rational thought, which are among the enchantments of modernity, but it is not necessarily antithetical to modernity. Rather, miracles may affirm some of what modernity ignores. Some authors go so far as to say that magical powers are a handmaiden of modernization (Comaroff and Comaroff 1993). The miracle worker is an expert but of a special kind. His or her knowledge is quite different from that of the modern experts; it is holistic and non-rational, engaging the individual and his emotions and providing a source of personal reaffirmation and reconstitution.

It is for his miracles that Sai Baba is most widely acclaimed and they provide a major device for the movement's expansion. Devotees often see them as the final proof of his divinity, and the sick and needy flock to him in the hope of help. Virtually all the followers I interviewed in Malaysia related their stories of personal transformation as hinging upon an experience of Sai Baba's miracles, though these may not always take the spectacular forms often cited in published devotee accounts.

A middle-aged woman, born in Rajasthan but married to a Malaysian Indian and living in a wealthy suburb of Kuala Lumpur, told me her story when we were on a service trip to the government hospital. She related how, after having given birth to two daughters, she found herself pregnant for a third time. She was afraid it would be another girl and therefore consulted a doctor about an abortion. It turned out that the doctor was a Sai Baba devotee and he recommended instead that she pray to Sai Baba for a son. She complained that it might not work, but tried anyhow and eventually gave birth to a son. This, she says, was still not enough to completely convince her. Her faith was confirmed only later when she and her husband were trying to buy the house they now live in. Again she prayed to Sai Baba for help and it turned out that they not only succeeded in securing the house, but the price was unusually low. Similarly, the wife of a doctor in Malacca told me that she became a devotee simply because she had felt she had everything she needed, but still felt a spiritual emptiness. So she visited Puttaparthi after hearing about Sai Baba and was called for an interview. He asked her how she was. 'Fine,' she replied. 'No, not quite fine,' he then said. After that she felt that he could see who and what she really was and that he loved her.

Sai Baba uses miracles frequently and often publicly, although he belittles their importance:

I am the One who is known by many Names, the Embodiment of the Glory of all Forms and Names by which man has adored God. Reference was made here about miracles. Do not attach much importance to them, they are but natural consequences of Divinity. Adore, rather, My Prema [love] and try to cultivate it, yourself (Sai Baba in Jagadesan n.d.: I, 56).

The miracles range from the most common – production of ash, known as *vibhuti*, trinkets and other small items – to extraordinary tales of raising people from the dead or materializing surgical instruments, performing invasive surgery and leaving a barely visible scar after him (see Murphet 1975 chapters 13 and 14, also Beyerstein 1994 for a critical evaluation of this and other claims). The miracles are often experienced in places remote from Puttaparthi, as in the first case related above, or in the following story.

A doctor living in a small town close to Kuala Lumpur told me how, while he was a medical student, his father had urgently required a large sum of money. As a student he could not raise the money but he arranged to borrow from a friend and promised to repay within three

years. Then he applied for post-graduate work in Austria and just as he was due to leave Malaysia, his friend announced that he needed his money back. In a panic the doctor asked another friend for help, but this friend had no money to offer, only a picture of Sai Baba. So he prayed to the picture. The next day a Chinese leper came by selling lottery tickets. He explained he could not afford one, but the man insisted he buy one and finally he gave in. The following day the man came by to announce that the ticket had won exactly the amount that the doctor had borrowed from his friend.

The most fundamental indicator of devoteehood is the willingness to engage in 'non-sceptical dialogue' (Taylor 1987: 132) about Sai Baba's ability to perform miracles at will. Devotees from a variety of cultural backgrounds can engage in this kind of dialogue together, and they frequently do so at the ashram in Puttaparthi. At prayer meetings in Kuala Lumpur, particularly after someone has returned from Puttaparthi, groups gather to discuss recent experiences of Sai Baba's wonders, and at some centres individuals are encouraged to tell the congregation about miracles they have witnessed.

Devotees consider Sai Baba to be an avatar or divine incarnation. The concept of avatar, examined in detail by Parrinder (1970), refers to a voluntary descent of Divinity into the world. Divinity takes the form of a being that is driven by compassion for the deteriorating world to intervene and guide mankind towards salvation. This notion emerges in the Vedantic literature and in the Bhagavadgita, the 'Bible of *bhakti*' (Dumont 1980: 282). The avatar is free from the coercive power of karma (see below) that motivates the repeated births of mortal beings. By contrast, it wills its own earthly manifestation out of love; it is Divinity personified. This concept differs from that of the self-realized mortal, who may become a spiritual teacher or guru, and who may or may not develop special powers as a consequence of his discipline. The avatar is not bound by the laws of nature and therefore need practise no special disciplines to transcend them.

Like Krishna in the Bhagavadgita, Sai Baba emphasizes karma yoga, the path of action, as the avenue to salvation. The essence of Krishna's perfect action is firstly his compassionate engagement in mankind's troubled world, and secondly his emphasis on the selfless pursuit of righteousness. Likewise, Sai Baba involves himself in the passions of the world for the purpose of re-establishing order and harmony. He incites desire in his followers so as to ultimately refer them back to the detached ascetism of Siva – an ascetism now delivered as emotional (through selfless devotion and love) rather than physical. But his

miracles are instrumental in gaining the faith of his followers and ensuring they participate in the mission of righteousness. They authenticate his status as omnipotent avatar and command the surrender and commitment of potential followers.

Sai Baba explains his abilities:

Everything is My own creation and everything within the universe is part of Me ... All is part of that One, and that One is God ... the many are simply different forms and manifestations of that One, hence it is easy to change the one form into another, according to My will (in Ralli 1990: III, 8).

The ability to transcend the laws of nature is the expected outcome of practising Hindu austerities and many Indian gurus are acclaimed miracle workers. However, it is also believed that if an ordinary mortal who has accumulated these powers then exhibits them, they expend and finally lose them. Sai Baba claims that his powers are not cultivated but are innate and that since he only deploys them in order to bring about spiritual transformation in man they never diminish. He explains his use of miracles by reference to a quote from his predecessor, Shirdi Sai Baba: 'Why do I demonstrate these powers? I do it for your benefit and I give you what you want in the hope that eventually, you will want what I have come to give, My universal message of love ... [and] ... For me this is the kind of visiting card to convince people of my love for them and secure their devotion in return' (in Ralli 1990: III, 8 and in Ruhela 1997: 28 respectively).

Miracles are generally reported to be deeply transformative. The Jewish psychoanalyst, Sandweiss, writes of his encounter with Sai Baba's miracles: 'True belief in God and knowledge of the existence of a higher reality represent a leap in consciousness for most of us modern rationalists. Sai Baba can help many of us make this great leap, and after it is accomplished the quest for self-realization can begin in earnest' (1975: 155). He describes his own transformative experience of a miracle:

I am witnessing here no abstract college argument ... about whether God exists. I am seeing concrete evidence of such a reality ... When one finds a teacher of this caliber, all one can do is follow him, and this means full surrender ... There are forces in the universe, powers of being, that we cannot even imagine ... I am becoming humbled now in the feeling that I am really not in charge of my own destiny, that I am not the doer; God is the doer (ibid.: 47).

Sai Baba is criticized by some for both his magical performances and for favouring the rich and famous. An organization in India known as The Indian Skeptic publishes letters and articles and distributes films designed to debunk particularly Sai Baba. Its members argue that the guru's links to leading politicians and his use of what they consider trickery and illusion contribute to the continued oppression of the people and hinder the evolution of the critical faculties necessary to developing a true 'civil society' in India. It is notable that these criticisms are aimed not at the teachings as such, which are quite innocuous, but at the claims of miraculous powers.

McKean's scathing analysis argues that emphasis on the philosophical aspects of Sai Baba's formula for redemption conceals its more questionable political and economic dimensions, for its appeal is for '... rich and powerful followers who are affluent consumers ... [for whom] ... Sathya Sai Baba's miracles offer ... a self-indulgent, guilt-free experience of the magicity of objects' (1996: 22). His penchant for the rich and famous does not go unnoticed by other Hindus; his style and rhetoric arouse criticism and even ridicule both in India and elsewhere. His programme certainly challenges the premise that prosperity and modernity de-spiritualize man; it proposes that wealth and righteousness can be blissful bedfellows. He himself proclaims, however, that the rich and influential are the very people who most of all need to be humbled before God: 'In my view, those who appear to the world as wealthy or powerful persons, really bring me their troubled hearts and sick minds. I cure them by asking them to surrender material wealth and power to spiritual peace and grace' (Sai Baba in Ruhela 1997: 35).

Sai Baba's glittering miracles make use of the desires of his audience and indeed perhaps respond to the longing of the rational mind to experience its own limitations. He re-enchants the secularized universe, humbles the materialist world-view born of Western philosophical tradition and exalts a cultural universe born of Indian tradition, for which he stands as the unique personification. His miracles are the primary performative agent of this regenerative and transformative process.

ASH, HONEY AND HEALING

Apart from jewellery, gold trinkets and precious gems, the materialization Sai Baba is most renowned for is quantities of the sacred ash, known to devotees as *vibhuti*. Usually he produces this with a rapid circular movement of his right hand and then drops it into the hands

of a devotee. His most dramatic production of *vibhuti*, however, takes place at the annual celebration of Mahasivaratri Festival. At this festival he makes a churning motion with his hand inside an upturned vessel and produces enormous quantities of ash. The churning and the vessel can both be interpreted as symbols of creative power, while the ash suggests fire, dissolution, purity and death.

Although Sai Baba's symbols may recall classic Hindu imagery, they are also versatile enough for followers from different cultural backgrounds to find meaning in them. Among Trinidadian Hindu devotees, ash is an unfamiliar ritual substance and Klass (1996) suggests that exposure to Western religious metaphors may mean that interpretation of Sai Baba's ash is filtered more through Christian imagery than through Hindu. Among Malaysian devotees as well, most are unaware of the extent of its symbolic ramifications. In general they simply associate ash with Sai Baba and see it as evidence of his divine power. Their understanding and use of it is largely pragmatic. It is a recognized curative agent and promises other worldly benefits. It also connects them to Sai Baba and his power. Beyond this, most people also proffer quite simple explanations of the importance of ash in terms of its relationship to Siva and its association with death. They say it is a reminder that the world is impermanent and ever changing; all of us will eventually become ash.

The multivalence of ash is essential in its circulation at the periphery of the movement, where its role in missionizing is most evident. Novice devotees often learn about Sai Baba and his powers through ash. Devotees readily distribute ash to others, often for the express purpose of healing. In this way they hope that those helped will develop an interest in their living God and his path to salvation. A Catholic priest devotee explains:

While from the material point of view *vibuthi* [sic] is the most modest gift that Sai Baba constantly gives to devotees, it is really the one richest in powers and meanings ... Besides its powerful healing properties, this holy ash embodies a particular spiritual meaning ... The mystical symbolism of *vibuthi* calls to mind the Christian liturgy of Ash Wednesday, when the priest places holy ash on the foreheads of the faithful and says these words: 'Remember, man, that you are dust and unto dust you shall return.' The meaning suggested by Sai Baba is applicable to that liturgy and gives it even deeper significance: reduce your 'I', the cause of all ills, to ashes, and you will rise again to divine life as perfect and incorruptible as the ash itself (Mazzoleni n.d.: 87).

In his own exegesis, Sai Baba plays on the broad polyvalence of ash but ultimately collapses it into Hindu mythology:

What I materialize is a manifestation of Divinity with a potent significance as well as symbolization. It is symbolic of the cosmic immortal and infinite nature of all forms of God. Atma or the Spirit – that is, what is left when everything worldly, transient and changeable has burnt away.

I have spoken to you of the imperative of a desireless life. After Shiva had burnt the God of Desire, Kama into a heap of ashes he adorned himself with the conqueror of desire [*sic* he presumably means ‘with conquered desire’ since Kama *is* desire]. When Kama was destroyed Prema reigned as the Goddess of love. Such is the significance of ash.

In the first place it is symbolic of the life-death cycle in which everything ultimately reduces itself to ash. ‘For dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou art [*sic*] returnest’. Ash or dust is the final condition of things. It cannot undergo any further change. In the spiritual context, it constitutes a warning to the receiver to give up desire, to burn all passions, attachments and temptations in the fires of worship which makes [*sic*] one pure in thought, word and deed.

It is in order to press home this lesson that I materialize ash for those who come to me with love and devotion (in Ruhela 1997: 30).

Ash and more rarely the honey-like substance known as *amrit* or sometimes vermilion powder are not only materialized directly by Sai Baba at his ashram but are also reported to appear miraculously on altars in the homes of spiritually deserving devotees. These altars often become known as healing shrines and locals flock to them in the hope of tapping Sai Baba’s healing powers. It was one such remote, miracle event that in 1976 convinced a man who subsequently became a lead figure in the Sai Baba movement in Malaysia. He has published the story of how ash suddenly appeared on a picture of Sai Baba in his neighbour’s prayer room and how this then led to his admission of the power of Sai (Jagadesan n.d.: 20). Sai Baba himself describes his ash as a universal remedy: ‘Baba showers this ash (vibhuti) from his palm, his forehead, his feet and his pictures – for his devotees this gift of ash is the panacea for all physical, mental and intellectual illness. Baba is indeed “Maheswara [Siva]”’ (Sai Baba in Shaw 1996: 9).

Some of the most impressive miracle stories concern extraordinary cures, often accomplished with ash. The Former Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of India, Mr. Justice P.N. Bhagwati, for instance, is quoted as relating:



Figure 3. *A devotee's home shrine with materialized vibhuti*

I remember one occasion when I had a tear of cartilage of my left knee. The orthopedic surgeon had advised me to get operated. I had gone to Bombay and I went to Dharmakshetra where Swamy had come and I told Swamy that I was going to be operated. He looked at my knee and said “Don’t get operated”. He materialized *vibhuti* for me and said “Divide it into three parts. Take one part each day and you will be alright.” I cancelled the operation and took the *vibhuti* which Swamy had given me and within a week, I forgot that I had ever had the tear of the cartilage (in Ruhela 1997: 199)

Devotees advertise numerous stories of converted sceptics, particularly influential people with scientific backgrounds. The patronage of these converts helps to authenticate Sai Baba and his following by suggesting he is not simply exploiting the vulnerability of the

gullible and ignorant. Devotees argue that the miracles cannot be rationally explained and this justifies Sai Baba's claims as well as their own faith in them. Miracles are therefore the crucial instrument by which a person becomes reconstituted as 'faithful'. Sai Baba himself declares: 'Whenever your faith meets my love there is a cure' (in Baskin 1990: 21).

THE SAI MISSION

Sai Baba's teachings are completely in line with those of the Hindu Renaissance leaders; they stress the eternal and supreme value of Hindu truth in a format that is well reconciled with modernity and rationalism. The teachings have two major prongs. Firstly, they are about ecumenism and tolerance. Secondly, they regenerate Hinduism by manifesting its bourgeois potential, producing a 'puritanical', capitalism-friendly version of Hindu philosophy.

Sai Baba himself explains his mission on Earth:

The establishment of dharma (righteousness): that is my aim. The teaching of dharma, the spread of dharma: that is my object (Sai Baba in Sandweiss 1975: 89).

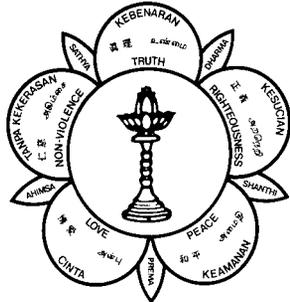
This mission seeks to embrace all religious and cultural forms within its range of relevance:

While the scope and significance of religion is confined to certain number [*sic*] of people following a certain creed, 'dharma' is universal in scope transcending race and religion. Dharma belongs to all (SSSBP 1993: 105).

Babb rather deprecatingly notes of Sai doctrine that '... there is relatively little to dwell upon, or at least nothing very distinctive. His philosophical views are simplistic, eclectic and essentially unoriginal' (1983: 117). However, the lack of doctrinal originality is in keeping with Sai Baba's own contention that he is here to rekindle awareness of eternal truths, not to invent new ones. Also, their simplicity makes them accessible to a broad audience. The eclecticism Babb notes, which extends into Sai Baba's symbolic repertoire as well as his teachings, is a highly significant feature of this movement. It is its heterogeneity that establishes the openness and adaptability of the cult.

There is no published formal doctrine or set of rules for the Sai Baba movement, though there are numerous publications produced by devotees, containing his sermons and speeches. Devotees say that Sai Baba is omniscient and therefore aware of all that is written and said,

regardless of whether he has actually read or heard it. The teachings, which tend to be metaphorical or allegorical, are usually delivered in Hindu terms and draw upon Hindu mythology. They are often inconsistent and contradictory in details and this opens a wide field of interpretative possibility for his followers. Their core lies in a set of five Hindu principles; *sathya* (truth), *dharma* (righteousness, duty), *shanti* (peace), *prema* (love) and *ahimsa* (non-violence). These principles are said to lie at the root of all religious traditions. The movement has adopted the lotus flower as its emblem and originally this contained the symbols of five world religions in its five petals: the om sign of Hinduism, the sickle moon and star of Islam, the Christian cross, the flames of Zoroastrianism and the wheel of Buddhism. At the centre of the lotus flower emblem is an Indian oil lamp. The central position of the Indian lamp suggests that at the core of all human experience is an Indian formulation of enlightenment. The original positioning of the five world religions in relation to the Indian lamp alludes to Hinduism's supreme and embracing role and it is perhaps not surprising that this was rejected by Malaysian Muslims. When the Malaysian Sai Baba organization applied to the authorities to become a registered society, they were told that their emblem, with Islam as an included religion, was unacceptable. The organization then decided to change the lotus emblem and include the five principles instead. I have been told by devotees that the World organization has recently decided to follow this initiative as well.



Figures 4 and 5. The original Sai Baba emblem and the adjusted emblem

These five principles are given more concrete applicability in a list of ten 'commandments' that Sai Baba has given, and which are pub-

lished by the organization as the foundation of the ‘Integration of the World Community’: have patriotism to your nation, respect all religions, love all, keep your home and surroundings clean to promote health and hygiene, practise charity, but do not encourage beggars by giving money and do not encourage laziness, never give in to corruption, curb envy and jealousy, try to do as much as possible by yourself (you may be wealthy and have servants, your servants can help, but service to society must be done personally), love God and fear sin and never go against the law of the land (from SSSCCM Vol.1 n.d.).

This list shows the tendency of Sai doctrine to affirm puritanical and bourgeois values, to promote political conservatism and to enable purification through the individual mind, most particularly through charity. Together with the Sai code of practising a ‘ceiling on desires’ (and utilization of the savings thus generated to provide charity), they show how Sai Baba enables a form of religiosity, generated from Hindu cosmology and philosophy, that embraces the realities of ‘global embourgeoisement’. Sai echoes Hinduism’s identification of interestedness as the source of spiritual pollution. However, it promotes disinterestedness without denying the interestedness that underlies capitalism and frames modern life (see Kent 2004). One devotee, recognizing that Sai adds to rather than subtracts from life, proclaims that ‘... *the greatest miracle of Sai is the transformation of man – to move selfish individuals to dedicate their time, effort and love to help the poor, the sick and the needy – and to add a spiritual dimension to one’s daily life*’ (SSSCCM vol. 1 n.d.: 4, italics original). Instead of self-purification through offerings to the disinterested Lord or Brahmin (upwards), sacrifice comes to mean the giving up of desire and attachment and the giving of worldly goods to the needy (downwards). This sacrifice is internal and individual:

The world is like a ripe fruit. But it tastes bad as long as we look at it with a worldly attitude. The nectarine sweetness of the world can be enjoyed only when it is viewed with a Divine attitude. Hence man’s main endeavour lies in the transformation of his attitudes and mind ... It is the inner pollution of man which is reflected as the pollution outside. Everything is the reflection of the inner being (SSSBP 1993: 29).

Purification of the mind and, ultimately, bliss become achievable through devotion and cultivation of a charitable spirit. This implies working within existing structures of power:

Spend your money for service. Where there is water shortage, try to solve that problem. Where health care, education and medicines are

required, participate in that activity ... We should not depend upon the Government for everything. People should co-operate to the extent possible and provide all types of conveniences for themselves. Then only will there be a feeling of one family (SSSBP 1995 Vol. 8: 8, Vol. 1: 6).

And:

Service to society is everyone's primary duty. Businessmen should develop a moral approach, use right means for earning wealth and utilise it for the benefit of society (SSSCM 1985: 43).

Religiosity becomes a real possibility for those who are not catered for by a Hinduism that promotes Brahminhood or world-renunciation and celebrates poverty as spiritual loftiness. The concerns and exigencies of today's growing Indian and non-Indian bourgeoisie are affirmed yet given the possibility of sublimation through charity:

Neither performance of Tapas (austerities), nor pilgrimages to all holy places, nor study of all Sastras, nor immersion in Japa, will ever help one to cross the Ocean (cycle of birth to death). The only path that will help you to be liberated from Samsara is dedicating yourself to the service of others (SSSCM 1984: 37).

Detachment is internalized and becomes an attitude of disinterest or 'charitable spirit' in a process reminiscent of Dharmapala's Protestant Buddhism (Gombrich and Obeyesekere 1988). The purificatory power of charity is accomplished through the sacrifice of egoism:

You have to uproot egoistic tendency, get rid of all sense of mine and thine, and burn to ashes the pride that comes of the feeling that you are offering service to some one poorer and less fortunate ... Seva [charitable service] in all its forms ... is spiritual discipline, mental clean-up. Without the inspiration given by that attitude, the urge is bound to ebb and grow dry; or, it may meander into pride and pomp (SSSCM 1984: 34).

Sai Baba urges his following to seek out the poorest and the sickest for the administration of charity. This allows the giver to purify himself by learning to feel compassion for the suffering other and disinterest in his own possessions.

Sai Baba's teachings, then, manifest Hinduism's latent modernist potential. Like his powers and imagery, his teachings nourish a particular strain of modernity. This is well suited to the values and

experience of the cosmopolitan bourgeoisie who, according to Sai Baba, are those most exposed to religious alienation and the polluting influence of materialism. Although the teachings are presented as a reiteration of eternal Hindu ideals, it is also their Protestant-like potential that is selectively highlighted. They are updated in a way that is particularly appropriate to those enculturated with aspects of Western thought.

KARMA AND DHARMA

Although the notion of charity may address the spiritual needs of a diverse, global, middle class audience, the movement's axis is unquestionably Hindu. Visitors to the ashram are encouraged to adopt an Indian style of dress, sometimes by Sai Baba himself at *darshan*. Both Western and Indian women dress mainly in Punjabi dresses or saris and all have to wear a shawl to cover their shoulders. Although devotees may include aspects of their own religious traditions in their Sai Baba worship, the offering of the camphor flame at the altar, the singing of *bhajans*, the chanting of om and mantras all evidence the adoption of Hindu practice. Devotees I spoke to, for instance, explained that reciting the Gayatri Mantra gives rise to particular kinds of reverberation in the human body and this brings about beneficial effects for anyone, regardless of their cultural origin. Sai Baba often refers to Hindu scriptural ideas in his allegorical teachings. His imagery, his life story and his miracles are all part of a particularly Hindu logic of coherence. But perhaps the most categorically Hindu base is found in the concepts of karma and dharma, the conceptual framework within which Sai Baba's enigmatic behaviour becomes part of a meaningful scheme of spiritual progress.

Werner defines karma as

... the cosmic law of balance effective in the sphere of morality ... which operates in this life and through successive lives as a kind of natural 'law of retribution' for human actions on the principle 'as you have sown so will you reap' (1994: 86).

Karma is generally defined by Hindus as the law of moral, rather than material, cause and effect: '... [O]ne's karmic legacy is seen as the consequence of moral actions in a previous existence' (Keyes 1983: 15). Since a person cannot know these, he cannot be held responsible for the karmic destiny ascribed to him at birth. As an explanatory system, the doctrine of karma is dependent on the concept of a flow of serial

life cycles (*samsara*). This differs from Western theistic religions in that abstract Divinity is construed as impartial. It does not exact vengeance on or punish mortals (although Divine forces refracted through specific god-forms may). Sai Baba's devotees capture this idea in their slogan 'Love God, Fear Sin', which implies that it is human failings rather than divine retribution that cause suffering. The doctrine also entails an understanding of human lives as inherently unequal. This contrasts with the human rights argument, which proposes all people are born equal, and in this it subtly challenges the hegemony of Western ideology.

Karma is not simply predestiny but refers to the potentiating and delimiting conditions of life. It offers a particular level of explanation, a level that explains the body of unalterable parameters of existence accompanying every human birth, such as the length of a lifetime. Karma also considers the social setting in which a person's life takes place and explains how it may be affected by the misdeeds or merits of other actors. However, within the confines of their setting a person is afforded freedom of choice. Karma links the remote past to the present and the remote future, and in this way addresses the issue of mankind's long-term destiny and ultimate predicament. Although the future can never be known, nor the outcome of measures taken to redeem past sins, karma suggests that moral consciousness is of consequence and that true heroism and self-denial do play a role in working mankind's malleable fate. The doctrine thus addresses those questions of absolute morality and final purpose that are neglected in the standardizing and depersonalizing processes of modernity.

Because he is omniscient, Sai Baba claims to know the karmic progress of all beings and to be able to see both their previous and future lives. The haphazardness, unpredictability and illogicality of life and of Sai Baba's participation in it become coherent through reference to karmic doctrine. Devotees believe Sai Baba orchestrates the world to enable mankind to move actively towards spiritual realization. In his divine play (the play of the Hindu gods is known as *leela*), he may manipulate the karmas of humans or passively observe them as they play themselves out towards their spiritual destiny:

Karma, karma, karma, so many past ones, have to be worked out according to the laws of nature. The seeds are there, deep in the ground, and they will sprout at the appropriate time (Sai Baba in Ralli 1993: IV, 71).

His purpose, he claims, is not simply to relieve suffering but to make people aware of their inherent ability to transcend their own suffering by following his path of devotion.

Sai Baba claims that he exists in order to re-establish dharma. Werner (1994: 59) translates the term dharma as, 'righteousness, virtue, integrity; discipline, duty, caste duty; reality, truth, cosmic law'. Sen (1976) claims that Hinduism has more to do with dharma than with religion. Dharma, he notes, has had to do with conduct rather than belief; a code of conduct sanctioned in the ancient scriptures, where it includes not only general principles of sociability, such as honesty and kindness, but also prescriptions for particular ritual performances. Members of various *bhakti* schools have rejected the rules governing ritual, while maintaining the general code of Hindu ideals.

The idea of dharma extends a general tendency, shared by some European orientalist and modern Indian spiritual leaders, to view India as a source of universally apposite spirituality, an idea that may be deployed for more or less explicitly political purposes; although the forceful imposition of Hindu ideals upon others may be discouraged, India may be perceived as destined to become the spiritual leader of humanity. As brokers of eternal righteousness, Indians appear to hold a recipe for a redemption that is not culture-specific.

The concept of dharma conflates social order with cosmic order and equates the disruption of the one with the disruption of the other. The term *adharma* (anti-dharma: the fall into 'phenomenality', lawlessness, moral and spiritual decadence) means chaos, both social and cosmic. This gives Hindu rules of propriety relevance for universal salvation because dharma is conceived of as natural and eternal, not conventional, arbitrary or culture-specific. Dharma is an ancient Sanskrit term, drawn from Hindu teachings that antedate the emergence of Christianity and Islam. Through Renaissance leaders like Sai Baba, the ancient concept becomes merged with the imperative to engage in brotherly love, socially directed service and devotion to God. The parallels with, for instance, the Lutheran 'calling' (Weber 1978: 81) are striking.

Again, there is ambiguity in relation to dharma. On the one hand, the term suggests universality and the transcendence of cultural difference, but on the other, it is easily read as a narrower notion of Indian moral order. Sai Baba even reinforces this in his discourses, where he sometimes associates the ills of modernity with the weakening of Indian culture, and the diagnosis is extrapolated to a global arena:

... the youth of today, in India as well as in other lands, are afflicted with deep discontent which manifests itself in revolt against rules, regulations, curricula and social norms, and an agitational approach to every little problem that affects them ... The reason lies in the fact that they have started to neglect the ancient culture of India and its ideals ... In blind admiration of Western ways of life, students in India belittle virtue and extol dry scholarship (Sathya Sai Speaks Series n.d.: X, 209, 286).

This, of course, provides fuel to the regenerative and re-dignifying urges of diasporic Indian communities. It generalizes the disorientation experienced by these communities into a universal diagnosis of global disorder, whose remedy lies in Indian tradition. It follows that Indians may perceive themselves to be the rightful administrators of cultural corrective.

Through karma and dharma, the possibility of universal morality is suggested, though the concepts in themselves do not specify any particular semantic content. Rather they open the way for a variety of applications, though these must ultimately harmonize with the unifying symbolic frame of reference personified by Sai Baba.

ORGANIZING THE MISSION

The precise content of and means by which Sai Baba's mission is to be accomplished are notoriously contradictory in his directives. Firstly, he encourages the development of a Sai Baba organization:

The sages of India knew that man was fundamentally Divine. They sought to make man aware of his inner Reality and expand that spark of Divinity into Light that can illumine the individual and society in the splendour of Love ... But never before has this become an organised movement in which the entire humanity was involved. Unless it becomes so, there can be no liberation from fear, anxiety and injustice (Sathya Sai Speaks Series n.d.: X, 43).

And the organization is posited as both open and encompassing: 'The essence of all religions is the religion of the Sathya Sai Organisation' (SSSCM 1984: 23).

But also as closed and exclusive:

It is also laid down strictly that those who are in our Organisation should not have any connection with other Organisations of Spiritual or Religious character ... Only those with faith and devotion in this

Name and Form can carry out its objectives with zest and enthusiasm (ibid.: 5, 6).

He insists upon regulation: 'There shall be a system and an order in the Organization ... Every unit must respect and follow the rules and regulations laid down at the All India Conference, from year to year' (ibid.).

Yet he denies containment of Sai by legal-rational, institutional structures:

A spiritual organization is really above all rules and regulations, the realm of the Atma is beyond the limits of regulations. In this sense rules are either meaningless or superfluous in Sathya Sai Organisations. But at least, to satisfy the law of the land dealing with associations of this kind, some rules have to be adopted (ibid.).

These apparent incongruities express the elusive, adaptive tolerance of Sai, which, although it exploits particular social and cultural constellations, defies their constraints. The mission of reinstantiating dharma is never absolutely contained by any particular rendition. The movement maintains its potential for expansion through inclusion of heterodox forms even as it promotes the growth of a kind of soluble orthodoxy at its centre. The propensity for this orthodoxy to become intolerant and restricted is always counteracted by Sai Baba's validation of contradictory interpretations and his insistence on the subordination of all forms of man-made order.

Such ambiguities leave the way clear for the generation of alternate meanings within the Sai following. There are followers of Sai Baba who worship him independently and have little contact with the organization and its centres. Some claim that Sai Baba helped them to see the value of their own religious tradition and inspired them to take it up with new commitment. They see no need to join the centres because Sai Baba proclaims that '... the votaries of each religion must cultivate faith in its own excellence and realise their validity by their own intense practice. That is the Sai religion, the religion that feeds and fosters all religions and emphasizes their common Greatness' (Sathya Sai Speaks Series n.d.: X, 65).

Devotees are, however, attracted to centres for various reasons. The power of devotional singing is greatly enhanced in groups, as is the social impact of charity ventures and educational drives. The centres are also social units where a sense of family oneness is created through participation in common activities and through cultivation of a spirit of

caring for one another. In their struggle to achieve these ideals, the centres sometimes have to counteract or transcend divisive tendencies between devotees. A sense of 'communitas' (Turner 1995) must be facilitated at the centres despite the sense of differentiation and structure. Nevertheless, failure of the centres to maintain the loyalty of members does not threaten Sai. When tensions at the centres become intolerable, individuals can leave without sacrificing their faith in Sai Baba. His multivalence ensures the continuance of variety, and curbs the ability of any actors to monopolize definitions.

Sai Baba's final insistence on purity of the individual conscience as the touchstone of spiritual achievement means that individual religiosity can never be entirely subject to the institutional framework of the organization. The Sai mission is accomplished through the inner transformation of individuals by various means, institutional or other. Ultimately, faith in Sai is a matter of individual commitment.

GOD OF UNITY

Although Sai Baba insists upon Hindu tolerance and refuses to limit spirituality to any one cultural form, he also personifies revitalized Hindu power. His rich blending of imagery constantly reiterates a theme of ascetic potential from within the very heart of worldly being. He engages human desire, sensuality, indulgence and pleasure in his re-presentation of these human propensities. But he also posits the possibility of detachment through an individualized and internalized form of renunciation. The replay of the Shaivite theme of eroticism/ascetism runs as a leitmotif through Sai symbolism and teachings. The general dynamic of Hindu tolerance/ecumenism expressed in the movement thus subordinates the 'other' to universalistic themes derived from Hindu sources.

Sai Baba revitalizes the Hindu cosmos but he also creates a new synthesis of its symbols. This synthesis resonates with non-Hindu traditions and thereby enables both Hindus and non-Hindus to experience a sense of unity through Sai Baba. Further, the primacy of the individual and the cultivation of personal, emotional commitment to Divinity, extant in Sai Baba, are appropriate to the individualism of modern society.

The rich multivalence of the miracles, ash, song and ideal of worldly ascetism re-enchants an ever-expanding and diverse middle class following. While this may revitalize communities and feed a variety of political, ethnic and religious interests, most particularly the re-

glorification of Hinduism, it refuses to be completely collapsed into any particular mode. The movement is fuelled by the passions of individuals who feel spiritually re-empowered by Sai Baba and this prioritizing of individual religiosity counteracts the stultifying potential of orthodoxy.

Sai Baba addresses boundaries not only between self and world, but also between local social groups. The community of Sai transcends divisive boundaries and local issues. The individual becomes part of a transnational, non-religious 'family'. Membership of this global community offers a feeling of strength despite the contradictory and often oppressive forces of modern life. Sai Baba affirms and then transforms modern daily realities rather than denying or excluding them, as would world renunciation or monastic seclusion.

The Hindu notion of detachment is refracted through the idea of charity – an attitude of compassionate disinterest actualized in the redistribution of resources from the wealthy to the poor. Charity offers a means of reformation that does not challenge existing patterns of mundane power distribution, but instead spiritually empowers actors within it.

Like other modern Hindu leaders, Sai Baba brings to life an ancient Hindu capacity for resolution of opposites. Because his imagery and teachings rejoice in ambiguity, they resist the constraints of orthodoxy, both Hindu and non-Hindu. They also refuse any claims for the supremacy of modern thought or institutions that deny ambiguity. In sum, they subsume all such systems within a regenerated Hindu scheme and they thereby assert its supremacy.

Sai Baba affirms both individualism and materialism, but finds a place for these within a Hindu cosmic order that transcends them both. Individual distress is resolved and individual striving rewarded by the charm of miracles and the creation of a transnational community. Hinduism's universality and modernity are made literal. However, it is in the tension between the open, tolerant syncretism of the Sai Baba movement and its paradoxical implications for the privileging of Hinduism that the development and character of the Malaysian Sai Baba movement may be understood.