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Logging-on to Sai Baba: the poetics of sacred globalization

Meredith Morgan Feike
Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College

LOGGING-ON TO SAI BABA: THE POETICS OF SACRED GLOBALIZATION

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Meredith M. Feike
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For Mom and Dad

Your unconditional love, support and patience has made all the difference

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Preface

Try to imagine a life touched by the grace of God, a body at one with all of existence and all of nature. Contemplate the notion that we are all part of God and God is part of all of us. Envision your soul as a vessel that contains the essence of God. Consider a healthy existence in which mind, body, and soul are in perfect equilibrium. Now realize that all of this can be attained through a path of devotion that transforms the human spirit and transcends all political and socio-cultural boundaries. This is the philosophy of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba.

The Sathya Sai Baba Organization is the principal force behind a growing religious movement that is steeped in the Hindu tradition. Today, the organization claims to oversee a vast global network of Sai Centers based in over 170 countries, with 160 located here in the United States. Sai Baba is at the helm of a financial empire that is worth between six and fifteen billion dollars (internet source #66; #69; #79). The movement originated in 1940 at Puttaparthi, a small village in southern India, when a fourteen-year-old boy, by the name of Sathyanarayana, proclaimed himself to be Sai Baba. Millions of followers believe Sai Baba is an incarnation of God in human form, or an *avatar* (see Appendix Sanskrit Glossary), as it is defined by the Hindu religion. Sai Baba teaches his devotees that humanity, by nature, is divine. This eighty-one year old god-man believes that the goal of each person should be to realize this human divinity, and lead a moral life full of compassion for every living entity. By maintaining oneself on this righteous path of devotion, humanity will be able to receive God's grace, which will ultimately allow for the divinity within to be awakened.

Sai Baba embraces devotees from all races, ethnic origins and religions. Universalistic in nature, the organization proclaims the underlying unity of all faiths, presenting itself as a movement of "love." Sai Baba and the global network that makes up the organization, seek to

instill in devotee's beliefs that are the foundation of the Hindu tradition. The philosophies found in Hinduism's most influential written discourses- the *Vedas*, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, and the *Upanishads*- are taught to followers of this organization. The incorporation of traditional Hindu practices and beliefs illustrate the revivalist nature of the Sathya Sai Baba Organization. However, the organization should also be recognized as a worldwide network that is attempting to redefine Hinduism and create a new hegemony for both Indian nationals and other global adherents that follow this holy man's teachings.

An examination of the Sathya Sai Baba Organization as a form of online religion is advantageous to the study of new "cyberliterate" anthropological practices. Over the past several years I have been a participant-observer of a communication network that illustrates the globalization of cultural production. This new domain of cyber-religion fueled by cultural and technological diffusion has allowed us, as researchers, the opportunity to witness the Internet as an emergent and transformative social phenomenon. In this new millennium, where we as global actors are facing transcontinental socio-political unrest, the digital universe has become part of our cultural framework shaping worldviews while transcending social borders (Beckford 2000; Brasher 2001; Giddens 1991; Holton 2000; Jones 2000; O'Leary 1996).

Navigation through the religious landscapes of the World Wide Web provides researchers with a provocative portrayal of "sacred globalization," a 21st century manifestation of what I term "technosocial collaboration." Advancements in technology have allowed for increased global interconnectivity and cultural exchange. The sacred sphere of religious belief and practice is being shaped by a global telecommunications infrastructure that promotes the pluralism of the modern world. Sacred globalization is the convergence of religious faith with technological innovation in the realm of mass media. Transnational integration and cross-cultural contact result from this new alliance that fosters multiculturalism and religious refiguration (Hefner 1998).

Incorporating nonrepresentational theory (Thrift 2000b) and its emphasis on performance, I argue that this web-based new religious movement (NRM), is utilizing the Internet as a global stage to define, perform, and transmit the universalistic philosophies of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba. Through research and analysis after immersion in the online world of this self-proclaimed living deity, I hope to shed light on the role of the Internet in the social construction of human culture. This thesis seeks to uncover some of the objective "truths" of religious practice in the realm of cyberspace. By applying an anthropological lens to the extensive web presence of the Sathya Sai Baba Organization, it is my hope that this use of technology as a vessel for sacred space will be revealed as not only a socio-cultural event, but as a "cyberperformance" shaped by the poetics of sacred globalization.

"Cyberpunk's Prayer"

"Our Sysop,
*   Who art On-line,*
High be thy clearance level.
Thy System up,
Thy Program executed
Off-line as it is on-line.
Give us this logon our database,
And allow our rants,
*   As we allow those who flame against us.*
And do not access us to garbage,
*   But deliver us from outage.*
For thine is the System and the Software
and the Password forever" (O'Leary 1996:792).

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Abstract

Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba is the leader of a progressive religious movement steeped in the Hindu tradition. The Sathya Sai Baba Organization claims to have over thirty million members in approximately 170 countries. The dedicated followers of the movement believe Sai Baba to be an avatar or incarnation of God in human form. Sai Baba utilizes the Internet to transmit his universalistic philosophies around the world. With this digital universe, devotees can log-on to a multitude of official Sai websites that act as training ground for achieving liberation of the mind and soul. This path of devotion that Sai Baba teaches his followers has its foundation in Hinduism's sacred scriptures. The Sathya Sai Baba Organization is attempting to restructure the Hindu tradition, marketing a new hegemony fit for global consumption.

The organization is one of many spiritual movements that have embraced globalization and become part of the religious landscapes of the World Wide Web. Using websites as field sites, I conducted an in-depth case study on the cyberspace activities of this organization. This annointment of cyberspace as sacred space illustrates how the Internet can be a powerful source in cultural production. The religious subculture that links a global network of Sai Centers and dedicated participants utilizes information technology to spread the ideology of the movement. The Internet has the potential to change how social scientists engage in data collection and cultural documentation. The fieldwork that I conducted in cyberspace and during interviews with my consultant reveals the Internet as both a vessel for sacred space and a venue for a "cyberperformance" that is shaped by the poetics of sacred globalization.

Chapter 1

The Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba Organization

" I have come to light the lamp of love in your hearts, to see that it shines day by day with added luster. I have not come on any mission of publicity for any sect or creed or cause; nor have I come to collect followers for any doctrine. I have come to tell you of this universal unitary faith, this path of Love. Believe that all hearts are motivated by the One and Only God, that all names in all languages and all forms man can conceive, denote the One and Only God. Cultivate the attitude of oneness between people of all creeds, all countries, and all continents. This is the message of Love I bring."

-Mission of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba

Figure 1. Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba

The Internet transmits the mission of Sai Baba around the world. In this era of globalization, the borders that once isolated societies have been penetrated by advancements in technology. Today, an information highway that fosters a global community interlinks members of the international citizenry that have access to the World Wide Web. The Sathya Sai Baba

Organization has utilized this worldwide technosocial network to circulate and promote the teachings of Sai Baba.

I first learned of India's most famous living deity (Figure 1) during an independent study taken under the direction of Dr. Gail Sutherland. As a graduate student in the field of socio-cultural anthropology, I had always been interested in pursuing research concerning the Hindu religion. My independent research examined the creolisation of the Hindu tradition on the Caribbean Island of Trinidad. One of the monographs I chose to aid me in my research pursuit was Morton Klass' *Singing with Sai Baba: The Politics of Revitalization in Trinidad*. After reading about the South Indian guru whose message helped to spark a global Hindu revival, my search for an intriguing thesis subject ended. Over the next three years, I studied the Sathya Sai Baba Organization and found a tremendous amount of research material on the organization's various websites. The Sathya Sai Baba Central Council of the United States of America runs a website that introduces U.S. nationals to the teachings of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba.

During a seminar course on Discourse Analysis, I examined the use of prayer as a devotional activity among members of the Sai Baba Organization. Under the direction of Dr. Mary Jill Brody, I analyzed several prayers used in Sai devotion so as to convey the actual performance of the prayer as members of this religious movement recite it (see Ch.6). Research and analysis conducted during this seminar class set the tone for further investigation into the devotional practices that Sai Baba claims will bring about the spiritual regeneration of faithful devotees. The Sathya Sai Baba Organization's satellite Sai Centers hold weekly meetings attended by adherents who wish to maintain the path of devotion emphasized by Sai Baba. During these meetings, followers engage in devotional activities that include study circle, meditation, prayer, devotional singing, and chanting. As a student of cultural anthropology in the postmodern era, I am aware of the postmodern critique of "traditional" anthropology. Although I

embrace many of the anthropological theories that evolved during the early to mid twentieth century, I also agree with the postmodern notion of incorporating one's own fieldwork experience into the anthropological account of a particular socio-cultural phenomenon (Lundgren 2002; Michrina 1996). I employed a pluralistic methodology in my research, incorporating both traditional and postmodern approaches in my analysis.

This thesis is my own interpretation of the Sathya Sai Baba Organization as I experienced it in cyberspace. The chapters examine what I encountered when I logged-on to this virtual realm of the sacred. All that I experienced in my lifetime played a role in shaping how I interpreted and documented this religious movement. I was born in New Orleans, Louisiana to parents coming from very different backgrounds. My father, from Texas, was a conservative Southern Baptist who served as an Air Force Security Service Officer during the Vietnam War. My mother, brought up in New Orleans as one of Jehovah's Witnesses, was politically liberal-minded and an accomplished artist, dance teacher and choreographer. My parents waited ten years before having me, and although they had differences in opinion concerning almost everything, they were very unified in my upbringing. I consider myself blessed to have such a loving and tightly knit family to care for me. Being the first baby in the family in many years, all were always there to support me.

Spiritually, there was a potpourri of religions represented amongst the family: Southern Baptist, Roman Catholic, Methodist, and Jehovah's Witnesses. Since my mother was brought up as one of Jehovah's Witnesses, she and my father, who converted from Southern Baptist, also raised me as a Jehovah's Witness. The belief of Jehovah's Witnesses is that there is but one true god, Jehovah. To worship anything else is considered improper and taboo. Worshipping graven images is condemned, as well as celebrating any holidays, including birthdays. I am not a

practicing Jehovah's Witness, however their Biblical teachings are familiar to me. While I attended church ("Kingdom Hall") growing up, my mother emphasized that God did not create robots, but free thinking individuals. She believed that I should familiarize myself with all religions, and later decide what was best for me.

Academically, my immediate family and other close relatives were very education oriented. Coming from a family of teachers, professors, speech therapists, artists, architects, musicians and anthropologists (my cousin, Juanita Anne, is a linguistic anthropologist), I was encouraged to excel in the profession of my choice. My entire academic experience from the age of four through high school was one of privilege. I attended an elite private school, the Louise S. McGehee School for Girls in the Lower Garden District of New Orleans. While it was a school primarily attended by old-line blue-blooded girls, it also enrolled many girls from other countries whose parents were working for the numerous embassies located in New Orleans. I was exposed to the cultures, religions, and politics of various countries. My school had as its motto, "noblesse oblige," which emphasized the importance of giving back to the community, so my alma mater also enrolled less fortunate, inner city children.

From the very earliest age, the school taught equality and respect toward all, regardless of sex, race, religion, or ethnic origin. One day each school year was dedicated to learning about the many cultures and religions represented by the student body population. Recollections of my father having difficulty watching me share bites from the same apple with a little African girl, or car pool with a Muslim family, now only fuel my desire to further my study of various cultures, and try to understand the best way to overcome the prejudices that still exist in much of our population. Being enculturated with the values of social equality and respect for diversity affected my feelings toward and interpretations of the Sri Sathya Sai Baba Organization.

My mother also engrained in me the importance of embracing cultural diversity. From the time I was born my mother took me with her when she taught dance classes in the various racially diverse sections of the city. While she had her own dance studio, she also taught the early childhood and after school dance programs at McGehee's, St. George's Episcopal School, the New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, and various inner city and special needs schools. From directing conservative classes at the seminary, to developing ethnic dance programs in black public housing projects, I watched her teach with respect for ethnic and racial identity, striving to preserve her students' cultural heritage.

I went into this research endeavor with an open mind and a desire to document the Sathya Sai Baba religious movement, which differed greatly from the Christian tradition I was raised in. Several months after I had undertaken my research in discourse analysis, I began trying to attend the local devotional activities of the Sathya Sai Baba Organization. While the website run by the Sathya Sai Baba Central Council of the United States of America listed the cities that were home to Sai Centers, no phone numbers or addresses were provided. The only contact number available was that of the Sathya Sai Baba Book Center of America, located in Tustin, California. I tried calling that number several times but no one ever picked up and there was no answering machine. I turned to an e-mail address that the U.S. Sai website provided for prospective members to learn about the exact location of local Sai Centers and the times of weekly devotional activities.

Three weeks passed after I first e-mailed the organization about my interest in attending a meeting. I e-mailed again, thinking that maybe the message had not gone through; still nothing. I started to wonder about exactly what kind of religious organization this was. My mother, part of the generation that remembers the Patty Hearst incident, began to question the safety and

soundness of my proposed fieldwork. To her, everything that I told her about Sai Baba and his organization red-flagged it as a cult.

Unlike my mother, I was fascinated by the unusual nature of the organization, and became determined to find a contact to facilitate my entrance into the Sai community. After making several more calls to the book center in California, I finally got a woman of Indian descent on the line. She sounded a little surprised when I explained that I was interested in attending a meeting. When I asked where the Sai Centers in Louisiana were located, she put me on hold for several minutes. She came back to the phone a bit out of breath, and gave me the name and number of the contact in my area. When I called that number, I got a standard answering service recording, and I left a message in hope that the contact would return my call. A few days later, a young U.S. man who attended law school at my alma mater, Tulane University of New Orleans, returned my call. We talked for over an hour, and I explained my research pursuits to him. He was excited about my attending a meeting, and began talking about Sai Baba and the organization. He spoke quickly, with emphasis, as if having been trained at what to relay to potential followers. Each time he mentioned Sai Baba, his tone of voice changed, making apparent his reverence of this holy man. He suggested certain divine discourses written by Sai Baba for me to read, which were available online via official Sai websites.

My contact described the Sai Center of which he was a member, located in New Orleans, Louisiana. He explained that the New Orleans group was relatively small, with approximately fifteen adherents who met weekly at the home of a member. This group of devotees was made up of mostly U.S. graduate and law school students from two local universities, one of which is a Catholic institution. He added that there were also devotees living in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. Within an hour, I redefined this contact person as my main consultant, who was willing, and even anxious, to discuss the teachings and worship of the man he believed to be God on Earth.

Over the next few months I continued telephone conversations with him and prepared an agenda to start conducting fieldwork, with the intention of focusing on the devotional activities that followers of Sai Baba engage in during their weekly meetings.

However, on August 29, 2005 my plan of research dramatically changed when a powerful category four hurricane struck the Gulf Coast of the United States. Hurricane Katrina, with winds up to 145 m.p.h. hit New Orleans and the scenario that every native New Orleanian, including myself, had always feared became a reality. It is hard to express the devastation that I found when I returned to my beloved city, close to a month after the levees broke, inundating eighty percent of New Orleans with water. My plan to conduct fieldwork at the New Orleans location was no longer feasible, since New Orleans Sai Baba devotees were mostly students who had been displaced by the storm. I left messages with the book center in California requesting information regarding devotional activities held in Baton Rouge, but my calls were never returned. Telephone conversations with my consultant also ended at this point, as he became displaced, and was no longer reachable. The loss of contact with my consultant was especially disappointing because I had never gotten to meet him in person. However, the data I collected from our months of telephone interviews proved invaluable to my research pursuits. After several months of dealing with my own personal family issues caused by the disaster, I began to revamp my research pursuits by delving into Sai Baba's extensive global network of online religion. I quickly began to realize that I could conduct fieldwork in cyberspace, employing the Internet as a tool of anthropological investigation.

In utilizing the Internet as a tool of inquiry, I considered the Internet as Place. The landscape that the Sai organization inhabits in cyberspace is a place where religious beliefs and ritual practices can be taught, learned, and practiced. My research examined how Sai Baba utilizes the Internet as a place for religious proselytizing. Religious websites have the ability to

serve as sacred spaces, taking on characteristics of places of worship. When I logged-on to the sacred world of Sai Baba, I felt as if I was entering a Hindu temple. The written and audio text of the WebPages spoke to me just as I imagined a guru would. The voices on the downloadable chants and bhajans, as well as pictures of devotees engaged in worship, allowed me to feel like I was among many who were also taking the same voyage of inquiry.

I employed a phenomenological approach in the presentation of my research findings (Thomas 2006; Thrift 2000b; Tilley 1994). Phenomenology "involves the understanding and description of things as they are experienced by a subject" (Tilley 1994:11). My description of this growing religious movement is based on my own journey into the online world of Sai Baba. What I learned about the organization through my experience as fieldworker in cyberspace, provided the basis for my research findings. My journey into the world of phenomenology informed my process of conceptualization, and aided me in the discovery of new pathways of engagement.

Phenomenology is a methodology that calls for immersion "in-place," signifying the importance of human encounters with both the material and virtual worlds. To understand culture a person must experience it, and it is this human experience that influences perceptions and understanding. Phenomenologists, like anthropologists, focus on the relationships that exist between human beings and objects (both animate and inanimate) of culture. These objects of culture are "always embedded in a complex network of relations between people and things, and they are only comprehensible as such" (Thomas 2006:46). Culture reveals itself to those that are subjects of the experience. My experience logging-on to a religious landscape of cyberspace shaped my interpretations and understanding of the Sathya Sai Baba Organization.

I am unaware of any scholarly research published about the United States Sathya Sai Baba Organization. However, the movement has been documented by anthropologists who

conducted fieldwork among devotees in Trinidad (Klass 1991) and Malaysia (Kent 1999). Most written accounts of the movement chronicle the Sathya Sai Baba Organization within its native landscape of India, where the bulk of his devotees live (see below). In 1950, Sai Baba's devotees built him an *ashram* (a temple and residential quarters) near his home in Puttaparthi. Today, his main *ashram*, Prasanthi Nilayam (Abode of Peace), has become the major center for his religious movement, with the capacity to house thousands of his followers. Sai Baba also has ashrams in Bangalore and Kodaikanal (Figure 2). Indian scholars describe the Sathya Sai Baba movement within the social and historical context of their native country, documenting the beliefs, behaviors, and customs found in Sai Baba's ashrams (Balasubramaniam 1985; Bharati 1970; Ruhela 1976; Srinivas 1999, 2000). This literature has provided a foundation, historically and culturally, for my research.

Figure 2. Map of India-note Puttaparthi, Bangalore and Kodaikanal (internet source #86).

A large portion of my research addresses what Sai Baba wrote or said. Sai Baba's devotees live by these words, which they consider to be revelation; an insider's perspective of

the movement would not be attainable without an in-depth knowledge of these discourses. The

Sathya Sai Baba Central Trust website promotes Sai Baba's writings. The avatars'

> "message is always extempore, His ideas receiving expression as mellifluous
> poems and songs, showering exquisite delight. His script is reminiscent of
> charming monastic artistry. The lines are straight and parallel, resembling floral
> garlands spread out upon paper. Poetry and melody shine through each sentence
> and behind each phrase and clause lays a form that is apparently human, but is
> suffused with Divine Wisdom" (internet source #1).

Sai publications are presented in four series: 1) the "Sathya Sai Baba Speaks" series

(spoken discourses by Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba compiled into thirty-six volumes covering

the years 1953-1993), 2) the "Vahini" series (fourteen books written by Sai Baba that speak of

peace, meditation, love, and wisdom), 3) the "Sathyam Sivam" series (four books chronicling the

life of Sai Baba), and 4) the "Summer Shower" series (discourses written by Sai Baba on Indian

culture and spirituality). The materials I used most extensively in my research come from the

"Sai Speaks" series and the "Vahini" series. I was directed toward these "divine discourses" by

my contact, who indicated particular volumes he thought would be most applicable to my

research pursuits.

Knowledge of literature pertaining to Hindu beliefs and religious practices was also

necessary for my research. There is no shortage of scholarly literature on this world religion (see

Ch.4). I focused mainly on sections of the ancient Vedic scriptures and the *Bhagavad-Gita*, texts

which provide the foundation for the Sathya Sai Baba Organization's teachings, and which have

been integrated into the movement in a multitude of ways.

In order to undertake an anthropological account of the religious movement, knowledge

about Anthropology of Religion and how to apply methodologies was also critical. A number of

foundational works on the anthropological study of belief systems and religious practices have

informed my analysis (Anderson 1987; Asad 1993; Davis 1982; Durkheim 1965[1912];

Evans-Pritchard 1965; Geertz 1973; Lewis 1971; Morris 1987; Needham 1972; Shapiro 1995; Skorupski 1976; Weber 1963). This scholarly literature outlined various approaches to the study of religion, focusing on the social/psychological functions of religion, as well as the role of symbolism in rituals. Postmodern approaches such as reflexive anthropology have provided me with guidance on how to integrate my own experiences as a fieldworker into this ethnography (Michrina 1996; Lundgren 2002).

When one enters the name Sathya Sai Baba on the Yahoo search engine, 728,000 references will appear. Literally hundreds of websites are devoted solely to this South Indian guru. The pictures that appear in this thesis were taken, unless otherwise noted, from www.saibabalinks.org. Almost all of the images depict the Sathya Sai Baba Organization in India. My interpretation of the lack of pictures documenting the movement in other parts of the world is that Sai websites seek to showcase images from India in hopes of appealing to Westerners desire for the exotic.

The global community that interconnects via information technology can be observed by social scientists who embark on a 21st century mode of research. Logging-on to this virtual treasure trove of potential data has recently gained popularity in numerous academic disciplines such as Anthropology, Sociology, and Women's/Gender Studies (Bromseth 2002; Danet 2001; Dibbell 1993; Escobar 1994; Hine 2000; Houtman and Zeitlyn 1996; Johnson 2003; Jones 1994; Kendall 2002; Markham 2004; Miller 2000; Ryen 2002; Schwimmer 1996; Senft 2003; Turkle 1995; Witmer and Katzman 1998). I am unaware of any published scholarly literature that documents the Sathya Sai Baba Organizations' strong presence on the World Wide Web. Investigation of this cyber-religion will supply data to illustrate the beliefs, customs, and rituals that define this religious movement, while also contributing insight into a form of religious practice that is being fueled by society's transformation by globalization. A critical analysis of

this growing spiritual alternative to organized religion, which can be learned and practiced in cyberspace, contributes to a new domain for socio-cultural inquiry.

Chapter 2

What is Religion? : Symbolism and the Transmission of Meaning

Before delving further into the world of online religion and the Sathya Sai Baba Organization's transformation of cyberspace into sacred space, it would be prudent to first contemplate the much-debated question: What is Religion? With the advent of the nineteenth century, the analysis of religion by social scientists paved the way for an anthropological debate that still resonates within the discipline today (Banton 1966; Beckford and Luckmann 1989; Brasher 2001; Lawson and McCauley 1990; Zaleski 1997). Noted theorists such as Emile Durkheim (1965) Max Weber (1963), Evans-Prichard (1965), Mary Douglas (1970a, 1970b) and Clifford Geertz (1973) have contributed to the debate and added their own theoretical perspectives to the scientific study of religion.

Although religion is considered to be universal across cultures, the actual forms and practice vary greatly (Berndt 1974; Brasher 2001; Horton 1967; Howell 1984; Kaplan 1975; Parkin 1991; Turnbull 1965; Zaleski 1997). Considering religion cross-culturally, there are various avenues for drawing distinctions and making connections between the earthly and supernatural realms. In spite of differences in belief and ritual practice, religion functions culturally to fulfill the psychological and social needs of its adherents, both individually and collectively (Malinowski 1948).

This chapter addresses religion as a general cultural phenomenon, while illustrating a set of theoretical viewpoints taken by social scientists who deliberate the scientific study of religion. I will use Geertz (1973) and Asad (1993) to provide the theoretical framework for my analysis of religion. I bring in examples from Shapiro (1995) and Anderson (1987) to illustrate two forms of

religious practice found in distinctly different cultures. While these two examples of religious

practice of Brazilian spiritual possession and Japanese tea ceremony differ strikingly from the

cyberperformance in the global network of web-based internet spirituality, a comparative

examination of these practices is helpful to understanding the importance of symbols in the

transmission of religious meaning. Geertz provides the premise that religion can be defined as,

> "(1) a system of symbols which acts to (2) establish powerful, pervasive, and
> long-lasting moods and motivations in men by (3) formulating conceptions of a
> general order of existence and (4) clothing these conceptions with such an aura of
> factuality that (5) the moods and motivations seem uniquely realistic" (Geertz
> 1973:90).

He explains that "a system of symbols" can be best defined through the meanings they

convey. Symbols, or systems of symbols, become instruments that people use to transmit

meanings. A symbol can represent "any object, act, event, quality, or relation which serves as a

vehicle for a conception - the conception is the symbol's 'meaning' "(Geertz 1973:91). He goes

on to explain how cultural patterns are comprised of groups of symbols which work to mold

general behavior. Geertz develops his conception of religion as it pertains to practicioners'

motivations and moods as types of disposition that symbols work to invoke. For Geertz,

motivation is "a persisting tendency, a chronic inclination to perform certain sorts of acts and

experience certain sorts of feelings in certain sorts of situation" (Geertz 1973: 96). A person is

motivated toward some end, and in the case of religion a person may be motivated toward living

a religious life, with all that it entails.

I believe that the role of religion in ordering conceptions about existence (see Geertz #3

above) is the most important component of religion. In a world that is always uncertain and

complex with many unexplainable happenings, religion may teach people how to cope with their

situation and have faith in that which can not be seen. Geertz shows that people use symbols and

groups of symbols as tools for constructing their definition of the general order of existence.

Religion involves surrounding oneself with an "aura of factuality" (90) that is, the idea/feeling that one's belief is valid. The problems people experience, whether pain, suffering, confusion, moral conflict or contradiction draws them to the explanatory concepts of religion.

One's religious perspective helps to define how one views the world in which one lives. Religious beliefs shape the way that we live in this world, and allow us to both make sense of and cope with difficulty and complexity. Religion teaches one how to live a proper life, while illustrating how to deal with the pitfalls that one will experience during one's actual earthly experience. Geertz asserts that in order to ever actually understand an aspect of culture such as religion, one has to first comprehend the symbols or sets of symbols that define the cultural practice in question (Figure 3).

Figure 3. Symbolism is important to celebrations held at Sai Baba's ashram

Asad's contrasting view of religion (1993) involves a shift from the symbolic approach to a postmodern one with regard to the scientific study of religion. While Geertz argues for a

universal definition of religion, Asad's argument can be seen as antithetical to this notion. Asad asserts that "there cannot be a universal definition of religion, not only because its constituent elements and relationships are historically specific, but because that definition is itself the historical product of discursive processes" (Asad 1993:29). Asad criticizes Geertz's universal definition of religion as essentialist, and suggests what he considers to be a better definition of symbol: "a set of relationships between objects or events uniquely brought together as complexes or as concepts, having at once an intellectual, instrumental, and emotional significance" (Asad 1993:31).

Asad also critiques Geertz's characterization of culture pattern, which according to Asad cannot account for social change. Asad explains, "the basic problem is with the assumption that there are two separate levels – the cultural, on the one side (consisting of symbols) and the social and psychological, on the other –which interact" (Asad 1993:32). Asad uses Christianity as an example to show that religious symbols do not have to necessarily bring forward certain moods and motivations to be powerful symbols of religion because "religious symbols possess a truth independent of their effectiveness" (Asad 1993:33). Asad further suggests that Geertz's symbolic approach toward a universal definition of religion is based in the Western tradition of separating religion from power. Asad believes that religion cannot be separated from power, and if religion and power are viewed as conceptually inseparable, than the essence of religion as transhistorical/transcultural is no longer feasible. He goes on to illustrate that symbols are not the only means of invoking righteous motivations and moods in man. He examines how in Christianity power, in the form of laws sanctioned by the church and ideas about salvation also work to produce specific moods and motivations. He describes how the essence of religion has changed over time, thereby making Geertz's universal definition of religion and its

transhistorical/transcultural nature impossible: since power structures have changed, and since power and religion are conceptually inseparable, the essence of religion has changed over time.

Asad asserts that Geertz's notion of religious belief only embodies a modern Western and Christian conception of religion. He argues that Geertz emphasizes religious belief as a "state of mind rather than as constituting activity in the world" (Asad 1993:47). Asad also claims that Geertz errs in defining religion from a theological standpoint: "this happens when he insists on the primacy of meaning without regard to the processes by which meanings are constructed" (Asad 1993:43). Asad explains that a universal definition of religion is impossible, proclaiming that religion can only be defined according to the time and place it was/is practiced. The multitude of belief systems and religious practices found throughout the world shapes our conception of religion. Social scientists remain at the forefront of scholars documenting the various spiritual subcultures that continue to influence the global citizenry.

I now turn to Shapiro (1995) and Anderson (1987) to illustrate two forms of religious practice found in distinctly different cultures. These two case studies both highlight the importance of symbolism in religious practice. Shapiro's research concerning spirit possession sects found in Northeastern Brazil reveals the major role that religion plays in the formulation of both individual and group identity. Shapiro illustrates how symbols are utilized by various spirit possession sects to define inter-group and intra-group identity, outlining the way these religious symbols work as representations of ideology.

Shapiro conducted fieldwork during a two-year stay in the city of Salvador in the state of Bahia, Brazil, where she studied three different spirit possession sects, each sect having adherents of a particular racial heritage and social class. In Shapiro's opinion, the religious beliefs of these spirit possession sects originated in Africa among the Yoruba-speaking peoples and include animal sacrifice in their religious practices. The three sects are the Keto Candoble

(Afro-Brazilians who represent the darkest and poorest population), the Giro (upper-lower-class mixed Afro-Brazilian and Amerindian racial heritage), and the Mesa Branca (middle class of European descent). When describing this culture Shapiro states, "there is a strong association between social class and color. Indeed, individuals with darker skin are more likely to be very poor" (Shapiro 1995:833). In Bahian culture, the categorization of skin color is based upon the relative distinction of dark and light, rather than the absolute black and white. The Keto Candomble are dark-skinned and venerate blood (which is also very dark) as their religious symbol. Shapiro explains how the symbols can mean different things to different sects, using blood as an example of this point. She states,

> "in the Candomble the blood regenerates, fortifies, and creates kinship, and thus symbolizes hope for the future. For the Mesa Branca members it unleashes the forces of darkness that can take life, dissipate the natural flow of social relationships, and undermine the social order" (Shapiro 1995:833).

Shapiro argues that the religious practitioners she investigates use symbols to differentiate among racial/class divisions. The three spirit possession sects use the following symbols: the Keto Candomble (blood, oil, and honey), the Giro (water, oil and honey), and the Mesa Branca (water). Each sect can be put on an ascending hierarchical scale in terms of their supposed human worth and degree of morality, with the Candomble being the least moral/worthy and the Mesa Branca enjoying the superior station of most worthy and moral. The Giro and the Mesa Branca possession sects view the religious symbol 'blood' in a negative way, using this symbol to characterize the Keto Candomble as comparatively lesser/immoral beings, to their own advantage. According to Shapiro "each spirit possession group relies through the use of symbolic forms on its evaluation and portrayal of other groups to maintain its own coherence and appeal" (Shapiro 1995:830). This system of labeling degrees of morality according to membership in possession sect allows for the continuance and justification of social oppression.

The Giro spirit possession sect incorporates aspects from both Keto Candomble and Mesa Branca groups, along with aspects of Brazilian Amerindian tradition, as members have mixed racial heritage. In Brazil there is a prevailing trend towards whitening oneself, which allows one to achieve higher status within society; whiter individuals are considered to have better inherent traits and morals. According to Shapiro, "race functions as primary reference point for the symbolism of the spirit possession groups that codifies moral and ideological stances with distinct racial identities" (Shapiro 1995:829).

All sects except the Candomble use water as a religious symbol, as the Candomble are considered to be too inferior to be represented by the purity that water symbolizes. Shapiro divides the Giro sect into two branches: one that connects more with the African tradition, and one that connects more with the European tradition. The oil is used as a religious symbol by those in the Giro who society labels more "African," while honey is used by those who society considers to be "whiter." Shapiro emphasizes the fact that membership in these spirit possession sects is a means by which individuals can negotiate their identity within the larger society.

Geertz's system of symbols that promote particular dispositions among religious practitioners applies to the spirit possession sects of Bahia, Brazil. In Bahian culture, sect adherents define themselves and others according to the symbols that are assigned to them. Symbols are used to order conceptions about existence, shaping both religious and socio-cultural ideology. Asad's view that religion and power are conceptually inseparable is also applicable to Shapiro's research findings. The religious symbols that motivate sect adherents toward particular worldviews justify the social inequality and oppression found in Bahian society. Those with power use the symbols that characterize the various sects to maintain their own superiority within the culture, keeping lower class citizens in a subordinate role. While the spiritual

possession sects utilize religion in ways that affect the socio-political fabric of Bahia, the Japanese Tea Ritual focuses on the spiritual well being of the individual.

Anderson is both a practitioner of Tea ritual (chanoyu) and an anthropologist who wishes to convey how this ritual can be seen as a religious practice "central to Japanese cultural identity" (Anderson 1987:475). She places the ritual within an anthropological perspective and vividly explains its religious character. Anderson shows in her account the importance of an in-depth analysis of the Tea ritual, as it is an example of religious behavior. Early in her essay, Anderson explains that the goal of religious behavior is to experience a "condition of original wholeness, health of holiness" (Anderson 1987:475). Anderson illustrates that the Japanese reach this goal when they engage in the Tea Ritual.

Anderson describes how the Japanese Tea Ritual is taught in a highly disciplined fashion, where the authority of the teacher is never questioned. The author first puts the ritual in its correct historical context showing its ancient beginning and connection to Buddhism, Taoism, Zen and the secular world. She details the life of Sen Rikyo, known as the greatest tea master, whose conviction was "that the simple act of preparing a bowl of tea can become a positive step towards achieving enlightenment" (Anderson 1987:481). Anderson describes the Tea ritual as it is practiced in Japanese homes. She explains that this ritual, or chaji, is a vehicle for religious expression that can be studied by anthropologists. She adds that the religious symbolism found in the Tea Ritual is quite subtle causing many to assume that the ritual is a secular rather than religious event. Anderson goes into great detail when she describes the numerous religiously symbolic aspects of the ritual. Some of these aspects include: purification, the crawling-in entrance, the meal, and the incense burned. Most of the ritualistic acts that occur during the religious practice signify a person's ability to become "separated from mundane reality" (Anderson 1987:487). Anderson has successfully shown why the Japanese Tea Ritual should be

viewed as a religious practice. She ends her essay by stating how "tea becomes the symbolic medicine for man's angst [so that] he is restored to 'original wholeness, health or holiness' . . . through concentrating on chanoyu both guests and host can obtain salvation" (Anderson 1987:495). Practitioners of the Tea Ritual engage in symbolic acts in order to achieve spiritual fulfillment. Acts that outsiders might not deem religious in nature are for this particular culture, crucial elements in attaining a spiritually and physically healthy existence.

Geertz and Asad provide a theoretical framework for looking at religion, while Shapiro and Anderson illustrate how religious practice can take very different forms signaling the importance of symbols in the transmission of religious meaning. The data from both the spiritual possession sects and the Japanese Tea Ritual validate Geertz's argument that religion is a system of symbols that work to transmit particular meanings pertaining to the "order of existence." However, while all religions have these symbols that transmit meaning, these symbols and meanings are different in terms of social and historic context. The research findings of Shapiro and Anderson reinforce and accentuate this point well. Although the highly disciplined Japanese Tea Ritual differs greatly in religious form from the spirit possession sects of Northeastern Brazil, both are religious practices that espouse their beliefs through the use of symbols. The religious symbolism found in every spiritual culture transmits meaning and influences the religious and social ideologies of devoted followers.

Sai Baba and his organization transmit their belief system through the use of symbols. The symbols that define this growing religious movement are being transmitted around the world via the Internet and other forms of global media. In today's world of sacred globalization, those seeking spiritual fulfillment can log-on to an information highway that interconnects an international citizenry with the click of the mouse. In the privacy of one's own home, devotees can chant ancient Vedic scriptures, read the divine discourses of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba,

and maintain a path of devotion said to liberate their souls and enlighten their minds. In this 21st century, a modem, monitor, and keyboard can be added to the repertoire of tools used to achieve religious salvation, forever changing how we contemplate the perennial question, What is Religion?

Chapter 3

Online Spirituality and the Future of Research in Cyberspace

"The wisdom Web pages and holy hyperlinks that are the stuff of online religion possess the potential to make a unique contribution to global fellowship in the frequently volatile area of inter-religious understanding. Fueling the trend that widespread mobility began, cyberspace diminishes the relevance of location for religious identity. As it widens the social foundation of religious life, cyberspace erodes the basis from which religion contributes to the destructive dynamics of xenophobia. In the process, it lessens potential inter-religious hatred" (Brasher 2001:6).

During the pivotal years of the Protestant Reformation, the invention of the printing press played a crucial role in shaping Christian history (O'Leary 1996). In the current digital world of global interconnection, the Internet has forever changed how religion is presented and transmitted to those with access to the World Wide Web. Like the printing press, the Internet has brought about a new means of consumption, transforming traditional pathways to God. Some landscapes of cyberspace have become sacred spaces with virtual congregations dismantling prescribed geographical and social borders (Brasher 2001; Dawson 1998b; O'Leary 1996; Zaleski 1997). This thesis examines one aspect of the religious landscape of cyberspace through an in-depth study of Sai Baba's online presence. The Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba Organization utilizes the Internet as a global stage to disseminate the teachings of its leader. Official Sai websites can be viewed as training grounds for breaking the bonds of *Karma* and achieving salvation.

My travels through the multitude of websites concerning Sai Baba have allowed me to understand one way the Internet can be used as a tool in religious proselytizing. In a new millennium characterized by globalization, the markers that delineate "space" (location and time) have in some instances become obscured. The Internet, and the information highway that

characterizes it, is an example of "space" without tangible limits. The Sai Organization has taken up residence in the realm of cyberspace, allowing Sai Baba to proselytize to a global audience of online subscribers seeking spiritual fulfillment. Through interaction with the online "space" of Sai Baba's organization, an international citizenry encounters an alternative to traditional modes of religious inquiry. Space is defined by the human interactions that take place within it, as well as, with it "by virtue of its relational construction and because, being differentially understood and produced by different individuals, collectivities and societies, it can have no universal essence. What space is depends on who is experiencing it and how" (Tilley 1994:11). Every person who logs-on to Sai Baba's website potentially experiences that "space" in different ways. Differing goals and motivations of those who engage in remote-access spirituality may account for different experiences.

The Internet provides a means for people who have access to experience the spiritual messages of religious leaders such as Sai Baba. Twenty years ago, before the online world became accessible, personal contact and books were the main vehicles for learning about the world's various religious belief systems. Now, as a result of globalization and technological innovation, the privileged minority of the global population who have Internet access can utilize search engines to traverse the religious landscapes of the World Wide Web. Access to a multitude of spiritual possibilities has never been easier: "whenever time for the contemplative arises, online religion is there. All it takes is a momentary visit to cyberspace, the unexpectedly novel terrain of human spirituality" (Brasher 2001:5). People who log-on to religious websites are embracing the world of sacred globalization. While the Internet is changing the ways religious messages are transmitted, religion is also affecting the Internet. With international citizens utilizing the web for spiritual direction, religious websites are being sacralized.

In the twenty-first century culture of becoming digitally connected with others around the world, advancements in technology fuel global economies. Approximately seventeen percent of the world population uses the Internet and sixty-nine percent of North Americans are on-line (internet source #88). In the U.S. it is almost unheard of for upper middle class teenagers not to have both a cell phone (internet source #80), and Internet access (internet source #81; #82). I was surprised to hear that the girls' school I attended implemented a program to give all students from the sixth through twelfth grade their own laptops (internet source #83).

Wireless connection with broadband speed is available for purchase at most cellular companies, and Internet cafes in America are getting as familiar of a sight as McDonalds and Walgreens. As more time is spent in cyberspace it is only natural that online subscribers have found a means to satisfy their psychological need for spiritual fulfillment in this virtual realm. Due to digital interconnection, "our conceptions of spirituality and of community are undergoing profound and permanent transformations in the era of computer-mediated communication" (O'Leary 1996:782).

Sai Baba's religious movement has staked out its place within the religious landscapes of cyberspace, embracing a sacred form of globalization. Numerous scholarly articles and books have been written on the relationship between religion and globalization (Beckford 2000; Beyer 1994, 1998; Dawson 1998b; Holton 2000; Robertson 1985a, 1985b, 1989; Robertson and Chirico 1985). The secular world of globalization has explicit implications for religion:

> "the rapid escalation of the level, scope, and intensity of communications among nation states, corporations, non-governmental organizations, and organizations in the arts, sports, education, and religion in the latter half of the twentieth century made people feel that the world is a smaller place. The experience of the world as a smaller place has also given urgency to the need to identify 'humanity' as a property shared by all the increasingly inter-dependent global actors. Religions provide many of the symbols of common humanity and are therefore implicated in globalization. But they are also vehicles of particularistic ideas about humanity, so they appropriate and filter the experience of globalization in 'local' terms. In

short, religions can mediate between the global and the local" (Beckford 2000:490).

The Sathya Sai Baba Organization has utilized a religious belief system to interconnect devotees from all parts of the world. Many dedicated followers make pilgrimages to Sai Baba's *ashram* in Southern India (Figure 4), attend religious retreats in major cities, and network with other devotees in the planning of community service projects.

Figure 4. Sai Baba walks among this culturally diverse group of devotees

Before I lost contact with my consultant he invited me to a retreat near Houston, Texas. He explained that at least once a year, devotees from the South Central Region of the United States (or Region X as it is referred to by the Sai organization) gather to share their devotion to Sai Baba. While Louisiana, Arkansas, Oklahoma and Texas are included in Region X (Figure 5), he explained that the retreats were almost always held near Houston. He claimed that in Houston there were three Sai Centers that each had a membership of approximately 250 devotees. I was excited about the prospect of attending this event, but became a little worried after I heard that

the retreat would take place in the middle of the woods. Dr. Mary Jill Brody (my advisor) suggested that I ask more questions regarding the circumstances surrounding the retreat, including if it would be okay if I brought a cellular phone. When I asked my consultant these questions, he abruptly told me that no cell phones were allowed, and when I asked about the exact location of the retreat site, he explained that I shouldn't worry about that because I would be riding there in a van with other devotees. I thought this to be strange, and I couldn't help recalling the numerous websites that call into question the mysterious deaths that plague the organization (see Chapter 8). I decided not to attend and instead to focus on how the organization connects its followers in cyberspace.

Figure 5. Child devotees from Region X of the United States at Sai Baba's ashram

The Sathya Sai Baba Organization is profiting from mastering the spiritual realm of the Internet. Profits accrue not only in terms of rapidly expanding membership, but also in regard to their bank account. As I mentioned earlier, the Sai organization is worth billions of dollars

(internet source #66; #69; #79). Sai Baba's financial empire (Figure 6) was built upon monetary donations from global adherents. The organization has, along with their poor to middle class devotees, a number of extremely rich members as well (internet source #78; #84). Isaac Tigrett, founder and owner of The Hard Rock Hotel, Casino, and Café chains, former Princess Fergie (Duchess of York), and actors Kurt Russel, Steven Segal and Goldie Hahn are some of the wealthy and well-known followers of Sai Baba. High-ranking Indian government officials, including past Prime Ministers, cabinet members, governors and political leaders, have supported the organization openly (internet source #63). In July of 2006, Alaya Rahm filed a civil lawsuit against the Sathya Sai Society of America (internet source #62). The suit was later dropped and a statement released by the Rahm family explained, "it seems impossible to approach Sai Baba legally from abroad - not to mention the obstacles to bringing him to justice within India itself, where Supreme and High Court judges are his devotees" (internet source #62).

Figure 6. Lavish extravagance characterizes Sai Administration Building

While Sai Baba embarks on his self-proclaimed Mission of Love, he is amassing a fortune, and using the Internet to advertise his message. In a digital-friendly culture, religious organizations are adapting to globalization. According to Wilson,

> "new religious movements are more accurately regarded as adaptations of religion to new social circumstances. In their style and in their specific appeal they represent an accommodation to new conditions, and they incorporate many of the assumptions and facilities encouraged in the increasingly rationalized secular sphere. Thus it is that many new movements are themselves testimonies to secularization: they often utilize highly secular methods of evangelism, financing, publicity and mobilization of adherents" (Wilson 1988:965).

It is significant to note that while technology provides new arenas for proselytization, technology itself is affected by this novel relationship. I would argue that the partnership between the sacred and the process of globalization is in effect "humanizing" technology, because engaging technology in pursuit of religious fulfillment allows the technological invention to attain a "real" status, which involves attaching human emotional characteristics to man-made devices. According to Jones,

> "our current relationship to cyberspace is analogous to our primary ancestors' relationship with language and with their world at the time when their cultures were still isolated. It is as though cyberspace provides a dream-like, almost hallucinatory configuration of our perception, becoming a screen for the projection of our spiritual desires and interests" (Jones 2000:127).

The virtual world of activity comes "alive" as humans enter into it and engage with it in practice. As a forum for spiritual activity, a new domain opens up to both faithful pursuit and scientific inquiry. Social Scientists can log-on to empirical data. Cyberspace becomes the field site and neither time nor space (Holton 2000) limits potential consultants. The breakdown of geographical distance may "'plunge us back into the armchair' by affording such rich data set in addition to personal field notes, including remotely accessed data channels, permitting new forms of interactive fieldwork off-site" (Houtman and Zeitlyn 1996:2).

As I was engaged in research I became excited by the possibilities afforded by this method of socio-cultural inquiry. I knew that I had embarked on a new path of qualitative research, one that had only been traveled by a relatively small number of anthropologists. Joining this group of social scientists meant opening up to the notion that, "science and technology are crucial arenas for the creation of culture in today's world" (Escobar 1994:211). Escobar provides guidelines for anthropologists engaged in conducting research in this new domain of inquiry: "the proper task for an anthropology of science and technology is to examine ethnographically how technology serves as agent of social and cultural production" (Escobar 1994:216).

Using the Internet as my primary research tool, I was able to conduct an in-depth case study on the activities of one religious group in cyberspace. Through examining the use of cyberspace as sacred space, I began to understand how the World Wide Web could be a powerful source in cultural production, and to understand how a social group can use "Internet technologies to build and reproduce member's ideologies" (Markham 1997:95). Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba and his organization employ the World Wide Web both to build a global community of devoted followers and to transmit Sai Baba's ideology of divine liberation.

Figure 7. Example of an image of Sai Baba found on the World Wide Web

In the case of the Sathya Sai Baba Organization, advancements in information technology paved the way for the social construction of a religious cyberculture. The numerous websites and e-mail addresses that connect a global network of Sai Centers and dedicated participants make up this particular cyberculture. As a researcher, I had access to a database of written text, images (Figure 7), and music, produced by people from around the world. In reference to the advantages of using the Internet in field research, Schwimmer remarks that it can "better capture the multilevel referencing and interrelatedness of complex symbolic and behavioral systems. Accordingly, postmodernists might more easily realize their objectives of articulating numerous voices and perspectives without the restraints of linear exposition" (Schwimmer 1996:561).

The Internet has the potential to forever change how we as social scientists engage in data collection and subsequent cultural documentation (Markham 1997). Websites become field sites as qualitative researchers log-on to this social space where cybercultures, such as the one I have studied, exchange written, visual and auditory text across both national and sociological borders. These three types of text can serve as a replacement for what Markham terms the "knowing-subject." According to Markham, "as a communication medium, a global network of connection, and a scene of social construction, the Internet provides new tools for conducting research, new venues for social research, and new means for understanding the way social realities get constructed and reproduced through discursive behaviors" (Markham 1997:95).

Over the course of my fieldwork I experienced the advantages of conducting research in the virtual realm. However, there is a down side to logging-on to potential data. The aim of every anthropologist is to understand the society/culture in question. We want to be right in our assessments, providing correct information that documents the true nature of what is being studied. Uncovering the truth is what we hope to achieve on our journey of inquiry. But how does one accomplish this in the intangible virtual world of cyberspace? This is a question that I

grappled with on numerous occassions. I understood that the data I was collecting from official

Sai websites was manufactured by the organization and therefore, could be propaganda. How

could I ever be sure that what I was encountering on the Internet was an accurate portrayal of the

religious movement? Excluding telephone conversations with my consultant, all text, images,

and audio that together served as my "knowing-subject" could not be evaluated in the traditional

sense. I was faced with the dilemma of how to evaluate online material.

My answer to this problem led me to spend hundreds of hours scouring the World Wide

Web for information about Sai Baba. I used information from multiple official/unofficial

websites in the same way I would have used data collected from interviews with consultants. The

Internet provides online subscribers a forum to share experiences. I viewed hundreds of websites

dedicated to either praising or villifying Sai Baba. Reading narratives of both devotees and ex-

followers was not the same as interviewing them and observing their body language and facial

expressions. I realized that there was no way for me to legitimize what was being communicated

on the Internet. However, what I was searching for was not whether Sai Baba is who he

professes to be, nor was I attempting to establish the credibility of the movement. What I set out

to understand and correctly relay was how the Internet is being used as a tool for religious

proselytizing.

"Official" Sai websites run by the organization allowed me to access the ways in which

the movement portrayed itself to online subscribers. WebPages produced by ex-devotees

illustrated how the very forum that Sai Baba utilized as marketing space could also be used to

expose him as a fraud. Researchers conducting fieldwork in cyberspace depend upon controlled

resources. However, once one has come to terms with the limits of online research there is much

to be gained from this 21st century method of scientific inquiry.

Chapter 4

Tradition and the Making of a New Hegemony: Revitalization and Global Transcendence

Hinduism is a constantly evolving system of faith and worship. Interaction amongst Hindus of differing belief and practice, as well as relationships engaged between Hindu nationals and "others" keeps the religious tradition in a state of constant evolution. In the contemporary world of globalization, the intrusion of "others" has never been greater. Technological innovation allows Western ideas of equality and freedom to permeate India's political and spiritual borders. As a result of Western intrusion, many Hindus find themselves alienated from the practices, values, and identities that their religion prescribes for them. Traditional Indian Hinduism, which promotes social inequality through distinctions of caste and class, is being challenged, and the need for a new belief system capable of restoring order and meaning has arisen (Falk 2006; Hefner 1998).

The Sathya Sai Baba Organization is attempting to restructure the Hindu tradition, defining a new hegemony for global consumption. Other such spiritual movements that are fueling a Hindu revival by laying the foundations for a new hegemony include: the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (internet source #2); the Chinmaya International Foundation (internet source #3); the Divine Life Society (internet source #4); the Sri Aurobindo Society (internet source #5); the Brahma Kumari World Spiritual Organization (internet source #6); the Ma Anandamayi Organization (internet source #7); and the Mata Amritananandamayi Organization (internet source #8). Falk suggests that these new spiritual movements are attractive to a growing number of modern Hindus seeking religious fulfillment in an era of

uncertainty (Falk 2006). Along with the Sathya Sai Baba Organization, these movements engage in global networking via Internet websites.

The underlying philosophy of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba has international appeal that works to stimulate its proliferation and gain followers of this holy man's path to liberation. Nevertheless, adoration of the self-professed incarnation of God is nowhere as great as it is in India. During the last century, there has been a renaissance of the Hindu tradition within India. Anthropologist Agehananda Bharati, a respected Sanskritist and pioneer in the field of Tantric Studies, describes the Hindu Renaissance as a revival (1970). Smelser offers a concise definition of "revival" that is applicable to the situation in India: "a revival as we use the term involves an enthusiastic redefinition of religious methods, but not a challenge to basic religious values" (Smelser 1963:49). The Sathya Sai Baba Organization is an ashram-based movement that is revivalist in nature. An *ashram*, also spelled asram, is a religious retreat center where people practice spiritual discipline (Falk 2006). While the Sai Organization teaches classic Hindu beliefs and values, it also restructures traditional religious practice in a way that has an impact on numerous socio-cultural issues. Bharati characterizes the Indian Renaissance as a revival of two active agents, *sadhus* (religious renouncers) and politicians. The title *Swami*, or "Lord," is given to such charismatic religious leaders as Sai Baba and Vivekananda, founder of the Ramakrishna Mission (internet source #87). Bharati calls these two leaders asramites, in reference to the large *ashrams* that serve as the organizations' religious centers. He explains that while asramites vary in terms of their place within the religious hierarchy, they are all part of a larger category of *sadhus*. Bharati explains how the *sadhus* are fueling the renaissance: "we can arrange the asramites and their lay and monastic retinue on a scale of ascending sophistication; but when the sadhus are viewed as a total category, they certainly represent the most powerful bloc of agents of the Hindu Renaissance" (Bharati 1970:278). Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba and his ashram

based organization form part of this Hindu revival that is redefining modern India's religious ideology.

As previously mentioned, members of the global network of Sai Centers hold weekly devotional activities for followers, incorporating meditation, study circles, devotional singing (*bhajans*) and prayer. Sai Baba explains the importance of singing *bhajans* to achieving enlightenment of mind and soul while speaking to his devotees in a sermon entitled "*Bhajans and Bliss*." He details how *bhajans* should be sung with true feeling (internet source #9).

Figure 8. United Kingdom devotees singing bhajans

The singing of *bhajans* (Figure 8) is part of the Hindu tradition, however Sai Baba modifies this tradition in practice, in accordance with his belief that both men and women should participate in devotional singing. In the past, *bhajans* were led and sung by men only. Sai Baba challenges traditional practice: "when singing the divine name, why should they (men and women) not sing in unison? What is the reason for this separatism? This should be given up"

(internet source #9). The women of the Sathya Sai Baba Organization also break with older tradition when they chant ancient Vedic prayers in Sanskrit and join with men as they study Sanskrit philosophy during the time allotted for study circle. Sai Baba believes that both men and women have equal ability to achieve salvation. In the end, we are all one, with no separation or division between the sexes. My consultant, on several occasions, spoke about the equality within the organization. He explained that Sai Baba sees no distinction between his male and female devotees and professes to love all equally.

The revitalization of the Hindu tradition is being played out on a global stage, thanks to the power of mass media to transcend international borders. The numerous Sai websites provide followers around the world the opportunity to learn about and embrace the ancient scriptures of Hinduism. Sai Baba bases his teachings on the *Vedas*, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, and the *Upanishads*. Sai Baba's incorporation of ancient scriptures for the foundation of his organization follows the principles of the Hindu revival outlined by Bharati (1970). According to Bharati, "the oratory of the Indian Renaissance is not challenged because its contents are revered, ancient, and profound by ascription" (Bharati 1970:268).

The Sai organization guides devotees into a spiritual world defined by traditional sacred Hindu literature, such as the *Vedas*. The oral traditions of the ancient Hindus were preserved when the *Vedas* were written in 1200 B.C.E. The *Vedas* are the sacred scriptures of the Hindus. They are the oldest part of *shruti*, the sacred writings based on what the original Hindu authors "heard" in revelation (Matthews 1999). As revealed knowledge, *Vedas* are sacred. They are divided into four collections: the *Rig-Veda*, the *Sama-Veda*, the *Yajur-Veda*, and the *Arthava-Veda*. Sai Baba upholds the lessons taught in the *Vedas*, and comments on their timelessness:

> "the Vedas are the recordings of sages to whom the mantras were revealed. They proclaim the transcendental Truth, which is not changed by time and place. The Veda teaches how to achieve purity of heart, getting rid of impurities. The Vedas

have emphasized that man will be truly human only when he lives up to human values and practices the good life" (internet source #10).

The Sathya Sai Baba Organization is henotheistic, a term that refers to belief that affirms one deity without denying the existence of others (Matthews 1999). According to this notion, one deity is supreme over other deities. Sai Baba teaches that while there is a pantheon of gods, there is an overriding Absolute, referred to as *Brahman* (the highest deity). Sai Baba, following Hindu tradition, believes that the essence of *Brahman* is present in every individual, and this universal self is termed *Atman*. Reincarnation, or the cycle of rebirth (*samsara*), is the plight of humans until their souls reach perfection. As tradition has it, *moksha*, or release from the cycle of rebirth, can only be obtained when *Brahman* and *Atman* become one. A person has to break the bondage that continues the cycles of rebirth by separating his/her soul from *karma*. When one achieves this separation, one realizes the Ultimate Reality of *moksha* and embraces the knowledge that they, too, are the Ultimate Truth. Sai Baba's philosophy emphasizes the idea that once a person's inner divinity is awakened he/she may become one with God and with all of existence, realizing that they were always at one with God, which they formerly could not realize due to karmic bondage and illusions.

The Sai Baba Organization also teaches its members to serve the society in which they live. In this pursuit, Sai Baba lays out *Ten Guiding Principles* his followers should abide by: 1) show love for your native country/don't talk bad about other countries; 2) be tolerant of all world religions and spiritual practices; 3) treat all of mankind as you would your own family; 4) clean your house regularly; 5) engage in selfless service to humanity; 6) live honestly; 7) don't be a jealous, hateful, or envious person; 8) become more self-sufficient and reliable; 9) be a good and active citizen; 10) love God and don't commit sin (internet source #11). These principles

(excluding number four) outline what Sai Baba believes to be the human values that the *Vedas* emphasize.

Sai Baba's devotees study the *Vedas*, and also chant ancient Vedic *mantras* as part of their devotional activities (Figure 9). One of these mantras is the *Gayatri Mantra*, first recorded in the *Rig-Veda* circa 1200 B.C.E. The word *Gayatri* is actually made up of two Sanskrit words, *gayanath* (what is sung, giving of praise) and *trayate* (gives deliverance, grants liberation). Many texts have defined the word "*mantra*" as a prayer of praise, so the title of this prayer can be translated as a prayer of praise that gives liberation. The *Gayatri Mantra* is the essence of the *Vedas* and has been referred to as the "mother of the Vedas," or the "mother of knowledge" (Panikkar 1977). According to Hindu tradition, speaking or chanting this mantra causes one's mind to be illuminated. Sai Baba teaches that knowledge is the vehicle for attaining salvation from the cycle of rebirths. A seeker must come to the realization that God is part of all of us and we are all part of the One God who is the Ultimate Reality.

Figure 9. Sai Baba sits amongst his Hindu devotees after prayer

The Sathya Sai Baba Organization also emphasizes the lessons of the *Bhagavad-Gita*, which constitutes part of the *Mahabharata*, the epic Sanskrit history of the ancient Hindu world. The Sai organization venerates the Gita in such a way that devotees regard it as equal in spiritual weight to the *Vedas*. However, it is important to remember that there is a distinction between these two writings. Bharati (1970) interprets the redefinition and recategorization of texts in this era of the Hindu Renaissance. Referring to the Gita's Renaissance status, Bharati states,

> "it is not canonical like the Vedas or the Upanishads; it is smriti, belonging to a category of texts the acceptance of which is not incumbent on the Hindu. The leaders of the Renaissance have blurred this distinction. Most modern Hindus, unless they happen to be Sanskritists, assume that the Gita is a canonical text" (Bharati 1970:274).

Sai devotees use the *Bhagavad-Gita* as a learning tool, or rather a blueprint for salvation. Sai Baba follows a major theme of the Gita, and teaches that a person needs to see everything with an "equal eye," because detaching oneself and breaking free from duality is crucial to maintaining one's *dharma* or duty in life. A person must not see duality, meaning they have to look at something good and something bad equally, seeing no difference. In one of his "divine sermons" Sai Baba preaches this idea of equanimity and non-dualism. Sai Baba emphasizes that people must be taught "to face sorrow and joy with equal serenity" (internet source #10).

Sai Baba also teaches his followers lessons of the Gita (Figure 10) when he outlines the belief that in order to achieve salvation one must detach oneself from the fruits of one's actions. This overriding theme of the Gita means that one should not be goal-oriented, but rather should do one's duty without worrying about gain or loss. By detaching oneself, *dharma* can be fulfilled. According to the concept of *dharma*, everything that exists is part of an interdependent whole and everything and everyone has to follow its own inborn *dharma* in order for the world to be in balance and continue (Falk 2006). In a sermon entitled "*Let Everyone Do His Duty*," Sai Baba explains that, "by developing attachment to persons and possessions men create causes of

sorrow. By reducing their attachments and developing love for God, they can reduce their misery and increase their experience" (internet source #12).

Figure 10. Devotees fill the crowded hall to listen to the Divine Message of Sai Baba

The Sathya Sai Baba Organization teaches the idea that one must renounce actions based on desires. In the Gita, *Krishna* talks about being "addicted to the senses," claiming that breaking free from addiction is necessary in order to achieve salvation. In the act of renunciation, one ends addiction to the senses, which allows one to perform inborn *dharma*, break free from the bonds of *karma* and finally realize oneness with God. The Hindu doctrine of *karma* teaches that what one does in this life affects subsequent lives in the cycle of rebirth. This cycle of rebirth, or *samsara*, ends only when a person's soul reaches perfection and becomes one with God. Sai Baba preaches the concept of oneness in his spoken discourses and writings. He follows Hindu

tradition, stating that when a person overcomes *maya*, or illusion, he/she is able to realize that all

is one: we are all part of God and God is part of all of us.

The *Bhagavad-Gita* also plays a role in one of the prayers that members of the

organization recite individually, or as a group. *Brahmaar Panam*, or the prayer of spiritual

awakening said before ingesting food, is taken from the Gita. The prayer is a combination of two

verses from the *Bhagavad-Gita* (Chapter four, verse twenty-four and Chapter fifteen, verse

fourteen). The Sai organization translates its repertoire of prayers and devotional songs into

English for consumption on the World Wide Web; however, their translations tend to be

different from scholarly translations of the same material. The Sai Baba movement's translation

of *Brahmaar Panam* is as follows,

> "the act of offering is Brahman, the offering itself is Brahman, offered by
> Brahman in the Sacred fire which is Brahman. I am Vaishvaanaro, the all-
> pervading cosmic energy lodged in the bodies of living beings. Being united with
> their ongoing and outgoing life-breaths, I consume all the different (four types of)
> food" (internet source #13).

Barbara Stoler Miller's translation of the Gita is useful to illustrate the differences that

can be found between the Sai Baba Organization's translation and other scholarly translations.

Miller is a leading translator of Sanskrit literature, and translates the same verses quite

differently:

> "the infinite spirit is the offering, the oblation it pours into infinite fire, and the
> infinite spirit can be reached by contemplating its infinite action…I am the
> universal fire within the body of living beings; I work with the flow of vital breath
> to digest the foods that men consume" (translation by Miller 1986:56,125).

While these two translations of verses from the Gita differ, the underlying message is

similar. Further investigation into how the translations found on Sai websites differ from non-Sai

translations of the same material would be an interesting research endeavor in discourse analysis.

The Hindu revival that is being fueled by such charismatic leaders as Sai Baba is

employing what Bharati (1970) terms "scientific simile." In an age of technology,

> "the incorporation of gadgetry language is now part of the religious homilectic.
> 'Swamiji is an electric powerhouse,' a Ramakrishna monk said to a rapt elegantly
> dressed audience in New Delhi. 'And the various asrams all over the world are
> like the power substations, or the transformers.' He pointed to a lit-up globe
> indicating the locations of the Ramakrishna Mission Centers" (Bharati 1970:282).

There has been many a time that I too have caught the use of "scientific simile" when

reading the "divine discourses" of Sai Baba on various Sai websites. I believe that this

technological language illustrates the melding of modern and traditional that is found in

contemporary Hindu India. Bharati (1970) highlights another aspect of the Sai organization when

he discusses how the religious leaders of the Hindu Renaissance disseminate their message

throughout the world. According to Bharati (1970), new religious movements distribute

pamphlets throughout India on a massive scale, promoting spiritual leaders and their

organizations.

Sai Baba and the Sai organization have mastered the world of print media. Sai book

centers are located in various cities around the globe. The Sathya Sai Baba Book Center in

Tustin, California supplies American devotees with the *Sri Sathya Sai Newsletter* (a magazine of

recent and previous discourse event's in Sai Baba's career with commentary by western

devotees), *Flowers at His Feet* (a regional quarterly newsletter published by devotees in the

Midwest United States), *Sai Sarathi* (a regional newsletter published by the devotees in the Mid

Atlantic region), and *Sai World* (a newsletter for children and youth). There is also a monthly

newsletter, *Sanathana Sarathi*, which focuses on the activities of Sai Baba's Prasanthi Nilayam

ashram. In addition to these newsletters, Sai Baba has written dozens of books that are also

available for purchase through the book centers. Sai Baba has penned numerous children's books

to teach the next generation. The U.S. Sai website provides lesson plans for followers to carry out with their children in order to foster their youngsters' own spiritual enlightenment.

In additon to claims that Sai Baba illuminates minds, devotees believe that Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba has produced miracles (Babb 1983). While this saintly characteristic of the *Swami* has been refuted (see Chapter 8), his followers swear that he has materialized objects before their eyes. Bharati (1970) discusses how a surgeon from Nairobi and a consultant at the United Nations saw Sai Baba materialize *bhasma* (consecrated sandalwood) in front of them. Dedicated followers consider it a blessing to be in the presence of Sai Baba when he materializes *bhasma* (Figure 11)*, or other objects.

Figure 11. Sai Baba materializes sacred ash

Sai Baba's global network teaches devotees the beliefs that underlie the Hindu tradition and instructs its followers on the philosophies found in Hinduism's most important written

discourses - the *Vedas*, the *Bhagavad-Gita*, and the *Upanishads*. The incorporation of traditional Hindu practices and beliefs highlights how the Sathya Sai Baba Organization is an example of a Hindu revival movement. However, the organization should also be viewed as an ashram-based movement that is attempting to redefine Hinduism. The organization is "spiritual" rather than "religious." The distinction focuses on working to empower individuals by teaching them how to awaken the divinity within through self-realization. Another characteristic of Hindu revivalism is its nonsectarian or secular nature, articulated as a fundamental premise of the Sai organization. The Sathya Sai Baba Organization embraces globalization and the interconnection that it fosters among global adherents. According to Sai Baba, "there is only one Religion, the Religion of Love; there is only one Caste, the Caste of Humanity; there is only one Language, the Language of the Heart; there is only one God, He is Omnipresent" (internet source #14). This rejection of caste and class status is meant to foster unity among Hindus, as well as the hope for a unified global community.
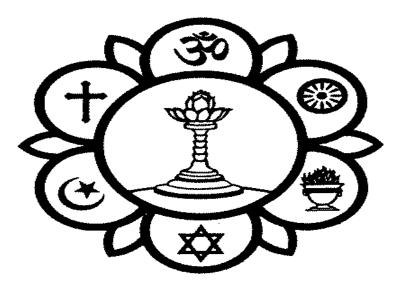

Figure 12. Logo represents unity of world religions

Sai Baba's organization embraces all religions, and Sai preaches that one can still celebrate one's own particular faith, while also being a dedicated follower of his teachings. One of the logos of the Sathya Sai Baba Organization illustrates this universal unitary faith. It consists of an open lotus with six petals and six leaves; each petal holds the symbol of a major world religion: the Hindu Om, the Buddhist Wheel, the Zoroastrian Fire Symbol, the Islamic Crescent and Star, Judaism's Star of David, and the Christian Cross (Figure 12). The tall pillar that stands in the middle of the open lotus flower is a replica of the "*sarva dharma*" pillar that is located near the temple in Sai Baba's main *ashram* (internet source #15). The pillar represents *yoga* or "union with God" (Yogananda 1993). Actively working to incorporate followers from all races, ethnic origins, and religions helps achieve Sai Baba's goal of increasing membership. According to the organization, the number of Sai Baba adherents continues to grow, with the teachings of this holy man being transmitted around the world through global media.

The Sai Organization is known throughout India and other parts of the world in part as a result of its service to mankind. Within the Sai organization, selfless social service is just as crucial to spirituality as devotional singing or meditation. The Sathya Sai Baba Organization is referred to as a "*Seva*" or service organization. Sai Baba examines the merits of service when he explains, "the foremost activity man should engage in, is service to fellow human beings. We must realize the truth that God has given us this body for serving others. There is nothing greater than service to humanity. Service to Man is service to God" (internet source #16). The Law of Karma holds that a person who performs good deeds in this lifetime will be rewarded in future rebirths. According to this notion, engaging in selfless service to humanity is a worthwhile pursuit on the path toward salvation. Members of the network of global Sai Centers take part in service to the needy in their own local areas. Whether it is providing food to the homeless or establishing free clinics and neighborhood children's programs, the Sai organization teaches its

devotees to engage in selfless service. Near Prasanthi Nilayam, Sai Baba's *ashram* (Figure 13)

known as "The Abode of Peace," the Sai organization built a free hospital open to anyone in

need of medical attention. On the U.S. Sai website, the organization lays out a seventeen-page

Guide to Service in American Sathya Sai Baba Centers. The four chapters of the guide addresses

everything from what one's attitude should be when engaging in service, to steps in organizing

and carrying out service projects are discussed. A person's attitude is important because *karma* is

not just based on performing good deeds. Right intention is paramount and if a person is

engaging in service to humanity for selfish reasons their deeds will not be rewarded. This notion

of right intention follows the noble eight-fold path found in the Buddhist tradition,

interdependent principles that those seeking salvation should develop: right view, right aim, right

speech, right action, right living, right effort, right mindfulness and right concentration

(Matthews 1999).

Figure 13. Prasanthi Nilayam, Sai Baba's ashram in Puttaparthi, India

This path of spiritual devotion that celebrates the worth of every human being is a powerful force that is transforming Hinduism by establishing a new hegemony that can be embraced universally. According to Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci and his "Theory of Subordination and Hegemony," cultural hegemony can work to subordinate individuals or groups of individuals (Gramsci 1971). But hegemonic values can be opposed and over time be changed, to be replaced by such as the one that is concurrently evolving both in India and amongst an international citizenry that forms connections through communication technology. According to Dwight Billings in an article entitled, *Religion as Opposition: A Gramscian Analysis*, "religion provides diverse resources for oppositional struggles" (Billings 1990:4). Although the Sathya Sai Baba Organization does not involve itself overtly in politics, the teachings of the movement comprise a worldview that is in opposition to subordination and prejudice. Lofland and Stark, best known for their Step Model of Conversion, illustrate this principle:

> "for people living a culture of religiosity, it is less a matter of their using religion to achieve secular ends than of their becoming able to see through their religious culture toward political goals in such a fashion that their religious discourse and practices become oppositional" (Lofland and Stark 1965:864).

Applying this formula to the Sathya Sai Baba Organization allows one to examine how the tenets of this spiritual movement reject both class and caste inequality. The way that the Sathya Sai Baba Organization uses the internet to disseminate the teachings of this South Indian guru should be viewed as an example of how new religious movements are embracing cyberspace and defining the 21st century notion of sacred globalization.

Chapter 5

Salvation through Love: The Path of Devotion

"Worship should be offered to the divine who resides in all beings. Love is God: live in love. Love is the means of realizing the bliss of the Self, which is centered in ourselves. It need not be sought elsewhere. It can be found within one's self when all thoughts are controlled and the mind is turned inwards. Dedicate all actions to the Lord. This is the highest knowledge. It is the summum bonum of existence. Love should become a way of life. That alone is true devotion" (Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba, internet source #17).

Spiritual devotion has found a new forum in cyberspace, one that redefines the borders of sacred space and allows for global consumption. The Sathya Sai Baba Organization utilizes this technosocial forum to instruct international devotees on a righteous path of devotion that ensures salvation. The teachings of this religious movement are laid out for online subscribers in structured and intelligible form. With a click of a mouse potential followers gain access to Sai Baba's understanding of devotion through text, pictorial images, and music.

Before discussing Sai Baba's approach to the path of devotion, it is important to reiterate that Sai Baba believes that he is God living on earth in human form. Therefore, when espousing his beliefs concerning complete devotion to God, he is directing his disciples to devote themselves wholly to Sai Baba. The path of devotion that Sai Baba defines as a path of love translates into unconditional love for himself as self-proclaimed *avatar*. Addressing devotees in the Poornachandra Auditorium on August 10th 1986, Sai Baba stresses,

"among all forms of *sadhana*, *bhakti* (devotion to the Lord) is the easiest and holiest. Bhakti calls for utilizing the mind, speech and body to worship the Lord. It represents total love. Devotion and love are inseparable and interdependent.

Bhakti is the means to salvation. Love is the expression of bhakti" (internet source # 17; *italics mine*).

Sai Baba teaches his followers that by nature humans are divine, and realization of one's own inner divinity will lead to liberation of the soul. By embarking on the path of devotion, followers open up the possibility for pure love in their hearts. As love flows from the heart and soul they become one with God and achieve salvation.

Figure 14. Sai Baba delivers a Divine Discourse

The Sathya Sai Baba Organization has its roots in the Hindu tradition and the path of spiritual discipline was first laid out in the *Bhagavad-Gita* as Lord *Krishna* counciled *Arjuna* on deliverance. Written in the fourth century B.C.E., the sacred dialogue established three ways of salvation that breaks the bonds of *karma*, ends *samsara* (the wheel of rebirth) and allows for *moksha* (the release of the soul from a cycle of rebirths) to be achieved. The first avenue to achieving salvation is *Karma-yoga*, the Way of Works. This method involves performing rituals and maintaining their prescribed religious obligations. Within the Sai Organization an example of how devotees fulfill this duty can be seen in their engagement in devotional activities such as the chanting of ancient Vedic prayers that can be downloaded off the internet in Mp3 format.

The second avenue for achieving salvation is *Jnana-yoga*, the Way of Knowledge. Knowledge is crucial to spiritual devotion:

> "the ignorant soul, not knowing its nature, thinks that the self is identified with the world rather than with the universal soul. Salvation lies in a person's recognizing that his or her identity is grounded not in the world but in Brahman-Atman. In this realization lies homecoming for the soul, the release from rebirth" (Matthews 1999:100).

According to the organization, by reading Sai Baba's "divine discourses," (Figure 14) devotees can acquire the requisite knowledge to achieve this path to salvation. It is his faithful follower's belief that Sai Baba's godly insight breaks the shackles of illusion that perpetuate karmic bondage. The organization's numerous websites are overflowing with literally thousands of pages of Sai Baba's written and spoken word.

Raja-yoga, the Way of Physical Discipline, is the third avenue for achieving Salvation. Although it is not part of the Gītā's three paths to salvation, this path of spiritual discipline has been linked with the *Yoga Sutra* and involves training the mind and body (Matthews 1999). By detaching oneself from the world through breathing techniques and maintaining certain postures, practitioners can extinguish "all consciousness of the world" (Matthews 1999:102). The followers of Sai Baba can download simple techniques that teach how to correctly engage in meditation, as well as, vocal exercises that are said to allow one to relax and transcend the earthly realm.

The fourth avenue to achieving salvation is *Bhakti-yoga*, the way of Devotion. It is this path of devotion, first outlined in the Gita, which Sai Baba believes, is the most righteous path to ultimate liberation. Sai Baba explains,

> "true devotion really means installing the divine in the heart and enjoying the bliss of that experience. It is the mystic union of the individual soul and the Universal. When the devotee prays ardently from the depths of the heart and his love gushes forth, Bhakti is manifested. Winning love through love is the vital

aspect of devotion. The basic quality of devotion is the yearning for realizing oneness with the divine" (internet source #17).

Figure 15. Devotees show complete devotion to Sai Baba at celebration

Sai websites outline two kinds of devotion: the first deals solely with the individual and is characterized by that individual's transformation and spiritual merge with the Divine. The second form of devotion encompasses the individual and the wider community (Figure 15). After the devotee has become enlightened, he/she should proceed to communicate his/her experience with others in society. According to Sai Baba, "such a devotee not only saves himself but helps others to save themselves" (internet source #17). Sai Baba and his organization have taken the role of the Internet in spreading this path of devotion very seriously. I say this because these ideas of devotion through love are succinctly espoused in a multitude of different ways on numerous official websites. After examining the various Sai websites, listening to Sai Baba's discourses from mp3 recordings, and reading his numerous publications, I believe that this path

of spiritual discipline that Sai Baba refers to as "the Path of Love" is the overarching theme of this religious organization.

In *Sathya Sai Baba Speaks* Volume nineteen, Sai Baba lays out nine ways of expressing devotion to the one God. These nine methods are as follows:

> "*Sravanam* (listening to God's glories); *Keerthanam* (singing the glories of God); *Vishnusmaranam* (ever remembering the Lord); *Paadasevanam* (worshipping the Lord's feet); *Archanam* (offering daily worship); *Vandanam* (prostration); *Daasyam* (dedicated service); *Sneham* (friendliness); and *Atmanivedanam* (total surrender)" (internet source #17; italics mine).

Devotees from around the world implement these nine ways of devotion outlined on the Sai organization's website where very large excerpts of the *Sathya Sai Baba Speaks* series can be downloaded free of charge. While Sai Baba encourages attending informal weekly devotional activities at local Sai Centers, it is not necessary to do so, as the teachings one needs to be a faithful devotee are available on the World Wide Web. My consultant explained to me during several telephone conversations that while he did not have the financial ability to travel often to Sai Baba's main *ashram* in India, he still had access to all the teachings necessary to achieve liberation because of the vast array of Sai publications.

While the beliefs of this organization are steeped in the ancient Hindu tradition, this religious movement should be viewed as an alternative to established world religions. Disenchanted members of established religion are more and more turning to new religious movements, such as this one, that embrace modernization (Falk 2006). Contemporary movements that are more spiritual than religious in nature are embracing new vehicles for the dissemination of sacred beliefs and values (Falk 2006; Zaleski 1997). The Internet is one of these vehicles, and the Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba Organization is an example of a growing religious movement that is implementing this 21st century mode of sacred globalization.

Figure 16. Bhaktas professing their devotion to Sai Baba

While the idea of complete devotion to God was formed in Hinduism centuries earlier,

the God-centered movements that followed did not gain popularity and spread within Hinduism

until after the sixth century C.E. (Falk 2006). Two of these God-centered movements are

characterized by their devotion to Lord *Shiva* (the *Nayanars*) and to Lord *Vishnu* (the *Alvars*).

The path of devotion has its roots in the *Rig-Veda*, the *Upanishads*, the *Puranas* and the

Ramayana (Matthews 1999). Today, the tradition endures and its bhaktas (Figure 16) are

prevalent in India and abroad. The term *bhakta* is translated as devotee. Falk states that bhaktas,

> "all share the trait of having an intense personal relationship with some deity
> whom they call their source and savior and who will one day end their pain. Most
> celebrate that deity in poetry and song in languages spoken by ordinary people.
> Many are ordinary people themselves, with spouses, children, and jobs" (Falk
> 2006:63).

Falk's description of a *bhakta*, or devotee, definitely fits my consultant, with whom I

spoke on numerous occasions at the outset of my research. He sounded like a typical American

Law student enjoying his time in the city of New Orleans. When he spoke of Sai Baba, however,

his reverence for this holy man and strong belief in his religious movement was evident in the tone of his voice. I became convinced after hours of conversation that he was a true believer in Sai Baba as an incarnation of God. I heard no cynicism or doubt, just pure devotion. He quoted Sai Baba's "divine discourses" with respect because, to him, Sai Baba's words were revelation. He was very anxious to teach me the objectives of the organization, and told me all about the information that was available on the Internet. It was clear that my consultant wanted to be the one to aid me in the learning process, and was hopeful about my future involvement in the movement. I felt as if he was trying to proselytize me, and in retrospect his attitude makes sense, because Sai Baba preaches that a true devotee transforms himself and then helps others achieve transformation. For my consultant, I was potentially that "other."

My consultant mentioned several times during our conversations that Sai Baba taught his devotees to put a "ceiling" on their desires. When I asked just what this entailed, he briefly explained and directed me to a subsection on the main International Sai Organization website (http://www.sathyasai.org) that goes into greater detail on this subject. The discussion of "Ceiling on Desires" on the organization's website states that

> "man is deluded by his unlimited desires. He is living in a dream world. He is forgetting the Supreme Consciousness. That is why it is important to keep our desires under control, to place a ceiling on them. Curtail your desires as materialistic desire's lead to a restless and disastrous life. Desires are a prison. Man can be freed only by limiting his wants. You should have desire only for life's bare necessities" (internet source #18).

The website goes on to explain how devotees can limit their desires according to Sai Baba. To reduce desires, followers must learn not to waste and/or misuse what they already have. Tangible things such as food, water, and money should not be desired in excess, but rather limited to just what is needed to survive. Devotees are expected to put their money to good use in service to humanity. Tangible resources, such as time and physical/mental/spiritual energy,

should also never be misused or wasted. Sai Baba reveals the four areas in which a devotee's energy should be conserved: "see no evil-see what is good. Speak no evil-speak what is good. Think no evil-think what is good. Do no evil-do what is good. This is the way to God" (internet source #19).

Sai Baba instructs devotees on *Ten Guiding Principles* (see Chapter 4) and a *Nine Point Code of Conduct*. These two sets of principles of conduct are meant to foster the spiritual development of Sai devotees. According to the International Sai website, the *Nine Point Code of Conduct* is as follows:

> "(1) daily meditation and prayer, (2) group devotional singing or prayer with family members once a week, (3) participation in Sai Spiritual Education by children of the family, (4) participation in community service work, (5) regular attendance at the devotional meetings in Sai Centers (does not apply if there is no local Sai Center in devotees community), (6) regular study of Sathya Sai Baba literature, (7) the use of soft loving speech with everyone, (8) not speaking ill of others, especially in their absence, and (9) practice placing a ceiling on desires - and utilizing savings for service to mankind" (internet source #85).

When speaking to my consultant about this *Nine Point Code of Conduct*, I remarked that there was not much difference between the Sai organizations code of conduct and the traditional "things you should do" as a member of Christian sects such as the Catholic Church. He laughed and quickly reminded me that all religions are one in the eyes of Sai Baba, and devotees will find that Sai's teachings can be a complement to any of the world's religious faiths. One does not have to leave his/her religion to be a faithful Sai devotee (Figure 17). It is possible and even encouraged to remain a practitioner of your chosen faith, while also incorporating the teachings and beliefs of Sai Baba in one's religious repertoire.

The path of devotion that the Sathya Sai Baba Organization teaches potential devotees who log-on to its websites is in tune with modern society (Falk 2006). *Bhakti-yoga*, or bhakti as it is referred to by Sai Baba, is seen by many religious scholars to be "the easiest and best path of

spiritual discipline for the present degenerate age" (Falk 2006:232). Followers can worship and engage in devotion to Sai Baba as a charismatic "god-man" from the privacy of their own homes. Tradition holds that Hindu homes are holy, incorporating a temple within their walls. Under a family's roof or outside, daily *puja*, or worship, takes place and *dharma* (duty) is fulfilled. With Sai Baba's message being transmitted around the world via the Internet, devotees of all ethnic identities and religious backgrounds have the opportunity to make their home a sacred space.

Figure 17. Muslims pray at Sai Baba's ashram

The World Wide Web has also been transformed as a vehicle for sacred messages, beaming information about the beliefs, customs, values and religious practices of Sai Baba into the homes of millions. In the context of discussing how devotional movements allow for easy access by the masses, Falk states, "it [salvation] could be gained by singing and prayer within one's own home. People aspiring to salvation no longer had to go to the woods and spend half their life in meditation" (Falk 2006:86). This religious movement illustrates how dedicated

followers can utilize elements of globalization to achieve spiritual ends. The 21st century, through technological innovation and the desire for global interconnection, has brought about a new means for spiritual devotion and religious practice. The information highway that links the international citizenry has fostered the evolution of a new socio-cultural manifestation, one that urges social scientists to rethink religion and ponder what this era of globalization means for the future of spirituality.

Chapter 6

Transcribing Sai Baba: Mantras, Bhajans, and Vedic Chants

Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba teaches his followers that part of maintaining a righteous path of devotion entails devotional singing and the chanting of ancient Vedic prayers in order to achieve liberation from karmic bondage. In this chapter I examine four prayers that are performed by devotees around the world. Whether sung in unison at Sai Centers during weekly devotional activities or chanted individually in the privacy of devotees' own home, Sai Baba teaches that this form of devotion plays a crucial part in achieving ultimate salvation and enlightenment. During research I noticed that significant portions of official Sai websites were dedicated to *mantras*, *bhajans*, and Vedic chants. In telephone conversations my consultant spoke of singing devotional songs and engaging in prayer as a means of achieving spiritual fulfillment. As a result of the importance the organization places on this form of worship, I chose to include analysis of four prayers in my research findings. The analysis will shed light on one of the ways Sai devotees vocalize their devotion. Each prayer is transcribed in a way that conveys the actual performance of the prayer as it is recited by Sai Baba followers, along with general translations and pertinent information necessary for understanding the prayers.

Each Sai Center holds devotional activities for its members, including meditation, study circle, devotional singing, and prayer. After devotional singing, various prayers are recited in unison by devotees (Figure 18). However, if one cannot attend the weekly meetings or lives in a location that is lacking a Sai Center, the Internet can provide a virtual alternative. The various Sai organization websites are filled with mp3 recordings of *bhajans* and *mantras* chanted by Sai Baba and his faithful devotees. Logging-on to Sai Baba, followers can learn chants in English,

Sanskrit or Hindi. There are also songbooks available in various languages, including French and German. Sheet music for the songs has been posted on the numerous websites allowing adherents to read the music that this religious movement incorporates into its devotional wing. The Internet now provides all the tools needed to engage in spiritual practice through music. Online subscribers can go to the RadioSai website and read *Heart to Heart*, the monthly e-journal that includes a "Bhajan Tutor." This tutorial gives followers full versions of numerous songs, along with lessons on correct pronunciation and tune, providing a virtual classroom.

Figure 18. Devotees recite mantras at celebration

The four prayers that I have chosen to examine are among those selected by Sai Baba to aid in the followers' path of devotion. All prayers that I have included derive from the Hindu tradition: two prayers are ancient Vedic *mantras*, one prayer is taken from the *Bhagavad-Gita,* and the last *mantra* invokes two Hindu Gods. I chose these specific prayers because of their foundational importance to the movement and their prominent role in Sai religious practices. The first two prayers, the *Gayatri Mantra* and *Asathoma Mantra*, both embody the message that Sai

Baba transmits to his devoted followers. Those that recite the verses of these *mantras* ask the Absolute, or *Brahman*, to enlighten their minds dispelling illusions, so they can realize their inner divinity through grace (Figure 19). I chose the *Namavali Mantra* because this chant for deliverance invokes the avatars *Rama* and *Krishna*, which both play a prominent role in the writings and divine discourses of Sai Baba. The fourth prayer, *Brahmaar Panam,* I chose because of its prevalence in the daily lives of Sai devotees. According to my consultant, *Brahmaar Panam* is one of the first prayers adherents learn because Sai Baba suggests reciting it before every meal.

Figure 19. Young boys engaged in prayer at ashram

The *Gayatri Mantra*, is an ancient Vedic prayer. The prayer was first recorded in the *Rig-Veda,* written in Sanskrit at around 1200 B.C.E. (Matthews 1999). According to Raimundo Panikkar, a well-known proponent of interreligious dialogue, "there is nothing more exalted than the Gayatri. It is the most renowned mantra of the Vedas. It is addressed to the divine life-giver as supreme God, symbolized in Savitr, The Sun" (Panikkar 1977:40). The *Gayatri Mantra* was named for the meter it was written in: the word *Gayatri* is a Vedic poetic meter consisting of

twenty-four syllables (Panikkar 1977). The *Gayatri Mantra* is known as the essence of the *Vedas*

and has been referred to as the "mother of the Vedas," or the "mother of knowledge." Hindu

tradition holds that by speaking or chanting this *mantra* one's mind will be illuminated and

ignorance dispelled. According to Gurudev Narayam Maharaj Ji, leader of the Godpromise

Society,

> "our energy centers, levels and rhythms are activated by the measure of breaths
> that are drawn in through the nostrils and released during recitation of the Gayatri
> Mantra. During recitation all elements of the mantra are in use; even the breath is
> a precision instrument. It all works together like an orchestra and the conductor"
> (internet source #20).

The *Asathoma Mantra*, which Sai Baba has entitled "From Untruth Lead Me To The

Truth," has a prominent placement in Sai devotion. Practitioners recite this prayer in unison with

other members of the devotional group after meditation, or individually in private. This *mantra* is

also an ancient Vedic prayer that is taken from the Brhadaranyaka Upanisad. The *Upanishads*

are considered to be *Vedanta*-the end of the *Vedas*. The *Asathoma Mantra* calls on God to lead

the reciter to truth, light and immortality.

Neither the *Namavali* nor *Brahmaar Panam* are recited as a group during devotional

activities, but are recited individually by devotees throughout their daily lives. The *Namavali*

Mantra invokes two Hindu Gods, *Rama* and *Krishna*, which according to tradition are both

incarnations of *Vishnu*. *Vishnu*, whose name literally means "the all-penetrating," is considered

to be the Supreme Lord; the preserver. The Sai Baba Organization advises its members to invoke

the two gods by reciting this *mantra*. While this prayer includes only three Sanskrit words, the

words are repeated during the chant numerous times with a total of sixteen words vocalized.

Extracts from the divine discourses of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba explain that the *Namavali*

> "has sixteen words. Each word signifies a virtue that has to be cultivated in each
> man. [Each person] must pray, with verbal repetition of each word, for the growth

in him of each of these attainments that will take him nearer the goal [to awaken the divinity within] " (internet source #21).

Brahmaar Panam, or the prayer of spiritual awakening before taking food, is recited before meals. According to Sai Baba, a follower should pray and offer his food to God, so that his food will be cleansed by God's blessing. As explained in Chapter two, this prayer is taken from a combination of two verses found in the *Bhagavad-Gita* (Chapter four, verse twenty-four and Chapter fifteen, verse fourteen). The *Bhagavad-Gita* was first recorded in the *Mahabharata*, an epic Sanskrit history of the ancient world. Practitioners recite this mantra before each meal.

The section of this chapter that follows includes my transcription of the four prayers that have been posted on the web by the Sathya Sai Baba Organization in the form of mp3 recordings; I accessed them through Windows Media Player. My transcription conveys the prayers as they are performed in the mp3 audio recordings. I numbered the lines of the transcription based on the separation of verses within the prayers and also to mark call and response between Sai Baba and his devotees. I broke each word of the prayer into syllables that I used a back slash to indicate. Under each word, I listed the number of syllables in the word (noted in parenthesis). I timed in seconds each numbered verse (noted in brackets) according to its duration, and when certain words or syllables were held for emphasis, I noted it in time. Clapping and the use of musical instruments are also noted in the transcription according to the time of their inclusion. The transcription is followed by what I have labeled as - *Notes on Data* - which includes translations, information pertinent to the understanding of the data, and an analysis of the data collected.

Gayatri Mantra:

Transcription: Transcribed using the English transliteration from

http://www.sathyasaibababrotherhood.org/media/gayatri.mp3

Total duration of prayer [:60 seconds]

Performed by: Sai devotee

1. aum/   /bhur/   /bhu/vah/   /su/va/ha/

    (1s)   (1s)   (2s)   (3s)

    [aum :00-:05 seconds] [:06-:09 seconds]

2. /tat/   /sa/vi/tur/   /va/re/ni/um/

    (1s)   (3s)   (4s)

    [:10-:12 seconds]

3. /bar/go/   /de/vas/ya/   /dhee/ma/he/

    (2s)   (3s)   (3s)

    [:13-:16 seconds]

4. /dhi/yo/   /yo/   /nah/   /pra/cho/day/at/

    (2s)   (1s)   (1s)   (4s)

    [:17-:22 seconds]

5. /aum/   /bhur/   /bhu/vah/   /su/va/ha/

    (1s)   (1s)   (2s)   (3s)

    [:23-:27 seconds]

6. /tat/   /sa/vi/tur/   /va/re/ni/um/

    (1s)   (3s)   (4s)

    [:28-:31 seconds]

7. /bar/go/   /de/vas/ya/   /dhee/ma/he/

    (2s)   (3s)   (3s)

    [:32-:35 seconds]

8. /dhi/yo/   /yo/   /nah/   /pra/cho/day/at/

     (2s)   (1s)   (1s)   (4s)

     [:36-:40 seconds]

9. /aum/   /bhur/   /bhu/vah/   /su/va/ha/

    (1s)   (1s)   (2s)   (3s)

   [aum held from :41-:44 seconds]   [:45-:47 seconds]

10. /tat/   /sa/vi/tur/   /va/re/ni/um/

    (1s)   (3s)   (4s)

    [:48-:51 seconds]

11. /bar/go/   /de/vas/ya/   /dhee/ma/he/

     (2s)   (3s)   (3s)

     [:52-:55 seconds]

12. /dhi/yo/   /yo/   /nah/   /pra/cho/day/at/

     (2s)   (1s)   (1s)   (4s)

     [:56-:60 seconds]

----Notes on Data:

- Lines 1, 5, and 9, which all have the same words are not actually part of the *Gayatri Mantra*,
  but is usually recited before and after [in the performance from which this transcription was
  made it is not recited after] the *Gayatri Mantra*, it can be translated through an examination
  of the *Satapatha Brahmana* (text which follow the *samhitas*, or first part of the *Vedas*):

  "At the end of a year the Father of creatures essayed an Utterance: bhuh. This
  word became the earth, bhuvah became the air, and suvah became younder sky . .
  From the five syllables that compose these three words he made the five seasons;
  hence they arose" (SB XI. 1,6,3,5, translated by Panikkar 1977).

So, Line 1 of the transcription can be seen as a type of invocation of the three *lokas*, or

worlds, in order to assist us in our enlightenment. These three *lokas* according to Sai Baba

are heaven, Earth, and lower or nether regions. The first word in the invocation is *Om*, which

is the "primordial sound out of which all other sounds originate. It is the all-pervading

Divinity in the form of sound" (internet source #22).

- Lines 2, 3, and 4 of the transcription which are repeated twice can be translated as:

     We meditate upon the glorious splendor of the vivifier divine.

      May he himself illumine our minds.

(Rig-Veda III, 62,10, translated by Panikkar 1977).

- There have been numerous translations of this mantra. Sai Baba's translation is:

"We meditate on that Supreme Effulgence of the Radiant Being . . . the indwelling Controller

and Director of all things. May He stimulate our intellect entirely (to realize the Truth)"

(internet source #23). Sai Baba elaborates on this:

> "Oh Mother! Who subsists in all the three Kallas (time-past, present, and future),
> in all three lokas (worlds-Heaven, Earth and lower or nether regions) and in all
> three gunas (attributes sathva, rajas, and thamas-universal qualities of harmony,
> agitation, and inertia), I pray to you to illumine my intellect and dispel my
> ignorance just as the splendorous sunlight dispels all darkness. I pray to you to
> make my intellect serene, bright and enlightened" (internet source #22).

- According to Sai Baba, this mantra has three functions: Praise, Meditation and Prayer. The

divine is praised, contemplated and appealed to (to awaken and strengthen man's intellect).

Asathoma Mantra:

Transcription: Transcribed using the English transliteration from

http://www.sssbpt.org/audio/Asathoma.mp3

 Total duration of prayer [:46 seconds]

 Performed by Sai Baba and devotees in Call and Response style

1. Sai Baba: /a/sa/tho/   /maa/   /sad/   /ga/ma/ya/

                       (3s)   (1s)   (1s)   (3s)

                   [:00-:05 seconds]

2. Devotees: /a/sa/tho/   /maa/   /sad/   /ga/ma/ya/

                       (3s)   (1s)   (1s)   (3s)

                   [:05-:10 seconds]

3. Sai Baba: /tha/ma/so/   /maa/   /jyo/thir/   /ga/ma/ya/

                       (3s)   (1s)   (2s)   (3s)

                   [:11-:16 seconds]

4   Devotees: /tha/ma/so/   /maa/   /jyo/thir/   /ga/ma/ya/

                       (3s)   (1s)   (2s)   (3s)

                   [:16-:20 seconds]

5. Sai Baba: /mrith/yor/   /maa/   /am/ri/tam/   /ga/ma/ya/

                       (2s)   (1s)   (3s)   (3s)

                   [:21-:26 seconds]

6. Devotees: /mrith/yor/   /maa/   /am/ri/tam/   /ga/ma/yam/

                       (2s)   (1s)   (3s)   (3s)

                   [:26-:30 seconds]

7. Sai Baba/Devotees: /om/   /shan/ti/   /shan/ti/   /shan/ti/

                       (1s)   (2s)   (2s)   (2s)

                            [om sung by Sai Baba and devotees from :31-:38 seconds]

                            [shanti (x3) sung by devotees from :40-:46 seconds]

----Notes on Data:

- The actual prayer is from the Brihat Aranyako Upanishad (Brhadaranyaka Upanisad) and is

  translated as:

  > Lead us from untruth to truth
  > Lead us from darkness to light
  > Lead us from death to immortality
  > Om Peace Peace Peace (internet source #22).

- According to the Sai Baba Movement, this prayer is actually comprised of three parts:

  "O Lord, when I am deriving happiness through the objects of this world make me forget the unreal objects and show me the way to permanent happiness. O Lord, when the objects of this world attract me, remove the darkness which hides the all-pervading Atma, which every such object really is. O Lord, bless me through Your Grace with Immortality, or Paramananda, resulting from the awareness of the effulgence of the Atma, immanent in every object." (internet source #23).

  Namavali Mantra:

  Transcription: Transcribed using the English transliteration from

  http://www.sssbpt.org/audio/11hrhrrr.mp3

  Transcribed first [:43 seconds of prayer]

  Performed by Sai Baba and devotees in Call and Response style

  1. Sai Baba: /ha/re/   /ra/ma/   /ha/re/   /ra/ma/   /ra/ma/   /ra/ma/   /ha/re/

     (clapping to beat begins at :04 seconds)

     (2s)   (2s)   (2s)   (2s)   (2s)   (2s)   (2s)

     /ha/re

     (2s)

     [:00-:10 seconds]

  2. Devotees: /ha/re/   /ra/ma/   /ha/re/   /ra/ma/   /ra/ma/   /ra/ma/   /ha/re/

     (bongo-like instrument begins at :12 seconds)

|(2s)|(2s)|(2s)|(2s)|(2s)|(2s)|(2s)|

/ha/re/

(2s)

[:11-:21 seconds]

3. Sai Baba: /ha/re/ /krish/na/ /ha/re/ /krish/na/ /krish/na/ /krish/na/

(flute-like instrument begins at :22 seconds)

|(2s)|(2s)|(2s)|(2s)|(2s)|(2s)|

/ha/re/ /ha/re/

(2s) (2s)

[:22-:32 seconds]

4. Devotees: /ha/re/ /krish/na/ /ha/re/ /krish/na/ /krish/na/ /krish/na/

|(2s)|(2s)|(2s)|(2s)|(2s)|(2s)|

/ha/re/ /ha/re/

(2s) (2s)

[:33-:43 seconds]

- According to the International Sai Organization website each time one of the three words (noted below as A, B and C) are recited, a virtue is cultivated (internet source #21).

Words A, B, C   The virtue it represents:

(A) Hare   full of devotion

(B) Rama   prepared to enjoy suffering

(A) Hare   eager to serve the Lord

(B) Rama   free from the attachment to the transitory

(B) Rama	of correct conduct	
(B) Rama	charitable	
(A) Hare	having an unsullied reputation	
(A) Hare	with no blemish on character	
(A) Hare	fully content	
(C) Krishna	endowed with all the virtues	
(A) Hare	equipped with the fruits of learning	
(C) Krishna	ripe of wisdom	
(C) Krishna	self-controlled	
(C) Krishna	adorned with commendable social traits	
(A) Hare	moved by humanity	
(A) Hare	fully dedicated to God	

----Notes on Data:

- Prayer invokes Lord Rama (giver of bliss) and Lord Krishna (he who attracts with joy)

- 'Hare' can be viewed as an expression of address to God

(Relevant terms from Sanskrit glossary of Panikkar 1977)

- *Rama* = Avatara of Visnu (Vishnu) and one of the most popular Hindu gods, the model of righteousness.

- *Krsna (*Krishna) = Avatara of Visnu (lit. "the black one") and one of the most popular of the Gods. He does not occur in the Veda, but it is he, which reveals the Bhagavad Gita.

- *Avatara* = the "descent" of the divine, the incarnations of Visnu in different animal and human forms. Traditionally there are ten such avataras (Rama and Krsna are two of them).

Brahmaar Panam:

Transcription: Transcribed using the English transliteration from

http://sss.vn.ua/brahmarp.mp3

Total Duration of prayer [:89 seconds]

Performed by anonymous Sai devotee

1. /om/   /brah/maar/pa/nam/   /brah/ma/   /ha/vir/

    (1)   (4s)   (2s)   (2s)

   [synthesizers begin at :00 seconds]   [om :04-:09 seconds]   [:12-:16 seconds]

2. /brah/maa/gnau/   /bra/ma/naa/   /hu/tam/

       (3s)   (3s)   (2s)

       [:18-:23 seconds]

3. /brah/ma/i/va/   /te/na/   /gan/tav/yam/

       (4s)   (2s)   (3s)

       [:26-:30 seconds]

4. /brah/ma/   /kar/ma/   /sa/maa/dhi/na/ha/

      (2s)   (2s)   (5s)

       [:32-:37 seconds]

5. /a/ham/   /va/ish/vaa/na/ro/   /bhu/tvva/

      (2s)   (5s)   (2s)

       [:39-:44 seconds]

6. /praa/ni/naam/   /de/ha/maa/shri/ta/ha/

        (3s)   (6s)

       [:45-:51 seconds]

7. /praa/naa/paa/na/   /sa/maa/   /yuk/ta/ha/

(4s)　　　　　(2s)　　　(3s)

[:53-:58 seconds]

8.　/pa/chaa/my/　/an/nam/　/cha/tur/　/vi/dham/

(3s)　　　　　(2s)　　　(2s)　　　(2s)

[:60-:65 seconds]

9.　/om/　/shan/ti/　/shan/ti/　/shan/ti/

(1s)　　　(2s)　　　(2s)　　　(2s)

[:68-:77 seconds]

[piano from :78-:85 seconds]

[synthesizers end at :89 seconds]

----Notes on Data:

- Translation from the *Bhagavad-Gita*:

  "A person is fully absorbed in Krsna consciousness is sure to attain the spiritual kingom because of his full contribution to spiritual activities, in which the consummation is absolute and that which is offered is of the same spiritual nature" (Prabhupada 1986:250). "I am the fire of digestion in the bodies of all living entities, and I join with the air of life, outgoing and incoming, to digest the four kinds of foodstuff" (Prabhupada 1986:729).

The devotees of the Sathya Sai Baba Organization are taught that meditation and chanting are important in order to maintain a healthy existence in which mind, body and soul are in perfect equilibrium. Tenets of physical anthropology can be applied to these devotional activities by examining the physiological aspects of chanting. According to Wilson, "part of the power of chanting meditation is that it unites Body, Breath, Voice, and Mind as these aspects of our existence become focused through the activity of chanting (internet source #24). The use of chanting/singing and meditation by followers of the Sai Organization allows participants to

embark on their path of devotion ultimately resulting in the awakening of their inner divinity (Figure 20).

Figure 20. Young Sai devotees sing bhajans

In addition to the spiritual aspects of these devotional activities, there are also numerous physiological aspects of chanting and meditation (Fields 2001). Some of these physiological aspects include changes in heart rate, blood pressure, and brain waves, along with muscle contractions (Gardner-Gordon 1993). Studies have linked meditation with improved mental and physical health (Boswell 1979). According to Tom Beal in his article *Mantra: An Introduction to the Healing and Meditative Application of Sound,*

> "the Sanskrit alphabet consists of 50 letters and 5 mouth positions. Each sound corresponds to different areas of the body and different types of cells and tissue (Figure 21). In yoga it is taught that the letters of the Sanskrit alphabet correspond to various nerve ganglia located throughout the body. The specific frequencies of the Sanskrit alphabet or mantra generate a focused and healing sound current for these tissues and cells. In an optimum situation resulting in complete healing on

the cellular level. On a mental and emotional level it can result in mental and emotional detoxification" (insertion of "Figure 21" my addition; internet source #25).

Figure 21. Relation of the sounds of the Gayatri Mantra to specific points of the body. Picture taken from http://www.thoughtpower.org/ExploreThePower.asp.

The Sathya Sai Baba Organization's websites give detailed instructions on how to maximize one's chanting and meditation experience, allowing for the divinity within to be awakened. Becoming one with God is what Sai Baba and his organization promises devotees from around the world as they log-on and begin this path of devotion. The numerous mp3 recordings of *bhajans*, *mantras*, and Vedic chants that are offered to aid in practitioners' journey of liberation are laid out on Sai related websites in an orderly fashion. The Prashanti Digital Studio, located at Sai Baba's *ashram* in Puttaparthi, is a state of the art recording studio. The

studio produces both audio and video recordings, with many CD's and DVD's available for purchase.

Sai Baba is also affiliated with Sathyadeep Musical Palace, located in Puttaparthi. The company is a manufacturer, supplier and wholesaler of Indian musical instruments, such as the tabla (Indian percussion instrument), sitar (Hindustani classical stringed instrument), dilruba (Indian string instrument), nadaswara (classical wind instrument of South India), and tanpura (long-necked Indian lute) which are available for purchase, with numerous shipping options for overseas consumers. The owner, a family friend of Sai Baba, sells the musical instruments that the Sai organization incorporates into its audio and video recordings. The Sri Sathya Sai Books and Publications Trust operates Radio Sai Global Harmony, a digital radio channel that Sai Baba uses to spread his teachings and religious practices. The Sai organization uses Prashanti Digital Studio to record programming and then sends the broadcasts via the Internet to uplink stations where they are then picked up by one of three satellites. Dr. Noah Samara, CEO of WorldSpace Corporation, joined forces with Sai Baba and at present, broadcasts Radio Sai on WorldSpace satellite streams (internet source #26). The three streams, AsiaStream, AfriStream (which also serves Europe) and AmeriStream transmit the universalistic philosophies of Sai Baba. Radio Sai Global Harmony also provides online subscribers with a streaming service on the Internet. SaiCast (internet source #27) offers global devotees streaming videos documenting Sai discourses, festivals, service projects, and the latest happenings at Prasanthi Nilayam. Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba has mastered the domain of global media, marketing his philosophy for worldwide consumption.

Chapter 7

Selfless Service and Education in Human Values

"The student seeking Vidya (true education) must possess kindness, compassion and love towards all living beings. Kindness to all beings should be his very nature. If it is absent, he becomes a boor. Vidya means, more than everything else, the quality of compassion towards living beings. If a person bears ill-will against any being, his education has no meaning" (Sai Baba, internet source #28).

Over the course of my fieldwork in cyberspace I have become familiar with the Sathya Sai Baba Organization's emphasis on education and service to humanity. Official Sai websites document the altruistic nature of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba, India's most famous living deity (Falk 2006). According to a paper commissioned by the Global Equity Initiative of Harvard University for a series on Comparative Global Philanthropy, Sai Baba's numerous philanthropies continue to aid the poor and underprivileged of India (Viswanath and Dadrawala 2004). Organization websites claim that satellite Sai Centers across the globe implement Sai Baba's model of selfless service to mankind while instilling an education in human values. In the absence of a local Sai Center, the Internet and its information highway fills the void, disseminating guidelines for potential hometown service projects that might be engaged. An education in what Sai Baba labels "human values" is possible in the comfort of one's own home with downloadable lesson plans for children and applicable study questions for adults.

In 1972 Sai Baba established the Sri Sathya Sai Central Trust. This public charitable trust operates its own website that advertises work sponsored by Sai Baba in the domains of education and health. The website highlights four areas in which devotees are trying to make a difference in the lives of the less fortunate: education, medical relief, aid to the poor (food and clothing), and infrastructure (community service projects). Sai Baba proclaims that a proper education

builds character, which he considers to be a precious value. His desire to educate the masses has resulted in the founding of sixty-two institutes and schools around the world (internet source #29). Sri Sathya Sai University, formerly known as the Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning (Figure 22), professes to enlighten the mind while liberating the soul.

The institute, founded by Sai Baba in 1981, received university accreditation from India's National Assessment and Accreditation Council in 2003 (internet source #30). The free university has campuses in Anantpur, Brindavan, and Prasanthi Nilayam, serving an undisclosed number of students that pass a written test and do well in the admissions interview process (internet source #31). In his role as "Revered Chancellor" of the university Sai Baba explains,

> "academic knowledge alone is of no great value. It may help one to earn a livelihood. But, education should go beyond the preparation for earning a living. It should prepare one for the challenges of life morally and spiritually. It is because human values are absent in 'educated' persons that we find them steeped in anxiety and worry" (internet source #32).

Figure 22. Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning prior to accreditation

Sai Baba's teachings on education are based on the Hindu Five Truths, which he terms "universal human values": Truth, Love, Right Action, Peace and Nonviolence. According to my

consultant, Sai Baba devotees educate themselves in Sai Baba's divine discourses and engage in selfless service, attempting to awaken these universal human values which Sai Baba believes to be inherent in mankind. It is Sai Baba's view that a person cannot reach their full potential without the experience of having all five of these human values awakened in the soul.
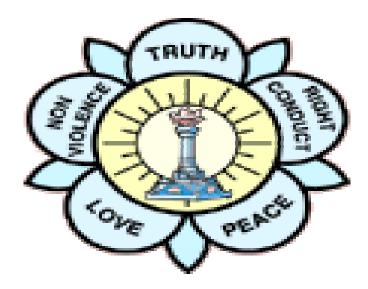

Figure 23. Logo for Sathya Sai Education in Human Values

The logo for the Sai organizations' Education in Human Values (Figure 23) is prevalent on the various Sai websites. Its symbolic representation is manifested through placing the five universal human values in the petals of the lotus flower. Each petal encompasses a human value that is to be fostered through education and service. In 1996, the organization replaced the *Sarva Dharma* logo (see Chapter2) that represents the unity of all religious faiths, with this new emblem that emphasizes the universality of human values. The logo above is a multi-vocalic symbol in that it expresses both the need for unity amongst religions and the values that all people should cultivate within themselves. While the religious symbols included in the previous logo are eliminated, the pillar in the middle is the *sarva dharma stupa* that signifies unity among

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the world's faithful. Sai Baba teaches that there is only one God and that he is the ultimate

reality. People of different faiths can nourish their inner divinity by realizing that while there are

many religions we are all worshiping one God and he is absolute. The five human values are not

exclusive to any particular doctrine or faith; rather they have the ability to unify the global

population.

My consultant explained to me that fostering these human values within oneself would

lead to right action in life. The Sai organization stresses the importance of action in the learning

process. The ancient Hindu notion of *dharma*, or duty, also plays a principal role in achieving

both academic and spiritual excellence. The teachings found in Hinduism have long upheld the

Law of Karma. According to this worldview humans can influence their future incarnations for

the better by engaging in fruitful actions in the present. A proper education in human values and

service to humanity in this life will result in the next life being even more rewarding. When

writing of the cyclical nature of human existence Warren Matthews writes,

> "the body that we see is only one chapter in a volume of a whole set of books on
> the life of a soul, or *Atman*. Our appearance now only hints of what we have been
> or will become. A human is a soul who wears, in succession, many different
> costumes. Each is appropriate to the human's current condition" (Matthews
> 1999:115; italics mine).

Many followers of the Hindu tradition turn to a deity in hope that through worship and

living a life of devotion, the deity will bestow upon them Grace. Through Grace they will

become enlightened and realize their inherent divinity, subsequently ending the cycle of rebirth.

His followers are expected to be true to themselves and others while maintaining right action

according to their prescribed *dharma*, serving both family and society.

The first human value devotees should embrace is *Sathya*, or Truth. By being honest,

having integrity and engaging in self-reflection, devotees may become enlightened with ultimate

reality. When interviewing my consultant he emphasized that Sai Baba is Truth. At the time I

thought that was an interesting comment; upon further research on the Sai websites, it became

clear what he meant. On the Sai Darshan website it states,

> "when you seek Truth, you are seeking God. Truth is God. Truth exists; so too, God exists. Truth must be considered as life giving as breath itself. Just as a person with no breath in him becomes useless, life without truth is useless and becomes a dwelling place of strife and grief" (internet source #33).

The next lotus petal symbolizes *Prema*, or Love. The prominence of discussion of love

indicates that it is central to the image the organization wants to portray to the public, or its self-

representation. The word "love" appears thousands of times within the text of the multiple

websites. Sai Baba's divine discourses, lesson plans, and devotional songs call upon devotees to

instill love in their hearts and spread it across humanity. When speaking of love, Sai Baba

stresses, "love is the basic nature that sustains human being and strengthens his resolve to march

ahead. Without love man is blind; the world for him will be a dark and fearsome jungle. Love is

the light that guides the feet of man in the wilderness" (internet source #34).

Figure 24. Devotees fulfill their dharma by engaging in service to the poor

Dharma, or Right Conduct, is the third Hindu value intrinsic to humankind. As an ancient Hindu principal and a key element in a Sai devotees' path to liberation, a person's fulfillment of their duties in this life are paramount. Sai websites outline the obligations that one seeking salvation must carry out during one's existence. Followers of Sai Baba are expected to fulfill their duties to family, occupation, community, God, and self. By executing these duties, one comes closer to awakening one's inner divinity. The Christian scripture, "faith without works is dead," is applicable to this notion of right conduct. Sai Baba accentuates the importance of maintaining one's *dharma* in the grand scheme of all existence when he states, "dharma is a body of principles that are fundamental to social stability and individual progress…The task of everyone is to do the duty that has come upon him" (internet source #35). Sai Baba teaches that it is everyone's duty to help those that are less fortunate and in need of assistance (Figure 24).

The fourth petal on the lotus flower is *Shanti*, or Peace. The Sai organization professes that peace is possible in this world. Through love, truth, and all people fulfilling their own duty, or *dharma*, peace can be achieved in both the individual and the world. Nevertheless, socio-political conflicts are ongoing all over the world. One such conflict is the dispute that is taking place in Ayodhya, the Indian holy city that Hindus believe to be the birthplace of Lord *Rama* (internet source #36; #37; #38). The city has become the center of a fierce religious and political fight between three world religions: Hinduism, Jainism and Islam. All three religious groups claim historical and religious precedence to this sacred site. The historical record documents that a mosque was built in 1528 on the sacred site that Hindus believe to be the actual birthplace of Lord *Rama* (Majumder 2002).

Three centuries had passed when in 1853 the first incidents of religious violence surrounding the sacred site occurred. Over the next 100 years, religious fervor fueled this dispute and in 1984 the Vishwa Hindu Parishad party (VHP) headed a committee to "liberate" Rama's

birthplace (Majumder 2002). The committee made plans to construct a temple on this sacred site

to honor Lord Rama; however, the site was at the time occupied by the Babri Mosque (Figure

25). Tensions came to a boiling point on December 6, 1992, when a riot broke out that resulted

in the mosque being demolished by supporters of the VHP, BJP (Bharatiya Janata party) and the

Shiv Sena parties (Varshney 2002). The demolition of this Islamic mosque sparked nationwide

rioting between Muslim and Hindu nationals leaving approximately 2,000 dead. The conflict

remains unresolved as of this writing.

Figure 25. Hindu rioters climb atop Babri Mosque in December 1992

In an interview with my consultant, I mentioned this ongoing conflict and asked if he

knew whether or not Sai Baba had taken a position on it. He was familiar with Ayodhya, but was

quick to say that Sai Baba and his organization do not get involved in political matters. However,

he explained that Sai Baba had professed his sadness about the matter publicly. I asked if he

thought Sai Baba believed reconciliation was possible for the religious factions involved. My

consultant quickly answered yes, adding that peace is always possible if people open their hearts to love and truth. He emphasized that unity and tolerance are crucial to a peaceful existence. When explaining how men have been led astray by the hate in their hearts Sai Baba states, "he has forgotten his unity with all men, all beings and all worlds. The contemplation of that unity alone can establish world peace, social peace, and peace in the individual" (internet source #39). The interview with my consultant also touched on Sai Baba's belief in non-violence as a crucial element in maintaining peace.

Ahisma, or Non-violence, is represented on the leaf of the lotus flower that links with the first. One of Sai Baba's slogans on his website is "Help Ever, Hurt Never." Sai teaches his devotees that violence never solves any problems and only breeds hate in the hearts of man. Children of devotees are taught from a young age that tolerance is the key to interaction with others, and that one should show love to every living creature. Through his websites, Sai Baba is attempting to get devotees worldwide to follow this spiritual course of non-violence. Reading his divine discourses, I feel that he is trying to foster in his devotees hope for a peaceful future, a coming light to brighten the dark mood of the present. The organizations' website emphasizes that violence does not have to be physical to inflict harm. Directing his followers he states, "the meaning of ahisma is that either in thought, word or deed, you should not cause harm or injury to others…Non-violence is an alternate name for Truth and Love. By following Non-violence, one achieves Love" (internet source #40).

Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba claims that communities in over 170 countries have adopted his Education in Human Values philosophy. He believes that there are two facets of true education. The first is book knowledge, while the second teaches education in the five intrinsic and universal human values. He has termed this second aspect of education "Educare," which means that through education and caring for others, a person's innate human values will flourish

(Figure 26). The Sai website that deals with Education in Human Values explains that devotees

have to practice these five values, in order to build character and achieve closeness with God. Sai

Baba outlines the interrelationships between these five human values when he writes, "love as

Thought is Truth. Love as Action is Right Conduct. Love as Understanding is Peace. Love as
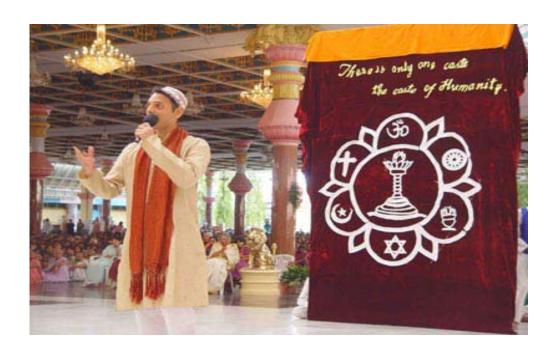
Feeling is Non-violence" (internet source #41).

Figure 26. Devotee speaks at Educare Conference

The Sathya Sai Baba Central Trust is known throughout India for its dedicated service to

the nation's poor and underprivileged. The Sri Sathya Sai *Seva* (service) branch of the Central

Trust engages in self-characterized selfless service to humanity in the form of medical aid,

charity for the poor and public utility projects. According to the Central Trust website,

> "the organization has as its main objective selfless love and service without any
> distinction of religion, nationality, race, socio-economic status, either for those
> who work in the Organization or for those who are served by them. Thus, it
> transcends the bounds of 'Religion' and unifies society in 'One Spirit' that is God
> and binds the whole humanity into one 'Brotherhood of Man.' This spiritual basis
> enables every one in the Organization to pursue his own religion better by putting

its teachings into practice by way of love and service to the God who dwells in all hearts" (internet source #42).

Over half a century ago, Sai Baba's mother, Easwaramma, told her son that all of the poor of their state of Andhra Pradesh should have a hospital to go to in times of sickness. Sai Baba, in 1956, fulfilled his mother's wishes, opening a small hospital in the Anantapur District of Andhra Pradesh. Today, the Sathya Sai Baba Central Trust Hospital runs four free hospitals – Sri Sathya Sai General Hospital at Prasanthi Nilayam (Figure 27), Sri Sathya Sai General Hospital in Bangalore, Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Medical Science at Prasanthi Nilayam, and Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Medical Science in Whitefield, Bangalore (Figure 28).

Figure 27. Sri Sathya Sai General Hospital at Prasanthi Nilayam

Information on these various medical institutions is plentiful on Sai websites. Four guiding principles continue to direct the organizations' medical relief sector. The first is the

notion that medical care and aid should be given to all people regardless of their nationality, religion, or social status. Secondly, methods of healing have to be separated from the 21st century mode of commercialization. Third, those that are involved in the healing process must provide care in the spirit of the five universal human values. Finally, the patient must be healed holistically. Patients are treated with the aim to heal not only their physical ailments, but also to spiritually strengthen both their mind and soul.
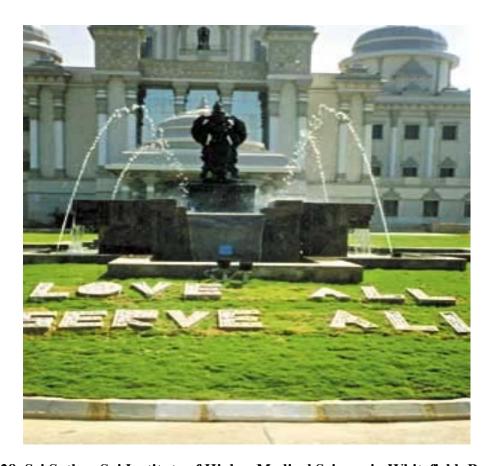

Figure 28. Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Medical Science in Whitefield, Bangalore

The Sathya Sai Seva Organization also establishes temporary medical camps in the rural areas of India to treat the poor who are in dire need of medical attention. Teams of doctors and nurses dedicated to Sai Baba's mission of service to humanity, treat the sick in orphanages and

leprosy settlements. The poor "low caste" members of society living near any of Sai Baba's free hospitals have access to everything from cardiology units to orthopedic specialists. When explaining the importance of service to mankind the Sri Sathya Seva section of one of the official Sai websites states, "engage yourselves in selfless service. Consider your social service as service to God. This is the easiest way to earn the love of God. The best way to love God is to love all and serve all. Your entire life will be sanctified thereby" (internet source #43).

Figure 29. Devotee delivers aid to rural villagers

Relief to the poor is an important part of service (Figure 29). Worldwide, Sai devotees distribute clothes and food to the underprivileged. One of the last conversations that I had with my consultant prior to my losing contact with him as a result of Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath, focused on how his New Orleans Sai group frequently took lunches to the homeless shelters in the city. He explained that local Sai devotees made dozens of sandwiches for the

homeless people who slept around Lee Circle at the edge of the Central Business District. He also added that several of the devotees volunteered regularly at the Osanam Inn Soup Kitchen on Camp Street. Sai websites highlight how devotees in India have set up eye screening camps and polio vaccination tents. Funded completely by the Sai Charitable Trust, through donations by global Sai devotees, the Sri Sathya Sai Seva Organization continues to make a difference within India's borders and around the world (Falk 2006; Viswanath and Dadrawala 2004).
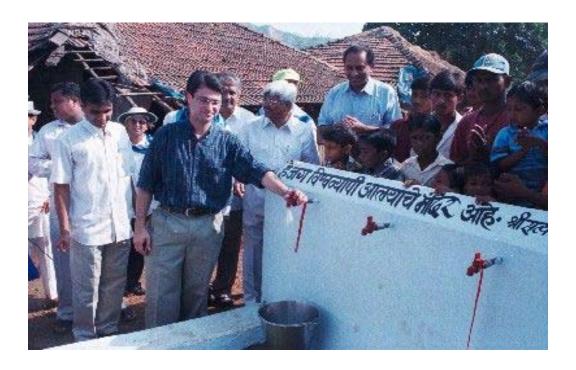

Figure 30. Inauguration of Water Project in a rural village on November 2, 2003

The Sri Sathya Sai Drinking Water Supply Project began in 1995, and is one of the largest of its kind in Asia (Viswanath and Dadrawala 2004). Many of the rural districts of Andhra Pradesh are continuously stricken by drought. The Sathya Sai Baba Central Trust funded the project, costing approximately sixty-three million United States dollars. Directed with the help of Larsen and Toubro Limited (a Mumbai based engineering and construction company) and the government of Andhra Pradesh, 750 villages with a total population of 900,00 were

provided with a clean, safe water supply (Figure 30). Through funding the building of reservoirs, storage tanks, and wells the quality of life for these rural inhabitants has improved substantially.

Devotees of this religious movement are urged to spend at least two to four hours a week engaging in some form of community service. Followers of Sai Baba's principles are expected to initiate their own community service projects where they live. Sai websites post suggestions for possible service projects, and guidelines for their implementation. This notion of spreading messages of service through global media outlets, such as, the Internet and Radiosai, is part of the 21st century phenomenon of sacred globalization.

Chapter 8

Avatar or Charlatan? : My Search for Truth

From an anthropological perspective, it is clear that cultural institutions, such as religions, are adaptive. Therefore, the conceptualization of the sacred can manifest itself in various ways that are fitting to the needs of a particular culture, society, or individual. Today's culture marked by globalization allows the Internet to play a part in the transmission of religious meaning. The desire to simplify (or some may say complicate) lives by integrating the latest technological inventions has infiltrated the sacred realm. Now in the comfort of one's own home it is possible to log-on and receive a daily dose of spiritual rejuvenation. Before I address the question of whether Sai Baba is an *avatar* or a charlatan, I would like to first explore the current religious climate in the U.S., where 160 U.S. Sai Centers have sprouted up.

Poverty, disease and war plague the contemporary world. As a result, a good percentage of the global population has looked to various religions for meaning and direction (Morgan 1977). A growing percentage of the U.S. population is turning to evangelical movements for answers (Shibley 1998). Mega-congregations are filled with evangelical Christians who speak in tongues and pass-out as a result of receiving the Holy Spirit. Pastors of these congregations preach politics from their pulpit, urging parishioners to become more active in policy-making decisions that affect their notion of "family values" (Johnson and Tawney 1982; Lienesch 1982; Lipset and Raab 1981; Patel 1982; Smidt 1988; Woodberry and Smith 1998). During the last presidential election I was amazed to hear an evangelical minister on television say "a vote for Bush is a vote for God." Religious ideology has become entangled with the political sphere, threatening the traditional separation between church and state. Aligned with the Conservative

Right, evangelical proselytizing has become increasingly sensational (Clouse 1983; Falwell 1981; Wilcox 1986). The emotionally charged fervor that is apparent to anyone who channel surfs the cable networks has been voiced by celebrity preachers such as Pat Robertson and Benny Hinn.

Ethnocentrism, or judging other cultures from the perspective of one's own culture, is prevalent in every global society. Anthropologists seek to avoid ethnocentric views and instead embrace cultural relativism and historical particularism. Cultural relativism is the notion that there is no set universal standard by which to judge cultural phenomena. Each institution, custom or belief system must be understood within its own culture's social and historical context. Historical particularism, advocated by anthropologist Franz Boas (1940), is the belief that in order to explain cultural customs, one must examine them from three fundamental perspectives: environmental conditions, psychological factors, and historical connections. An anthropological perspective on any phenomenon must take into account various cultural, psychological and environmental factors in order to produce a truly holistic understanding of any aspect of society, including religion.

It is within this context that I engage my evaluation of Sai Baba. Sai Baba claims that since he was a young boy, he has built his life around his beliefs. He has worked for decades to establish his reputation as God incarnate, or *Avatar*. He has raised organizational funds and with them built a successful empire of hospitals, libraries, religious and educational institutions, hostels, and life centers that, according to him, are used by thousands of his dedicated followers around the world. While dedicating his entire life to this supposedly selfless service, his newest accomplishment has centered on expanding his movement through use of the World Wide Web. Through the Internet, he has conceptualized cyberspace as both sacred space and marketing space. The Sai Baba Organization sponsors multiple websites showcasing devotional texts,

prayers, chants, and devotional songs, as well as announcements of current and past activities and achievements, book lists, and newsletters geared toward various ages. Sai inspired merchandise is sold and monetary contributions are solicited from devoted followers. Websites contain many testimonials and accolades by devotees, praising Sai Baba as an *Avatar*. These statements reflect the fervor of his devotees. However, while researching this religious movement's strong presence on the World Wide Web, I uncovered another, disturbing side to Sai Baba and his international organization.

Figure 31. Sai Baba rides in style alongside his faithful devotees

Sai Baba, like other charismatic religious leaders, has a powerful personality that could be used in a manipulative way, as a possible mechanism for sexual and/or financial abuse. My research on websites devoted to Sai Baba but not affiliated with the Sai organization, found negative, damaging and even scandalous testimonials that are often substantiated by police reports, newspaper articles, petitions, court filings, and country warning advisories. Ironically,

the very "space" Sai Baba has used to proliferate his religious empire is also being used to question and mar the validity of his proclaimed title. Scandals and accusations surrounding Sai Baba began in the late 1980's, and since then there has been an escalation of newspaper articles (available online) in numerous countries where he has centers, including India, France, Canada, New South Wales, Great Britain, and Australia. The claims of abuse have given rise to the possibility of the self-proclaimed *Avatar* actually being a Charlatan.

It would be appropriate here to define the terms "avatar" and "charlatan," and to locate these words and their connotations in relation to cultural context. The term *avatar* is taken from the Sanskrit word *avatara*, from *ava* (down), and *tarati* (he goes, passes beyond). According to the Hindu religion, an *avatar* is an incarnation of God in human form. The doctrine of *avatara* first occurs in the *Bhagavad-Gita* where *Krishna* declares that he has been sent down to earth to rescue *dharma* and reinstall order in times of crisis (Miller 1986). Given the evidence of the massive gatherings, large international following and pro-active institutions and projects associated with Sai Baba, it seems clear that his devotees accept that the definition of *avatar* is applicable to this man whom they consider to be holy.

The term charlatan is French derived from the Italian word *ciarlatano*, meaning one who makes untruthful pretensions. A charlatan is a person practicing quackery or some similar confidence trick in order to obtain money or advantage by false pretenses. The questions that now arise: Does Sai Baba really fit into either the classic definition of *avatar*, or into the classical charlatan mold? And more interestingly, how can these highly contrastive labels be applied to the same figure?

The numerous official Sai websites document his purported miraculous ability to materialize objects such as sacred ash, *lingams* (Figure 32) and jewelry (see Chapter 4). These websites include photographs and videos of Sai Baba supposedly in the act of materializing

objects, as well as testimonies by devotees that claim to have seen these miracles with their own eyes (internet source #44; #45; #46; #47; #48; #49). However, webpages run by ex-devotees and other non-believers are filled with allegations and supporting images that detail Sai Baba's materializations as fake (internet source #50; #51; #52; #53).
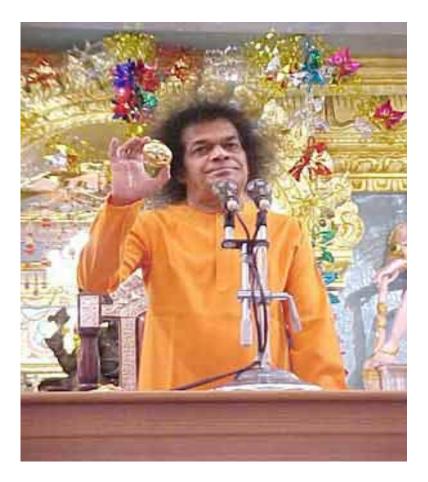

Figure 32. Sai Baba holds up a gold lingam that he claims to have materialized

While the alleged "miracles" that Sai Baba proclaims to produce may be in fact bogus, the question remains whether his actions resulted in swindling or defrauding his followers. Sai Baba's devotees may be inclined to interpret his messages and rituals as verification of his good works, further proven by the concrete evidence of his many hospitals, life centers, and

religious/educational institutions. Sai Baba attempts to put his performance of "miracles" in a subordinate perspective to his actions when he states,

> "you elaborate in your lectures this unique power of Sai, the incidents that are described as 'miracles' in the books about Me by some persons. But I request you not to attach importance to these. I use My Shakti (power) to attract people and to draw them toward the Godward path. These miracles are merely baits with which I lure them towards me. Once there faith is firmly established, they begin to look beyond the miracles and slowly start stretching their hands out for what I have really come to give - Knowledge and Bliss. The role of miracles, which are a trivial, when compared to my glory and majesty, as a mosquito is in the size and strength to the elephant upon which it squats" (internet source #54).

While he discounted his purported miracles as trivial and unimportant, other controversial and questionable areas of his activities proved harder to dispel. I have examined over thirty-five newspaper articles and dozens of e-documents written by ex-devotees dating from 1987 to the present, reporting alleged immoral activities within the Sai organization. Most newspaper articles and online documents originated from India, but others came from *The Times British News*, *The Age* (Australia), and *The Vancouver Sun*. In 2002, the United States Department of Consular Affairs issued an 'India Travel Advisory' that seemed to red-flag Sai Baba's *ashram*. It states,

> "United States citizens should be aware that there have been unconfirmed reports of inappropriate sexual behavior by prominent local religious leaders at an ashram or religious retreat located in Andhra Pradesh. Most of the reports indicate that the subjects of these approaches have been young male devotees, including a number of United States citizens" (internet source #55).

At that date, no alleged victim had filed an official complaint with the police, consulate, embassy or court of law in India against Sai Baba. The advisory was vague, and did not mention Sai Baba or his organization specifically. However, in 2004 the U.S. Embassy and Consulate in India confirmed that Sai Baba was the object of the advisory (internet source #56; #57). Efforts were made to issue a similar travel advisory to be posted by the British Embassy (internet source #58). This advisory failed to materialize because no British visitors to Sai Baba's *ashram* filed

formal complaints with the British Consulate in India, and there were no police investigations

underway at the time (internet source #58). A newspaper article from the *Times of India*

discusses how British legislation is being sought by the anti-cult organization, Family Action

Information and Resource, to limit the activities of the Sai movement within Britain's borders

(internet source #59). In May 2001, France implemented the "About-Picard Law" that allows for

legal action to be taken against organizations deemed cultic (*mouvements sectaires*) that are

involved in criminal activities (internet source #64). The new law could potentially affect Sai

Centers in France.

Figure 33. Young male devotees gather around Sai Baba in worship

Allegations by previous devotees and high ranking ex-administrators of sexual abuse and

corruption within the Sai organization continue to plague the religious movement (internet

source #60; #61; #62; #63). Most of the allegations and formal criminal complaints deal with

fraud and trickery, sexual misconduct, rape of minors, and pedophilia (internet source #62; #63;

#65). The website http://www.saiguru.net is an independent website that chronicles the

allegations and scandals surrounding Sai Baba. According to the site, Sai Baba surrounds himself

with young boys during his daily activities (Figure 33; Figure 34). SaiGuru posts hundreds of

articles in ten languages that document the alleged abuses of Sai Baba and his organization. Also

available for online viewing are two documentaries that examine the alleged dark side of Sai

Baba and his organization. The BBC documentary,"*The Secret Swami*," can be downloaded from

http://www.rfjvds.dds.nl/thesecretswami/thesecretswami.wmv. The Danish documentary,

"*Seduced*," is available at http://www.rfjvds.dds.nl/seduced/seduced.wmv.

Figure 34. Young boy delivers a speech at the Children's Festival of Joy

Newspaper coverage from around the world records this controversial side of the

organization. In a November 12th, 2002 article from the Australian newspaper *The Age,* entitled

"Scandal engulfs guru's empire: Divine Downfall," several personal accounts are detailed. One

such account by Hans de Kraher told of how his spiritual quest "ended when the seventy-three

year old guru tried to force him to perform oral sex" (internet source #66). Mr. De Kraher

reportedly went public to alert devotees to the sex scandal:

> "Sai Baba walks among devotees choosing people for private interviews. It is in these private interviews that many of the alleged assaults against males between the ages of seven and thirty take place. Former devotees said the interviews involved family groups, but when young males were involved they were ushered into a second room, behind what has become known as the 'curtain of shame'" (internet source #66).

Figure 35. British children take part in Christmas celebration at Sai Baba's ashram

The news article also stated that Sai Baba's organization was under investigation in

France, Germany, and America where children have come forward alleging sexual abuse

(internet source #66). In November of 2006, *The Guardian*, a British newspaper, called into

question the Sai organization's role in the United Kingdom's Duke of Edinburgh humanitarian

awards (internet source #67). The article explained that 200 British youths were going to earn

their humanitarian awards by traveling to Sai Baba's *ashram* in India and distributing aid to poor

rural villagers. The British charity in charge of the awards process was pressured to break ties

with Sai Youth UK (Figure 35) due to the allegations of pedophilia waged against Sai Baba (internet source #67). The chief executive of the charity responded by stating "this is not the only religion accused of pedophilia. Young people who are participating on these trips are doing so because they choose to. We make no judgement about their religion. We would no sooner intervene here than we would the Church Lads' and Girls' Brigade" (internet source #67).

A newspaper article from *BBC News* entitled "Sai Baba: God-man or Con-Man?" quotes Basara Premanand, India's guru-buster (internet source #68). Premanand has followed Sai's activities since 1976, and views him as a fraud and sexual abuser. The article quotes Premanand:

> "in the last four years, and with the growth of the Internet, the tide of claims has become a groundswell. Former devotees such as Alaya Rahm and Mark Roche, featured in the BBC documentary film, '*Secret Swami,*' are coming forward with increasingly graphic stories of the guru's sexual exploitations. Their own experiences bear an uncanny resemblance, yet span a time frame of almost thirty years. Both had been subjected to Sai Baba rubbing oil on their genitals. Concerning this supposed 'sexual healing' process, it is described by Sai Baba to be not a 'sexual event.' That there is a kundalini point between the anus and the genitals where human energy starts. By doing this oiling, it cures disruptions in the flow of such a crucial life force" (internet source #68).

In 2000, UNESCO (the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) and Flinders University of Australia withdrew their sponsorship from a conference organized by the Sai organization due to the widespread allegations of sexual abuse (internet source #66; #69; #70). The educational conference, *Strengthening Values Education: Innovative Approaches to Teacher Education for Peace and International Understanding,* was held at Sai Baba's *ashram* in Puttaparthi, India despite the withdrawn support. Devotees from around the world took part in this educational conference. Large numbers of British adherents made the pilgrimage to Sai Baba's *ashram* and strengthened their relationship with the organization. In the United Kingdom, the Sathya Sai Baba Organization claims to have 116 satellite Sai Centers (internet source #71). Children of devotees from England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland take part

in programs sponsored by the British Institute of Sathya Sai Education (internet source #72) and

Sai Youth-UK (internet source #73).

Figure 36. Children from the Sathya Sai School in Leicester, England

Children of members of the organization are not the only young Britons getting lessons in

the universalistic philosophies of Sai Baba. According to the *Times of India*, " more than 500

British schools are being taught according to Sai Baba-influenced educational programs"

(internet source #59). The Sathya Sai Education in Human Values Trust UK and the Human

Values Foundation (internet source #74) promote education in human values within the British

school system (Figure 36). On the website of the British Institute of Sathya Sai Education

(internet source #72) two videos are available for online viewing that document the program in

the United Kingdom. Some British nationals are worried about this trend and think that Sai Baba

"has infiltrated the British school system in a dangerous catch 'em young policy" (internet source #59). To date, there are mixed views, opinions, and stances involving whether Sai Baba's teachings should be incorporated into the National Curriculum of Great Britain (internet source #77).

Whether one agrees or disagrees with Sai Baba's philosophies being taught as part of a school's curriculum, one cannot ignore the allegations that continue to raise suspicion. The scandals that surround Sai Baba and his organization encompass more than trickery and sexual abuse. Indian newspapers report mysterious circumstances surrounding the murder of four male individuals on June 6, 1993 (internet source #75). The bodies, which were found in the guru's personal chambers, were reported to be those of four devotees who had broken into the building (internet source #68). The Puttaparthi police who shot the four men explained they did so in self-defense, claiming the intruders tried to attack them with knives (internet source #68). When investigating coverage of the murders on the Internet, I discovered a different account of the night's events (internet source #76). According to a former devotee, alarms went off at the *ashram,* and dozens of worried devotees and administrators staying on the grounds ran to see if Sai Baba was safe. The police captured four men and "when Sai Baba was asked what to do with them he said 'do whatever you want, do not involve me' at which time the crowd fell upon the four bound men and killed them using sticks and knives" (internet source #76). A book entitled *Murders in Sai Baba's Bedroom* chronicles the circumstances that surrounded the homicides, as well as the alleged cover-up by police and government officials (Premanand 2001).

During my field research in cyberspace, I ran across additional unsettling documentation of Sai related deaths. Several British devotees committed suicide after either returning from Sai Baba's ashram in India, or attending local Sai Center activities (internet source #77). *The Times British News* reported: "in three separate incidences suicide occurred after becoming followers of

Sai Baba. The first tragic incident occurred after one Brit had complained of being repeatedly sexually molested by Sai Baba at his ashram in Puttaparthi" (internet source #77). Overdose, hanging and jumping from a building were the three methods of suicide.

In a complaint lodged by Hari Sampath against Sathya Sai Baba on March 12, 2001, addressed to the Director of the Central Bureau of Investigation in New Delhi, India several more covert incidences were brought to light:

> "over the last 30-40 years there have been hundreds of instances of suspicious deaths at the ashram of Sai Baba. Many of these instances are young men committing suicide and elderly wealthy men/women 'found dead,' just a few days after they made a will giving all their properties to the Sai Baba trust. As there are hospitals and doctors well within the control of Sai Baba, people would do anything for Sai Baba, all these deaths are accounted for as natural means" (internet source #63).

Figure 37. Sai Baba with former Indian Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee

When reviewing all data, keeping in mind the attempt to balance Sai Baba's successes in service to humanity, with the escalating reports of his alleged abuses, one must remember always

to strive for an objective perspective. While Sai Baba does contribute large amounts of money for charitable, educational, medical, and religious enrichment and establishments, a huge amount of his funds are invested in personal endeavors (internet source #63; #78). His personal lifestyle, fleet of designer cars, and general living quarters are visibly extravagant. Rumors of money laundering, political and governmental cover-up involvement and backing in India (Figure 37) have also surfaced in recent years (internet source #62; #63; #68; #78).

The Sai organization is estimated to be worth between six and fifteen billion dollars (internet source #66; #69; #79). With such an exorbitant amount of money at stake, it is important to realize that anything is possible. As we have seen with some wealthy U.S. religious organizations (Taylor 1982), unscrupulous big businesses, crooked law enforcement and governmental agencies and leaders, money can foster every type of corruption. The Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba Organization continues to stir up controversy on the World Wide Web. But just as there are many websites dedicated to allegations of Sai Baba's abuse, there are many more proclaiming his divinity. While his dedicated followers continue to stick by him and worship at his 'lotus feet,' others continue to come forward in hopes of exposing him as a pedophile and fraud. One thing is certain, his message of love, tolerance and peace, although perhaps hypocritical, remains a message more people in this world need to live by.

My experience as fieldworker in the virtual domain of cyberspace has shown me both the advantages and disadvantages of conducting research online. While the Internet provides a database of potential fieldsites and consultants that are not inhibited by time or location, this method of scientific inquiry does have its limits. Researchers that log-on to their data are depending on controlled resources. Many times there is no way to validate what is being communicated across this information highway. However, in this 21st century of globalization social scientists must establish methods of investigation that embrace this new form of

expression and communication. Those that choose to explore this virtual universe and study the cybercultures that exist within it are pioneers in this era of digitalization.

When I began on this journey into the world of Sai Baba I was determined to keep an open mind and view this religious movement and its strong presence on the World Wide Web objectively. I was adamant about not letting my Christian upbringing and exposures to the beliefs of the Jehovah's Witnesses discourage my study of India's most famous living deity. Some of my family believed that researching Sai Baba could result in serious harm to me, as they considered him "demonized" and his movement "pagan." I'm sure that I probably horrified several members of my family when I played various chants for them over the course of my fieldwork. To them it was all "evil," and I was crazy for opening myself up to the devil. So many people living in this world close their minds to diversity and fear what they do not understand.

I was brought up to believe that Armageddon is near and all non-believers will be destroyed. I believe in God and an afterlife, however I disagree that Christianity is the only pathway to salvation. My theory is that all people, in all cultures, and in all time periods are really worshiping the same God. We just worship in different ways as a result of being born into different historical and socio-cultural frameworks. I don't believe that a person needs organized religion, or for that matter, Sai Baba's spiritual alternative, to have a relationship with God. It is my view that God judges each of us according to our deeds and our hearts. Studying Sai Baba and his philosophies did not bring about this outlook on religion, although it did solidify my feelings on the subject.

In this thesis I have made the effort to "listen" to what a religious landscape of the World Wide Web has said about itself, letting this sacred space reveal its text in a way that has allowed me to participate in the reality of this cyberculture. The Internet as Place is multivocalic and layered with meaning. Examining cyberspace through a phenomenological lens, meanings began

to emerge as a result of my interaction with the various official and unofficial Sai websites. As I became immersed "in-place" over the course of my interaction with the online world of Sai Baba, the role of the Internet as a vessel for sacred space was revealed. Revealed not only as a stage for the social production of culture, but also as a venue for a "cyberperformance" that is shaped by the poetics of sacred globalization.

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Appendix: Sanskrit Glossary

ahisma: the Sanskrit word that is translated "nonviolence."

Alvar: "diver"; one of twelve Tamil poet-saints revered by Shri Vaishnavas.

archanam: offering daily worship.

Arjuna: warrior prince from the Bhagavad-Gita that Lord Krishna councils

Arthava-Veda: the most varied of four basic Vedic collections. It is thought to be most recently assembled; attributed to a priest named Atharvan.

Asathoma Mantra: ancient Vedic prayer that is taken from the Brhadaranyaka Upanisad.

ashram: a hermitage. Today, it is a retreat center where people practice spiritual discipline.

atman: the essence of Brahman that is present in individuals. The universal self.

atmanivedanam: total surrender.

ava: down.

avatar/avatara: "descent" of God into the world to restore disrupted world balance.

Bhagavad-Gita: "Song of the Gracious Lord," famed Hindu scripture said to contain the essence of all Vedas. The divine descent Krishna gives this teaching to Prince Arjuna in the epic Mahabharata.

Brahmaar Panam: prayer of spiritual awakening before taking food; taken from the Bhagavad-Gita.

bhajan: type of devotional song; also a group devoted to singing such songs.

bhakta: a devotee.

bhakti: devotion.

bhakti-yoga: personal devotion to deity. In Hinduism, a path that leads to salvation.

bhasma: consecrated sandalwood.

brahman: in Hinduism, the name of the highest deity, the Absolute.

daasyam: dedicated service.

dharma: law. religion. one's support. religious duty or merit.

gayanath: what is sung; giving of praise.

Gayatri Mantra: an ancient Vedic prayer that grants liberation.

Itihasa-Purana: ancient; eighteen *puranas* honor Brahma, Shiva, and Vishnu.

jnana-yoga: spiritual discipline that consists of pursuing sacred knowledge; one of three appropriate forms of spiritual discipline, according to the Bhagavad-Gita.

karma: the law that a person's thoughts and deeds are followed eventually by deserved pleasure or pain. In Hinduism, it is an explanation for caste.

karma-yoga: spiritual discipline that consists of performing ritual and other constructive deeds in the everyday world. It is one of three appropriate forms of spiritual discipline, according to the Bhagavad-Gita.

keerthanam: singing the glories of God.

Krishna: an incarnation of Vishnu, who is also the chariot driver of the warrior Arjuna of the Bhagavad-Gita.

lingam: "mark," or "sign"; a symbol for the worship of the Hindu god Shiva.

loka: world; the universe where categories of sentient beings are reborn.

Mahabharata: a long epic poem featuring activities of the god Krishna.

mantra: a special formula of words recited in worship.

maya: appearance or illusion; power of creation.

moksha: the release of the soul from a cycle of rebirths. It is one of the four acceptable goals of life for Hindus.

Namavali Mantra: prayer for deliverance that invokes Lord Rama and Lord Krishna.

Nayanar: "leader," one of sixty-three Tamil Shaiva saints honored by the Shaiva-Siddhanta tradition.

om: primordial sound out of which all other sounds originate. It is the all-pervading Divinity in the form of sound.

paadasevanam: worshipping the Lord's feet.

prema: love.

puja: Hindu worship of deities. The ritual of worship in India.

Puranas: "Ancient Lore" treatises or the deities of popular Hinduism.

purdah: "curtain," the practice of shielding high-caste women from male gaze

raja-yoga: the way of physical discipline; often attributed to Yoga Sutra.

Rama: Hindu prince and ruler; hero of the Sanskrit epic *Ramayana*; an avatar of Vishnu.

Ramayana: an epic of the ideal man, Rama, and Sita, the ideal woman.

Rig-Veda: Vedic collection consisting of invocations, including the most ancient Vedic chants.

sadhana: Spiritual practice; especially meditation.

sadhu: "good person," generic term for a religious renouncer.

Sama-Veda: Vedic collection consisting of "songs" sung in praise of Soma

samhita: "collection," as in the four Vedic Samhistas

samsara: The Hindu concept of the wheel of rebirth that turns forever. Souls are reborn until they reach perfection.

sarva dharma: all feelings of obligations and responsibilities, of rights and duties. According to Sai Baba, sarva dharma means all world religions.

Satapatha Brahmana: text which follow the samhitas, or first part of the Vedas.

sathya: truth.

seva: service.

shanti: peace.

Shiva: The Auspicious. Ultimate Lord; the destroyer.

shruti: sacred writings, such as the Vedas, based on what Hindu writers "heard" in revelation. These writings are revealed knowledge.

smriti: writings based on what their human authors "remembered" of revelations to Hindus. These works are less authoritative than revealed scriptures.

sneham: friendliness.

sravanam: listening to God's glories.

stupa: an accumulation; a domelike mound containing a Buddhist shrine

swami: "lord," title used to address a renouncer of the Dasanami Sannyasi lineage. This title can also be used for a secular ruler.

tarati: he goes; passes beyond.

trayate: gives deliverance; grants liberation.

Upanishads: Sitting closely to a teacher; the last of the Vedas.

vandanam: prostration.

Vedanta: the end of the Vedas. A name for schools of philosophy founded on teachings of the Upanishads.

Vedas: knowledge or wisdom. Scriptures of the Hindus.

vishnusmaranam: ever remembering the Lord.

Vishnu: The Supreme Lord; the preserver.

Yajur-Veda: Vedic collection consisting of prose chants recited to accompany sacrificial actions.

yoga: in Hinduism, a path of discipline. Four disciplines lead to release from rebirth.

Yoga-Sutra: an aphoristic treatise on yoga by Patanjali; often identified with raja-yoga.

Definitions taken from (Falk 2006) and (Matthews 1999), as well as from official Sai websites.

Vita

Meredith Morgan Feike was born in New Orleans, Louisiana, in 1979. She attended the Louise S. McGehee School for Girls, located in the Lower Garden District of New Orleans, where she has served on the Alumnae Association Executive Board since 2003. In 2001, she graduated *cum laude* from Tulane University - H. Sophie Newcomb College with a Bachelor of Arts in history and minor in political science. While at Tulane University, she was chosen to serve on the executive board for the Newcomb Chapter of the National Mortar Board. Also in 2001, she was selected to chair Toast to Newcomb.

Her professional affiliations and academic organization memberships include the Gamma Beta Phi National Honor Society, National Society for Collegiate Journalists, National Deans List, Pi Sigma Alpha National Political Science Honor Society, Phi Alpha Theta International Honor Society for History, SGA Executive Board Member and Governmental Senator and Liaison, Southern Anthropological Society, American Anthropological Association, and most recently American Ethnological Society.

Past awards and honors include the H. Sophie Newcomb College of Tulane University Newcomb Oak Wreath for outstanding leadership, scholarship and service. She has also received the Southern Anthropological Society Paper Competition Recognition Award, as well as, various SGA service and Press Club journalism awards.

Graduating in 2007 from Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, with a Master of Arts in anthropology, she has presented several papers at conferences including the 2003 Southern Anthropological Society Convention in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, as well as, at the

2004 International Conference on Social Sciences in Honolulu, Hawaii where she also served as a session chair.

This summer of 2007, she has been invited to present the paper, *Logging-on to Sai Baba: The Poetics of Sacred Globalization*, at the Fifth Annual Conference on New Directions in the Humanities to be held at the American University in Paris, France. After which time she plans to complete her doctoral program in the fields of anthropology/geography.