

The Miracle Man and Sacred-Secular Education

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Abstract: An attempt has been made to relate the origin of the Sathya Sai Baba Sect with tradition and the notion of identity. The paper also analyses its role in the field of education and socialization of children.

Keywords: Sathya Sai Baba, Education, Vision, Identity, Self

'He is said to leave his body to aid his devotees in distant places. He cures incurable illnesses and is even said to have raised the dead. He has turned water into gasoline by dipping his hand in it. His most important miracle-style, however, is the apparent materialization of objects and substances, including such things as images of deities, sweets, books, pictures of himself, amulets, jewelry, watches, and much else besides' (Kasturi(a): 1970; 140).

This miracle man, popularly known as Sathya Sai Baba, was born in 1926 in the village of Puttaparti, a state of Andhra Pradesh. His real name was Sathya Narayan Raju and he belonged to a family of the land-owners. The birth of the child occurred on a day and month devoted to the worship of the Lord Shiva and his birth was also heralded by a number of auspicious events.

Sathyanarayan was a born leader who would always love and help the poor. He developed an interest in singing bhajans during his school days. 'He had also the mysterious power of tracing lost property, reading the people's thoughts, seeing far into the future and deep into the past' (Kasturi(b): 1970; 2).

However, an incident which changed his life happened in March 1940 when he was only fourteen years old. On 7th March 1940 he had a fit of some kind and he remained unconscious for several hours. He started behaving very strangely and he would laugh, cry, sing bhajans and recite scriptures without any particular reason. He claimed himself to be a reincarnation of Sai Baba of Shirdi. This declaration the number of his followers and by 1947 he had already become so popular that he presided over 'that year's All India Divine Life Conference'. In June 1963, he made another claim to be an incarnation of Shiva in very dramatic circumstances. This declaration helped him establish his link with Brahmanical background.

Sacred Life as an Individual

Sathya Sai Baba explains two aspects of the daily life—the spiritual life and the life of an individual as a member of society. The God is in every individual and an individual should direct his life according to three lines of action—spiritual exercises and discipline; cultivation of detachment and development of self-confidence. But for this divine grace is also required. Sathya Sai Baba advises each member to undergo sadhna - 'a spiritual discipline which should be merged with day-to-day life so as to make his or her worldly life, and every member shall make his or her "family as a unit" for such Sadhana (Spiritual Exercise)' (Hislop: 1978; 12). But the focus of all Sathya Sai Baba activities is bhajan. These bhajan programmes are usually organized on Thursday, 'a day when Sathya Sai Baba alleged to have led his first bhajan'.

The Sathya Sai Baba movement is very flexible as compared to other movements and the devotees are free to participate in any religious group since the teachings or rituals and rites of the cult are not in tension or conflicts with other religious communities. He considers the caste of humanity as the only caste which exists on earth and 'there is only one language—the language of love; there is only one God—and He omnipresent' (Sandweirs: 1975; 11).

Therefore, we can say that the Sai philosophy represents the unity of faiths. The Sathya Sai Organization advocates the principles of Truth (Sathya), Rightness (Dharma), Peace (Shanti) and love (Prema). But it also emphasizes on the need of a living guru since the guru is like a stamp which a letter needs and 'no letter will reach the address when it lacks the twenty paise stamp'. And a holy person is always needed to direct the person towards the realization of the Supreme Being.

Secular and Educational Pursuits of the Sect

It is not only the doctrine of love which the Sathya Sai Organization teaches but it is also active in social work or community work. The Central Shri Sathya Sai Trust engages itself in a variety of activities. For example, the Seva Dal is engaged in social services and its members help the poor and visit the sick in hospitals. During these visits, they also distribute pockets of vibhuti to the people and invite them to attend bhajan programmes.

Sathya Sai Baba's organizations are also very active in the field of education. A great deal of attention is given to Bal Vikas (Child development) programmes whose main purpose is to give secular education mingled with the feelings of spirituality. Those organizations also sponsor programmes on 'Indian Cultures and Spirituality'.

During these Bal Vikas programmes, the whole attention is focused on secular education, therefore, these programmes are 'non-sectarian' in nature. These classes or programmes take place before the pictures of Sathya Sai Baba and usually an empty chair is placed which signifies actual occupation of the chair by the Baba himself. 'Classes begin with the chanting of the sacred syllable Om, followed by a prayer (in Sanskrit) and the singing of devotional songs (bhajans). Then follows a lecture' (Babb: 1987; 169).

During a discourse on guruship, they were told that 'just as the deities Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiva preside over creation, preservation, and destruction-so a guru creates a new person, preserves the goodness in him, and destroys the bad. Then follows an interlude of meditation on Sathya Sai Baba's form. At the conclusion of the class each child receives a tilak of sacred ash on the forehead (a standard Hindu practice) (Ibid). In this way, the Sai Baba Trust tries to give a firm cultural pattern to the students.

But why did Baba place so much emphasis on his educational programmes? His answer is, 'Catch them Young' since it is 'much easier to mould the thought channels of a developing mind than to change the heavily encrusted conduct of the older lot' (Kasturi: 1970b; 65).

Sathya Sai Baba also emphasised on the upliftment of the women and that is why special attention is given to women's education but regarding the role of women, he seemed quite orthodox. For instance, he urges the women to realize Stri dharma and advises them to be 'silent invisible partners and inspirers and teachers' (Kasturi: 1987; 172).

He prefers to remain orthodox in some other matters also. For example, he is against strikes and considers the ideal social order as the one which is based on 'noncompetitive complementation, a view deeply conditioned by the ideology of caste' (Kasturi: 1965; 29). He argues that 'the cry of equality now being used as a slogan is a vain and meaningless cry; for how can man, inheriting a multiplicity of impulses, skills, qualities, tendencies, attitudes and even diseases from his ancestors and from his own history (Karmic history) be all of the same stamp?' (Kasturi: 1970a; 147). He advises his followers to treat others with decency but it doesn't mean the upsetting of existing hierarchies.

Similarly, foreigners are welcome in this organization but westernization is considered harmful for the Indians. He says that 'though India has won its freedom, the attainments and the habits of the west still dominate the mind of the educated and the leaders' (Kasturi: 1970a; 182). Instead of imitating others, Indians should adhere to the folk ways, rituals and beliefs of its own tradition as argued by Sathya Sai Baba.

His teachings or philosophical views are simplistic, eclectic and essentially unoriginal' (Babb: 1983; 117) but most of the people become his devotees not because of his teachings or community work but only because of the miracles performed by him.

The central feature of the Sathya Sai Baba cult is the miracles performed by him which also help us to understand the inner spirit of the cult of Sathya Sai Baba. Belief in the miracles is just the opposite of scientific rationality. But the idea of miracles is very common in Indian religious system and the human beings having extraordinary powers are also not unknown. As observed by Babb that in Hindu culture 'the miraculous lacks any element of truly radical surprise' (Ibid).

The miraculous nature of Sathya Sai Baba attracts the followers and also helps in increasing the membership of the cult. He cures diseases and takes a devotee's illness upon himself and in this way, he takes onto himself the Karmic effects of his devotees. His most famous miracle is his power of materialization of sacred ash (vibhuti) and different objects produced by him with the wave of his right hand. Materialization of ash symbolizes his relation with Shiva and Shakti.

The most basic thing is 'self-transformation' which occurs with the help of the guru and it helps the devotee to enter into a new identity. According to Mead, the self can create itself only when it enters the role of the others. Mead emphasizes on 'vocal gesture' or the role of language which acts as a medium through which this happens. Similarly, in Sathya Sai Baba Sect 'visual interaction' helps the person to enter the role of others' or it 'acts as a vehicle for relationship' (Babb: 1987; 192).

Therefore, we can say that the relationship with the guru involves questions of identity. According to Sathya Sai Baba, there are three persons in every person—the one the person thinks he or she is, the one others think he or she is and the one he or she really is, which is

atma or soul and this soul is God. In order to realize the Supreme Being, one should try to realize one's true self.

Sathya Sai Baba's religious movement has not only included the Sanskritic tradition but has also absorbed some local beliefs, practices, rituals and customs. This process can be described, in Milton Singer's term, as 'the cultural drift of orthodoxy', an inherent flexibility in Hinduism that permits a variety of changes without destruction of its basic structure'(Babb; 1987; 171), or in Yoginder Singh's term, it can be described as a modernization of Indian tradition while still keeping in touch with the ancient heritage of rites and beliefs.

In conclusion, we can say that Sathya Sai Baba movement is not only a healing movement but it has been able to use 'ancient religious symbolisms of extraordinary psychological efficacy in a way that appears to be deeply satisfying to his followers'(Babb; 1987;173).

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