

Who is Sai Baba?

Born in a small South Indian village in 1926 as Sathanarayanan Raju, Sai Baba announced himself to be a reincarnation of a local saint, Sai Baba of Shirdi, when he was fourteen years old. To distinguish him from his older namesake, the followers of the reincarnated Sai Baba refer to him as Sathya Sai Baba; but throughout this leaflet, he will simply be referred to as Sai Baba. Believed by followers to be a divine incarnation, he is based in India (having left the country only once to visit followers in Uganda) and visitors flock to see him and be in his presence. He is famous for 'materialising' a variety of objects, including *vibhuti* (sacred ash), saris and anything from sweets to gold watches. Other reported miracles include teleportation, healing the sick, and resurrecting the dead. Sai Baba has announced that he will die in the year 2020, to return in a third and final incarnation about eight years later as Prema Sai.

What are Sai Baba's teachings?

Sai Baba's core principles are *sathya* (truth), *dharma* (right conduct), *prema* (love), *shanthi* (peace), and *ahimsa* (non-violence). His best known aphorisms are: "love all, serve all" and "help ever, hurt never". Although rooted in the Hindu tradition, he emphasises the unity of religions, and discourages followers from abandoning their own religions. Rather, he points to the immanence of God, the realisation of which will enable devotees to become better members of their own traditions. However, the mainstream religions themselves have not always felt that the two spiritual commitments are compatible. For example, Mario Mazzoleni, a Catholic priest who wrote a book that accepted Sai Baba as the living Christ, was excommunicated in 1992.

Who are Sai Baba's followers?

A definitive sociological survey of Sai Baba devotees worldwide would be difficult to undertake, as many of his followers worship him in private as just one saint among many. It is generally estimated by both devotees and academics that Sai Baba currently has an international following of between ten and fifty million. Hindus form a large proportion of this following, but the growing number of Western devotees may be attracted by the eclectic spirituality of the teachings rather than the specifically Hindu beliefs. However, it is not known what proportion of these are actually affiliates of the Sathya Sai Organisation and what proportion are merely privately Sai Baba sympathisers. According to the Organisation's Charter, any spiritual aspirant who has faith in Sai Baba's teachings and who is willing to abide by the regulations of the Organisation and the nine point code of conduct (see section on "What do Members Practice?" below) qualifies as a Member. Devotees who can spend at least four

hours a week on activities for the Organisation are known as Active Workers.

The largest proportion of Sai Baba's followers come from the urban middle classes, and high profile followers include Atal Bihari Vajpayee, the Prime Minister of India (together with many others in the Indian political establishment) and Isaac Tigrett, the founder of the Hard Rock Café. Devotees are not obviously distinguishable by any special dress, and do not see the need to renounce such features of secular society as paid work or family life. However, there is a special greeting, "Sai Ram", that is used among members.

What do members practice?

The ideal code of conduct for those who are formal members of the Sai Baba Organisation includes daily prayer and meditation, family and group devotional exercises, participation in the education program and community service, regular study of Sai Baba literature, as well as the day-to-day observance of the principles of love and service. However, these requirements are not as strictly observed by informal members. Worship usually takes a Hindu form, with *puja* (ritual offering to God) and *bhajans* (devotional hymns) constituting core spiritual practices. Vegetarianism is generally encouraged, and there is no meat served on Sai Baba's ashrams, nor are alcohol or cigarettes available.

Ashrams are traditionally Hindu religious communities. Three such residential communities have formed around Sai Baba in India, but there are not yet any ashrams in Britain. The central event on the ashrams is *darshan*, in which Sai Baba walks among his devotees in the main temple, offering them blessings and accepting their letters. Members report a profound feeling of 'spiritual energy' in his presence. Much worship takes place in private homes, centring around family shrines. Indeed, Sai Baba places great emphasis on family values and the householder's life, and celibacy is usually encouraged only for people over fifty years old. The sexes are segregated during worship, and on the ashrams there are separate living quarters for men and women. Members celebrate a number of Hindu festivals throughout the year, as well as Sai Baba's Birthday, "Ladies Day" and Christmas.

How is the movement organised?

There are Sai Baba Centres in around 140 countries. Estimates of the number of Centres vary from 1,200 to 30,000. In Britain there are 64 centres, and some UK members have suggested that there are between ten and twenty thousand national followers, predominantly of South Asian origin. Sai Baba Centres are required to have at least nine members, and should be engaged in at least two of the three activities of the Organisation: spiritual (with a focus on devotional singing and meditation), educational (with a focus on teaching Sai Baba's

core principles to children), and service (which involves volunteers in the local community, providing meals for the homeless, for example). Across India, there are more than thirty Sathya Sai Baba schools, and the movement claims that the Sai Baba education programme is implemented in more than 166 countries. There are two education charities in the UK: The Sathya Sai Education in Human Values, and the Human Values Foundation.

The movement's centre is Prashanthi Nilayam, in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. The Central Office, based in Prashanthi Nilayam, is responsible for the major policy and decision-making, administration, and organisation, and also for the resolution of internal disputes that are not covered by the Organisation's Charter. The Charters for Indian and Overseas members are not identical, and in India there is a separate Women's Section (*Mahila Vibhag*) that deals mostly with educational activities. In Prashanthi Nilayam, a section of devotees act as uniformed "Seva Dal" volunteers, helping to manage the crowds and provide other services. A Sathya Sai university and two "Super Speciality Hospitals" have also been established.

Controversies

The Indian Rationalist Association has been at the forefront of a campaign to expose Sai Baba's reported miracles as mere trickery. However, Sai Baba has been unwilling to submit himself to testing under the scrutiny of laboratory conditions. There are also allegations that money that was meant to be spent on charitable projects for the local poor has been siphoned off by those at the head of the organisation. Some critics claim to have been subject to violent harassment by Sai Baba followers, and there are even allegations of murder that remain unsubstantiated. Indeed, an attempt on Sai Baba's life in 1993 that left four dead is still treated with suspicion by some critics, who believe that Sai Baba's powerful Indian supporters have prevented a full investigation of the incident. Criticisms of Sai Baba have gained force in recent years, since the online publication of a report entitled *The Findings* by disillusioned followers, David and Faye Bailey, in 2000. These latest accusations concern Sai Baba's sexual conduct, and have provoked heated debates on the Internet. A significant number of male devotees, including minors, claim that the guru has made sexual advances towards them during private meetings. The sexual advances are said to include the touching of genital areas. Although many followers simply deny these allegations, some justify them with the claim that they may have a deeper spiritual significance beyond the reckoning of mere mortals. One justification sees them as a technique for awakening *kundalini* energy, which is more of a spiritual than a sexual phenomenon; other apologists claim that they are tests of faith.

Further information

Devotional sources:

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Murphet, Howard (1977) *Sai Baba, Man of Miracles*, Red Wheel/Weiser

Sai Baba Links: <http://www.saibabalinks.org/>

Critical sources:

Brooke, Tal (1999) *Avatar of Night*, End Run Publishing

Haraldsson, Erlendur (1988) *Modern Miracles: An Investigative Report on Psychic Phenomena Associated with Sathya Sai Baba*, Ballantine Books

Former Sai Baba Members: <http://www.exbaba.com>

David and Faye Bailey's report *The Findings*:

<http://home.hetnet.nl/~ex-baba/engels/findings.html>

Academic sources:

Babb, Lawrence A. (1983) "Sathya Sai Baba's Magic", in *Anthropological Quarterly*, 56 (3) pp. 116-124.

Bowen, David (1988) *The Sathya Sai Baba Community in Bradford*, University of Leeds

Swallow, Deborah (1982) "Ashes and Powers: Myth, Rite and Miracle in an Indian God-Man's Cult", in *Modern Asian Studies*, 16 (1), pp 123-158

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New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction (London: HMSO, revised 1995) has been written by Professor Eileen Barker to provide practical suggestions as well as general background information.

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