

Music and Spirituality in the *Sai* Movement:  
A Case Study of the  
Isipingo *Sai* Centre

by

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For  
Tamara, Jasmin and Brandon

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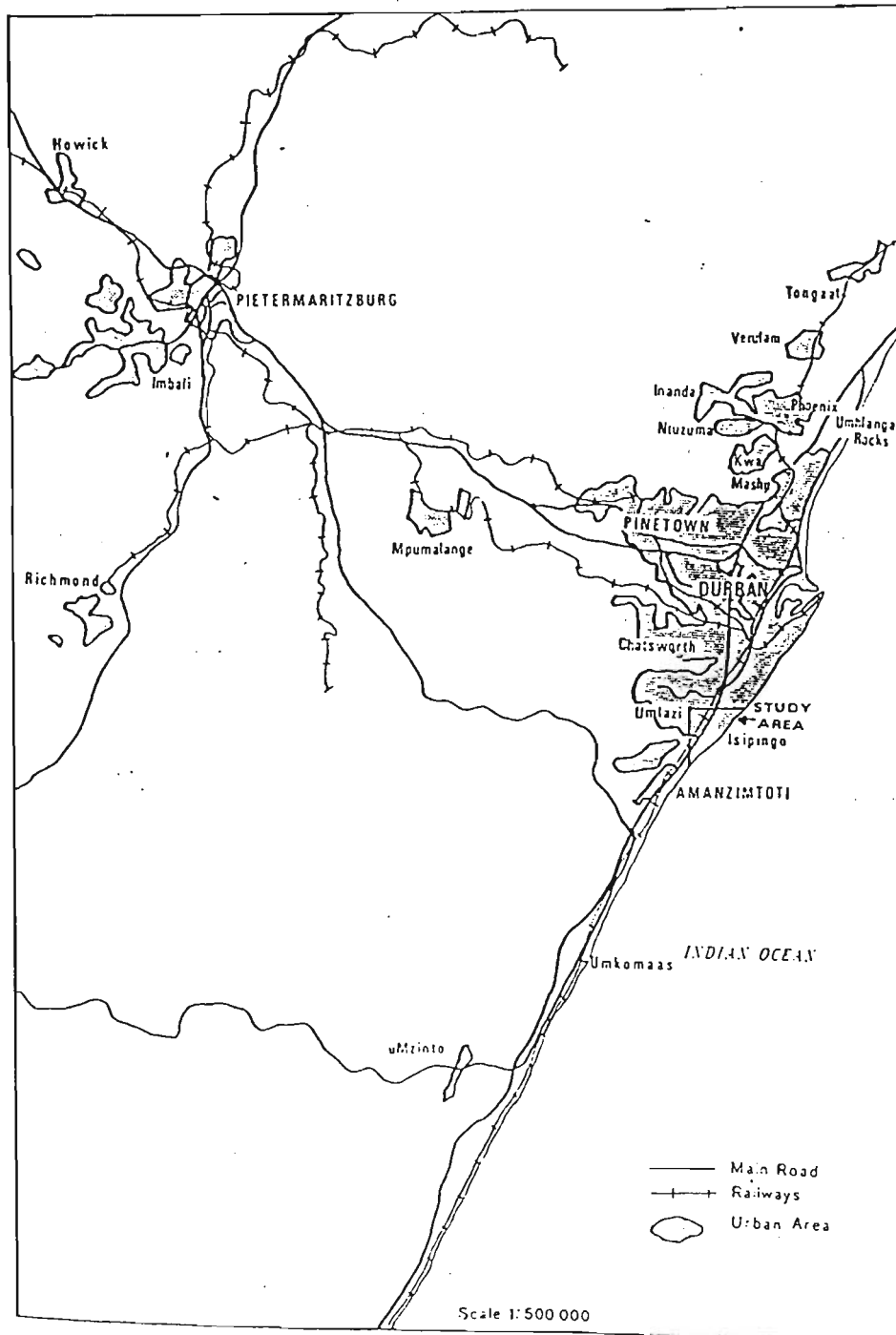
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Map of KwaZulu-Natal  
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Map showing **Isipingo** in relation to Durban

## CHAPTER ONE

### A. INTRODUCTION

The fourth day of the Hindu month of *Bharapad* (August-September) is celebrated as the birthday of Ganesha, the jovial, elephant-headed deity of the Hindu pantheon. Different legends are current among the Hindus concerning the birth and peculiar appearance of Ganesha<sup>1</sup> (See Fig.1, Appendix 4).

In one legend, the origin of Ganesha is attributed solely to [the goddess] Parvati<sup>2</sup> without the aid of any male agency. The impecunious Shiva<sup>3</sup> could not afford to keep guards at his gate, and Parvati, while she was having her bath, was often disturbed by visitors to whom there was none to give information about her whereabouts, especially when Shiva was out. So, one day, the goddess made an image of a boy from clay and the oil she was using, and infused life into it. She was highly pleased with the appearance of the young man and asked him to guard her house as Shiva had gone out, and then went for her bath. While Parvati was washing herself, Shiva returned from his peregrinations and was not a little surprised to find his entry into his own home blocked by the young stranger who wished to know what his business was! Shiva was never known for his genial disposition, and the young man proving unreasonable, the furious god blew his head to pieces.

Parvati now came on the scene and finding that her son had been killed by her husband, started wailing which brought all the gods and goddesses to Mount Kailas, the abode of Shiva. The guests tried to console her but Parvati would not be satisfied with anything short of the revival of her son. The head of the boy was so badly shattered that even the gods could not find all the pieces. So Vishnu, to save the situation, mounted his charger Garuda and set out in search of a fitting head for the body of the boy. The first one he could procure was that of an elephant, and the boy was revived with this head on his neck. Parvati was not quite satisfied with this, but the gods promised that they would exalt him as the leader of the Vinayakas (a group of minor deities; Ganesha, hence, is also called Vinayaka) and he would be made the first recipient of adoration in all rituals as the remover of obstacles, and this pacified the goddess (Thomas 1971: 9-10).

Unlike Shiva, who in a rage slays the source of that which he could not understand, it is my intention to investigate the delicate balance between spirituality and music that manifests itself in different ways within the context of the Sai community in Isipingo, Durban. The Hindu deity, Ganesha, cited in the

above excerpt, features prominently within the religious spaces created by the devotees of the *Sai* movement in Isipingo and by Hindu devotees in other parts of the world. As the "remover of obstacles", Ganesha enjoys an exalted position in the sequence of rituals that are performed by Hindus of the Isipingo *Sai* Centre. From a scholarly point of view, it seems appropriate to begin with the legend of Ganesha because of the high degree of respect that this deity enjoys in the eyes of the subjects of my case study.

As a pilot study this project focuses on the *Sai* movement - its historical context, its organisation, its activities and its devotees. More specifically, the purpose of this dissertation is to examine the relationship between music and spirituality amongst the largely Indian *Sai* membership in one particular community in Durban between 1990 and 1995. I have selected 1990, because this was the year that marked the historic unbanning of liberation movements, the release of now State President, Nelson Mandela, and the lifting of economic, cultural and academic boycotts of South Africa by the international community, including India.

The *Sai* spiritual movement seeks to include all the major religions of the world. While I focus primarily on song in this dissertation, I have also considered dreams, educational structures that focus on its young membership and rituals which are integral parts of song performance. These media provide a "looking-glass" through which one may understand the experiences

of largely Hindu South Africans who belong to a middle-class society that has emerged in the twentieth century. These are well-educated individuals seeking to re-orientate their "Indianness" within the fabric of an African and westernized country.

The Sai movement began in South Africa in the late 1960's. Although it had already been in existence in India in an earlier form from the nineteenth century, Sri Sathya Sai Baba, the charismatic leader of the Sai movement, assumed leadership in 1940, at the age of fourteen. His eloquent oratory, his knowledge of Hindu philosophical and classical literature, his powers of healing and the miraculous materializations of *vibuthi* (sacred ash) and objects such as pendants and rings, attributed to his powers, drew a faithful following of people, young and old, from the village of Puttaparthi and its surrounding areas. This village is located in the state of Andhra Pradesh in South India.

Sai Baba has a following of approximately five thousand devotees in South Africa who are registered with the Sri Sathya Sai Council of South Africa. From the attendances of people at major Sai celebrations, such as, Sai Baba's birthday celebration, however, it has been estimated that the number of devotees exceeds 150 000 in South Africa (Personal communication, Dr. R. Cooppan, January 1996). Similarly, the statistics of the Sai movement globally reflect approximately fifty thousand registered devotees, while Sai Baba's birthday celebration in India in 1995

drew over one million devotees (*ibid.*).

In South Africa, the spread of this movement must be seen against the backdrop of the political transformation that this country has undergone from 1990<sup>4</sup> to the present day (1996). Whilst the country has been in the throes of major political change, it has experienced an unprecedented level of violence. Muller (1995) refers to a fragmented social order characterized by fear, and the continual threat of violence which has become a way of life for many men and women. Within this socio-political framework, Hindu South Africans (largely of Indian origin) have attempted to carve out religious spaces that would be meaningful for them. They have tried to move away from traditional Hindu rituals imported into South Africa by their forefathers. In doing so they have chosen to perpetuate those practices that cohere with contemporary experience and disregard the less meaningful aspects. This has happened in a context in which the hegemonic rule of the state propagated Christian nationalism at every level - through schools, the media (radio, television and newspapers) and the government itself.

The *Sai* movement bridged the gap for *Sai* devotees between traditional Hindu beliefs and the pressures of a westernized culture in an African context. Devotees express their affinity with *Sai* Baba or their *Swami* (a Sanskrit word meaning lord or master), through the expressive domains of song, drama, dance, dreams, miracles of healing and materializations of *vibuthi* or nectar on the photographs of the deity or lord being worshipped.

Although the *Sai* movement globally includes all religions, the religious composition of the *Sai* movement in Isipingo is predominantly Hindu. The reasons thereof are multifold: the political structures of the apartheid era through the Group Areas Act of 1950 designated certain areas for particular race groups; Hinduism with its broad and liberal scope of interpretation favoured the teachings of Sai Baba since this was not a new religion, such as Christianity was for Indians, but rather a spiritual way of life that cohered with Hindu religious practice; Sai Baba was born into a Hindu household in India. Although his teachings and philosophies have universal messages which people have recognised and accepted worldwide, Sai Baba draws heavily on Hindu scriptures and philosophy to expound his teachings.

Music within the context of the *Sai* movement must be interpreted in its broadest sense. It includes that soundscape which may be extraneous to the songs themselves but which forms an integral part of the total effect of the sound created. Recitation of the "Om<sup>kara</sup>"<sup>5</sup> at the beginning of each service, hand-clapping, the beat of the tablas (Indian drums played with the hands and tuned to various notes), the melodic accompaniment of the harmonium<sup>6</sup>, the clearing of a devotees throat, the shuffling sound of pages of *bhajan*<sup>7</sup> (devotional song) books being turned, little children whispering, silences and the songs themselves -all form a part of the total soundscape which is so essential to one's perception of the overall effect of music on the senses.

Very often ethnomusicologists tend to look at what we consider to be the gist of the soundscape, namely, the songs. In most cases this approach proves to be instructive and valuable for what we seek. Songs bear texts and themes that often bear some level of meaning for their cultural carriers... value systems, worldviews, and identities (are) written and expressed through songs... Songs, however, do not exist in a vacuum (Pillay 1994:9).

It is thus my contention that every incidental sound - be it the sound of a crackling microphone or the muffled sneeze of a devotee - all contribute to the total atmosphere in a *Sai* ritual context. Although a harmonious blend of sounds is the ideal towards which *Sai* devotees aspire, they are not unduly disturbed by extraneous sounds that have become a norm at the *Sai* services. They have become so accustomed to these non-musical interruptions that they do not appear to notice them when they do occur.

An important aspect of my analysis surrounds the actual performance of *bhajans* and other songs by the *Sai* devotees of the Isipingo *Sai* Centre. Although the teaching of the *Sai* movement does not impose any specific religious practice, its membership in Isipingo exhibits a strong Hindu bias (see empirical study in Chapter Four).

The procedure at each gathering follows a similar pattern every week. The ritualistic nature of these religious practices, with their set pattern, fosters a sense of discipline amongst the devotees. It also creates an atmosphere of predictability with which one may associate a sense of safeness and belonging. Within the scope of these highly organised weekly services, significant festivals of both the Hindu and Christian calendars



are observed through special prayers, spiritual discourses, theatrical presentations, dance or music.

The theatrical aspect of festivals dramatised at the *Sai* gatherings serves to define the identity of the devotee. In most instances children who attend the *Bal Vikas*<sup>8</sup> classes (see Chapter Three) enact the playlets that have been taught to them by their *Bal Vikas* teachers or *gurus*. These are usually well-rehearsed presentations with moral or humanistic values as their goal. Whether the child is dressed in costume to depict Lord Ganesha, or portrays Lord Shiva through Indian dance, or characterizes Mary or Joseph for the Christmas celebration, these playlets serve to focus on the universal appeal of this movement and the sense of oneness that the devotees feel with major world religions even though their heritage is basically Hindu.

## **B. MOTIVATION FOR THE PROJECT**

### **An Insider's Point of View**

My husband, Praveen Raidoo, had been involved with the *Sai* movement whilst he was still a young boy. When we met in 1981, I had great reservations about what I considered to be a mere mortal man, Sai Baba. Nevertheless, I found myself blaming Sai Baba for what I considered to be the untimely death of a close relative who had been an ardent *Sai* devotee. Through all of this my husband did not try to influence me into changing my mind about the *Sai* movement and what it represented for its members.

In 1985, when we were to be married, my husband wanted to use the *Sai* emblem (see Fig. 2, Appendix 4), which is also referred to as the *Sarva Dharma* symbol (meaning unity of faiths), on the cover of our wedding invitation. By this time, I had no serious objections to the movement. The emblem, with its depiction of many religions, conveyed for me the idea of a universal religion. This idea was an appealing one. I had also begun reading, rather casually, books on Sai Baba which related real-life experiences of people in various parts of the world. Having always held the world of academia in high esteem, I was impressed by the calibre of people who had published books on Sai Baba and the *Sai* movement. These were mostly professional people from different walks of life, from medical doctors to scientists to businesspeople - all of whom had expressed deep scepticism about the movement at some stage, and subsequently came to believe in Sai Baba's cosmological powers. Despite my readings and my listening to *Sai bhajans*, however, I was not entirely convinced. My rational mind said, "Yes - there must be some truth in this!" but my heart said, "No - you cannot really relate to this 'hippie-looking' man!" (see Fig.3, Appendix 4)

Out of curiosity I occasionally attended *Sai* services at the Isipingo *Sai* Centre. A prominent member of the *Sai* movement in Isipingo, Dr. Rajen Cooppan, is a family friend. He knew that I was a music teacher and invited me to train the choir of the *Sai* movement for Sai Baba's birthday celebration to be held in November 1990. This I did with much enthusiasm. I was

challenged by having to train amateur voices, and drawn to the sound of the music itself (The music that was presented for the 1993 celebration is discussed in greater detail in Chapter Six).

My first "real" encounter with Sai Baba came at this time. I dreamt one night that I was at his *ashram* (a retreat for meditation and prayer), *Prashanti Nilayam*, in India. I stood right before him and for the first time in my life I could see something indescribably beautiful about his face. There was a look of serenity and wisdom. I knew at that moment that he could read my mind. Despite my doubts, I felt the urge to touch his feet because I knew then that I was in the presence of an extraordinary being. I began to kneel before him but he stopped me saying, "Mother does not have to touch my feet." I started to cry. He smiled at me and said rather softly, "But if she wants to, she may." I knelt at his feet and could not help but marvel at the soft, white, feminine appearance and the velvety touch of his feet. I knew then what devotees meant when they spoke about the "lotus feet" of Sai (see Fig.4, Appendix 4). I remember feeling a sense of joy and spiritual upliftment such as I had never experienced before.

After relating this experience to Dr. Cooppan, he said that I was blessed and fortunate. He said that in Sai belief, dreams of Sai Baba cannot be willed by the devotee, or manifest unconsciously in one's mind. If anyone dreams of Sai Baba it is believed to be an astral travel of the soul to the person

himself. In *Sai* religious belief, the dream is thus a real encounter with this avatar<sup>9</sup> or incarnation of God.

I have to confess that this first dream changed my attitude and deep seated scepticism. With regard to Rastafarianism, Homiak writes that dreaming has always been a key source of religious inspiration in prophetic and millenarian movements. He goes on to say that "visions are used strategically to assert claims to prophetic empowerment [and] also illustrate how a Rastaman can communicate aspects of movement history and creatively articulate Rasta mythos as part of his own inspiration" (1992: 234). A parallel may be drawn between the experience described by Homiak for the Rastafarians in Jamaica and the powerful impact of dreams on my own religious beliefs and inspiration.

At the celebration of Sai Baba's birthday in 1990 (also my wedding anniversary), I felt a surge of emotion as I was singing. It was an emotion that I can only describe as "heavenly". From that time onwards, I have been associated with the *Sai* movement and I have continued to assist periodically with various musical activities (discussed in later chapters). I have not become a zealous devotee attending the weekly congregations. I may be categorized as one of those many peripheral devotees who attend celebrations of the *Sai* movement but who are not accounted for as registered members of the organisation.

In September 1992, when my second daughter, Jasmin, was born three months premature, I remember praying fervently all night long for Sai Baba to exert his will to save her or take her away as he deemed necessary. Weighing a mere 810 grams, she survived without any complications, save for the fact that she was so little. I attributed her life to his good grace.

In 1994, my husband and I wanted to have another child because we had two girls and he dearly wanted a son. Again in July 1994, I dreamt of Sai Baba. I was very troubled in that dream and when I asked Sai Baba about a baby he merely replied, "What about him - he's there!" I could not understand this message. I was slightly afraid to ask him directly about a son because I knew at the back of my mind that the sex of the baby could not be chosen. The truth was that both my husband and I wanted a third child only because we still cherished the hope of having a son. In January 1995, when I discovered that I was pregnant, I dreamt once again of Sai Baba.

On the night after the Hindu festival of *Shivarathri*<sup>10</sup>, I was feeling nauseous and I did not go to the temple as I usually do for important Hindu festivals. My *punjabi* (Indian garment worn by women) had been ironed for me to wear to the temple. Since this festival includes an all night vigil at the temple, at about ten o'clock that night I told my husband that I still felt I ought to go. He dissuaded me, saying that since I had already conducted a prayer at home and I was not feeling well, I should stay at home. I went to sleep feeling discontented.

The following night Sai Baba appeared in a dream. He was not wearing his customary gown of orange, but a gown of deep blue. His face was soft and creamy-white like that of a child. His hair seemed unusually dark and his lowered eyelashes were thick and long like those of a baby. When he looked at me I said quite simply, "You know that I love you," to which he replied, "I love you too."

Again, Dr. Cooppan indicated that the interpretation of this dream could signify many things. Lord Shiva is traditionally adorned in blue and, having missed out on this celebration at the temple, I presumed that this was Sai Baba's way of absolving me from all feelings of guilt. Blue is also the colour traditionally associated with boys and the fact that Sai Baba depicted that baby-like quality in his appearance made me think of the baby I was carrying. This was for me, the final affirmation of faith. I subsequently visited the doctor twice to have ultrasound scans of my growing baby. Both scans confirmed that I was due to have a son in September 1995 (although an elective caesar was conducted in August 1995).

For an outsider, this experience may appear to be a coincidental sequence of events and a somewhat sentimental narrative which has no place in an academic project. Christian (1987) states, however, that visions are acknowledged by anthropologists as important to many human groups. He examines the manner in which visions are modeled to a specific form and the question of how charismatic leaders, prophets, oracles, as

well as spontaneous seers, come to speak meaningfully to their constituencies. Christian sees his study of visions at Ezquioga, in Spain, as being relevant for all cultures:

For many students of other cultures and times, this first month of the Ezquioga visions may suggest the importance of the context in which "prophets" and charismatic leaders formulate and gradually fix their messages. In the Basque visions and movements, general anxieties and hopes are answered by individuals with instructions said to come from God, but it seems clear that the cultural content enunciated is as much a consensual product of followers and the wider society as of the leaders, the prophets, or the Saints (*ibid.*: 163).

Within the *Sai* movement, many well-read and learned devotees have said that Sai Baba has a way of drawing in people who would eventually serve as instruments of his teachings. Through my involvement with the *Sai* choir, I have no doubt been drawn in, even if in a small way, as an instrument of his mission.

## **C. RESEARCH IN THE FIELD**

### **1. Choice of the Field**

Although I grew up in KwaZulu-Natal, like most Hindu South Africans, I had never attended the temple regularly. My parents took my brothers, my sister and I to the temple only for special Hindu festivals, such as, *Saraswathi Puja*<sup>11</sup>, *Ganesha Chaturthi*, *Shivarathri* or the *Kavadi*<sup>12</sup> festival. Since the Tamil calendar reflected many Hindu festivals, I thought that it would be enlightening to study these festivals as celebrated at one of the largest Hindu temples in Durban, the *Shri Vaithianatha Esperar Alayam*<sup>13</sup> temple (commonly known as

the Umgeni Road Temple). This project did not materialize as I originally intended. After a year of fieldwork, collating data, recording the music, video-taping the celebration of selected festivals and interviewing their resident priest from Sri Lanka, I was still unclear about the goals of my research.

Three years ago, I attended the celebration of *Shivarathri* at the *Arutpa Khazagam*<sup>14</sup> temple in Isipingo. I was immediately struck by the lack of elaborate traditional Hindu ritual which was in direct contrast with what I had witnessed at the Umgeni Road Temple. Most of the devotees at the temple in Isipingo were *Sai* devotees. They were singing *bhajans* dedicated to Lord Shiva. I was impressed with their singing and the meaningful simplicity of their songs and rituals. I was surprised that it had not occurred to me sooner to use this movement in Isipingo as the site for my research.

## **2. Constructing my Field**

The *Sai* movement in Isipingo is a well structured organisation which has secured premises at different venues in Isipingo in order to conduct their various activities. The boundaries of "the field" were thus fairly pre-determined for me by this highly organized movement even though they do not own their own premises. There were, however, several layers of construction of the "field".

First, there were the weekly services that I attended at the *Arutpa Khazagam* temple which spanned the course of one year.



Second, I attended the *Bal Vikas* classes that were conducted for children every Saturday morning in the classes of a local government primary school. These one hour classes are held each week except during the school holidays laid down by the provincial department of education. Third, I spent one hour a week for two months attending the study circle meetings that focus on *Sai* literature as a means to spiritual enlightenment. Fourth, I attended and participated in many special events, such as, *Sai* Baba's birthday celebration, the *Sai* Christmas celebration, the annual Sports Day and a day spent picnicking with children from a local orphanage. Finally, I spent many hours conducting formal interviews and engaging in informal conversations with *Sai* devotees in an attempt to understand their cultural ways.

### **3. Entering the Field**

I had suspended my studies in 1992 to take care of my second daughter (born prematurely in September 1992). In March 1993, I began my research at the Isipingo *Sai* Centre. Between 1991 and 1993 the number of devotees in Isipingo had increased considerably (Personal communication: November 1993).

Muller (1995) refers to the marked upsurge in violence in South Africa during this time of political transformation. One of the reasons for the increase in the *Sai* following may be attributed to this cycle of violence that had swept through the country during this period. One member of the *Sai* movement in Isipingo, a frail woman in her fifties and her two-and-a-half year old grand-daughter were held at knife-point in her home

by two black men. They demanded money and guns. This devotee claimed:

It could have been much worse. My grand-child and I could have been killed, had it not been for *Swami*  
(Mrs. D.Raidoo, Personal Communication, March 1993).

Many Indians experienced a feeling of vulnerability with a new government. With the old oppressive white regime, they were disadvantaged, but they knew the parameters of their discrimination. Some Indians joined forces with their black counterparts. The more conservative Indians waited anxiously for a new dispensation that would treat them fairly, especially in the job market. There were no longer any guarantees for the many Indian university students completing their studies. One *Sai* devotee expressed his concern for his two children who were in the process of completing their studies.

During the *apartheid* rule we were not white enough. Now, with affirmative action we are not black enough  
(Personal Communication, October 1995).

The response of Hindu South African *Sai* devotees to this cycle of violence and discrimination has been to seek sanctuary in the spiritual/religious spaces created by Sai Baba. Primarily through the expressive domains of meditation and song, *Sai* devotees have constituted vehicles for communicating with Sai Baba (who lives in India) and for the creation of a state of mind conducive to good physical, mental and spiritual well-being. It also serves to give new meaning to religion through the meaningful singing of *bhajans*. Devotees understand *Sai*

*bhajans* either because they are in English or because the *bhajans* in Sanskrit have English translations in the *bhajan* books.

My entrance and acceptance into this religious community was facilitated by many factors. Dr. Rajen Cooppan, first introduced me to the congregation in 1990 as the "musical-director" of the *Sai* choir. My task was to audition and train singers for the *Sai* birthday celebration that was held in November that year. Although I was amused by my new title, I could tell from the sincere and earnest expressions on the faces of the devotees that they respected Dr. Cooppan and his judgement. He plays the harmonium and sometimes the folk guitar for every congregation that he attends. Dr. Cooppan has also been the creative force behind the Christmas plays and the original music composed from time to time for special events.

I have lived in Isipingo for ten years and I have taught at the local high school for that period of time. Many *Sai* devotees knew me in that capacity because their children attended that school at some time or other. Further, the chairman of the Isipingo *Sai* Centre, Mr. A.Pillay, a retired school principal and a champion of academic studies, was highly supportive when he introduced me to the congregation at different stages of my fieldwork.

Marcus and Fischer (1986) see ethnography as a personal and imaginative vehicle by which anthropologists [and

ethnomusicologists] are expected to make contributions to the theoretical and intellectual discussions, both within their discipline and beyond.

In some cases, because he or she did fieldwork alone, the ethnographer [ethnomusicologist] is more autonomously in charge of this medium of expression than is the case with the expository genres of other disciplines (*ibid.*: 21).

As a fieldworker working alone, I have had to consciously distance myself during the writing-up phase. The historical position of power in the field had to be revised by re-examining the notions of "Us" and "Them" and by ensuring a greater interaction of both parties in the fieldwork itself (Grenier and Guilbault 1990: 382). I must stress, at this point, that although I was accepted as an "insider" by the Sai devotees, there were many times when I felt a complete "outsider". I could not relate to all of their experiences or their absolute faith in Sai Baba. I became acutely aware of my dual identity within the Sai community.

#### **4. Performance of Fieldwork**

My fieldwork has involved hours of interaction with devotees of the Sai Centre in Isipingo. This has taken several forms over the past three years. As an "insider", training the Sai choir for special celebrations, I have met with the devotees at different venues for rehearsals. Sometimes we gathered in the dining-hall of the Hindu Society Hall in Isipingo which stands adjacent to the *Arutpa Khazagam* temple. This was necessary whenever the temple and the main hall were being used

for other activities or functions. When all attempts to secure a suitable venue for rehearsals failed, we went to the home of Mr. Cooppan, the widowed father of Dr. Cooppan, who lives close to the temple in Isipingo. After particularly tiring rehearsals, I sometimes stayed a little while longer to have juice and sandwiches (almost all devotees are vegetarians!) that the devotees provided. This became a point of social interaction with the *Sai* community. Some of my most valuable insight was gained through casual conversations during this interaction.

Fabian (1990: 5) focuses on the importance of conversation and verbal communication as opposed to observation as the basis for ethnographic research. Within the context of my project, recordings have played an equally important role as a method of data gathering. As an "outsider", I chose not to engage in any form of writing whilst I was with the devotees. From previous experience, I realised that this was one of the most disconcerting methods of fieldwork for the subjects involved. I restricted my collation of data to unobtrusive video-recordings (no bright lights were used), tape-recordings and interviews. While all my video-recordings and tape-recordings were made at the temple (the venue for weekly services), I conducted interviews at the homes of devotees at times that suited their schedules. They were not only accommodating but also went out of their way to be helpful by lending me *Sai* literature, *bhajan* books and photocopies of song material.

#### D. CONSTRUCTION OF THE TEXT

Ethnography is being used increasingly in an interdisciplinary manner. Its authority and rhetoric have spread to many fields where "culture" is a newly problematic object of description and critique (Clifford and Marcus 1986). Culture is seen as contested, temporal and emergent. Representation and explanation - both by insiders and outsiders - is implicated in this emergence.

In constructing my text, I have included personal narrative and objectified description. This type of textual transmission seemed appropriate for the dual nature of my role within the Sai context. Different rules for ethnography are now emerging in many parts of the world. The popular image of the ethnographer was one of the sympathetic, authoritative observer. A new figure has now entered the scene, the "indigenous ethnographer". Insiders studying their own culture offer new angles of vision and depths of understanding. Their accounts are empowered and restricted in unique ways (*ibid.*:9). My experience as a participant-observer has meant that there has been a blurring of the boundaries between the roles of "insider" and "outsider". In constructing my text, however, I have tried to maintain a distance even though I have been strongly influenced by my conversations with devotees (some direct quotes have been included) and my experiences with the Sai phenomenon.

In creating a text which examines the music and spirituality

of a minority of South Africa's people, I have focused on the factors that have led to the homogenisation of this group. I have examined the manner in which they have created a meaningful identity for themselves within the context of a "rainbow nation". Through the musical text one is able to determine the fears and the aspirations of the *Sai* devotees in their quest for peace and harmony (physically, mentally and spiritually).

Clifford and Marcus (1986) refer to the making of ethnography as being artisanal, tied to the worldly work of writing. It has been suggested that this writing reveals only the partiality of cultural and historical truths, the ways they are systematic and exclusive. It is now widely asserted that ethnographic truths are inherently partial - committed and incomplete.

## **E. PRINCIPAL THEMES**

### **1. *Sai* Spirituality in South Africa**

The Oxford Dictionary defines spirituality as being concerned with sacred or religious things; holy; divine. Included in this definition are "the spiritual life" and "spiritual songs". There is also the reference to the mind, of being refined and sensitive; not concerned with the material. This definition speaks of a relationship concerned with the soul or spirit, not with external reality. The World Book Dictionary states that spirituality refers to devotion to spiritual things instead of worldly things; of being neither corporeal nor material. An

appropriate quotation is included with this definition:

Prayer is, undoubtedly, the life and soul of spirituality  
(John Jebb in World Book Dictionary: 1992).

Amongst Sai Baba's many thoughts on spiritual discipline, he states:

Spiritual discipline is required mostly to control the mind and the desires which the mind chases  
(Sri Sathya Sai Baba in Davis ed.: 1974).

Sai Baba has spoken extensively on the matter of spiritual discipline:

In spiritual discipline, in conduct or practice, each of you can judge and ascertain the success or failure that is in store. Discipline is the essential thing for you; no age is too early for this. Just as one tends the body with food and drink at regular intervals, [one] must also tend to the needs of [one's] inner soul nature by regular worship and meditation and the cultivation of virtues (*ibid.* 63).

It is clear from the given quotations that the concept of spirituality is shared by people from different parts of the world. However, the perception of spirituality may vary from individual to individual. The ensuing discussion of this study will illustrate that devotional (spiritual) songs and meditation are the vehicles Sai devotees use to aspire towards this holy and uplifted state of mind.



This dissertation revolves around the *Sai* movement and the teachings of the Indian religious leader, Sai Baba, who at the age of fourteen proclaimed that he had a purpose to fulfil in assisting human beings in spiritual realisation. It was at this time that he sang his first *bhajan*. Since then, hundreds of *bhajans* have poured forth through his divine inspiration. These songs expound the various teachings of Sai Baba. One of the most interesting aspects of this movement is that all the major world religions are included in the basic philosophies and teachings. This is important for a country like South Africa which is a melting-pot of many cultures and religions.

As I discuss in Chapter Five, even the songs reflect the inclusion of the different world religions - Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Judaism and Zoroastrianism.

As a participant observer of many services of the Isipingo *Sai* centre, the sense of dedication and commitment that devotees of Sai Baba display, and the sheer joy expressed through their singing of *bhajans*, has prompted me to examine various aspects of this movement and its relevance for South Africans today.

In a country which has been and to a large extent still is, divided by race, colour, creed, gender and religious affiliation, the *Sai* movement provides an all-encompassing approach for realising one's spirituality (without changing one's religion), for maintaining a keen sense of morality and keeping in touch with basic human values such as peace, truth,

right conduct, non-violence and control of the senses through the singing of *Sai bhajans*.

## 2. Myths and Dreams

One of the central issues of *Sai* belief amongst the largely Hindu devotees of Isipingo is the dichotomy that exists between the intellectual and educational levels of the community on the one hand and the idea of myths and dreams as a central construct of knowledge on the other.

Kracke (1987) states:

We tend to see dreams and myths as belonging to opposed categories of experience. Dreams are personal, unsharable, highly fluid private experiences of a predominantly sensory nature. Myths are public, fixed linguistic forms, a kind of literature. Yet there are indications that in many cultures...dreams and myths are regarded as closely related. Their association is marked, for example, by parallels in narrative style between myth telling and dream telling [both of which have already been reflected in my introduction] (Kracke in Tedlock 1987: 31)

In western culture, dreaming is recognised as being self-related and this experience is not accorded the same status as waking reality. Dream experiences are thus not fully integrated with other memories.

There are other cultures other than our own [western culture] in which waking, dreaming, and various in-between experiences, though they may be distinguished, may well not be sorted out according to the simple oppositional dichotomy of real versus unreal, or reality versus fantasy (Tedlock 1987: 1).

In *Sai* communities, dreams and myths are accepted as ways of knowing. There is no clear dichotomy between the rational and irrational as separated in western culture. In recent western social theory, however, there is a move to unite traditional divisions of the body and mind (Lakoff 1987).

### **3. India as "Mother" Country to Indian South Africans**

The yearning of Indians in Durban to connect with India must be analysed against the backdrop of the politics of South Africa. In the 1950s, for example, the Natal Mercury carried several discussions about the repatriation programme instituted by the state for Indians to be returned to India. There was a move to deny Indian traders trading licenses because India was one of the first countries to impose sanctions against South Africa because of its racial policies. The Indian South Africans did not want to be held responsible for India's actions against South Africa. By this time, their primary concern was to be accepted and recognised as South Africans, in the land of their birth. The Smuts government had already initiated discriminatory laws against Indians specifically with the Asiatic Land Tenure Act of 1946; the Group Areas Act of 1950 directly affected the Indian community in Durban.

India was also one of the first countries to lift its four and a half decade trade embargo, after the unbanning of political organisations, the freeing of Nelson Mandela and the general move to lift academic, economic and cultural boycotts internationally. After these years of isolation, it has now

become possible for Indians to reconnect with their "mother" land again. However, in the interim, many of the Indians whose forefathers left India have become upwardly mobile. They have joined the ranks of the middle class. Through racial policies, they have been discriminated against. They could not vote. They were ostracized by the state. But, within the Indian communities there have emerged a large number of professional people. Clearly, these were not individuals who could go back to India and fit in with their Indian counterparts there. The lives of an entire generation of Indians in South Africa have been shaped by the limitations imposed by *apartheid*. One common denominator for Indians in South Africa and India is the global spiritual movement of the middle class, the *Sai* movement. The *Sai* hospitals, schools, universities and airports are indicative of middle class elements.

#### **4. Local Practices of a Global Spiritual Movement**

The connection between the local Isipingo community of *Sai* devotees and the global movement, headquartered in India, has been possible in numerous ways. As with all global networks and popular practices, it is largely through transnational media (books, radio, television), and the mass distribution of sound recording technology (audio cassettes and videos) that the *Sai* movement has made inroads into various communities. As a spiritual movement, song performance has been the uniting factor globally. The same songs have been transmitted through audio cassettes and *bhajan* books to different countries around the world.

Dreams and visions have also brought Sai Baba into the bedrooms of devotees. The miraculous appearance of *vibuthi* and *amrith* on photographs and statues of deities in the homes of people, for instance, has reinforced the sense of devotion of devotees locally. Similarly, technology, such as television, has brought Sai Baba literally into the living rooms of South Africans. Further, it is now possible for devotees to see Sai Baba in person in India. Aeroplanes are able to land on the "doorstep" of Puttapparthi at the Sri Sathya Sai Airport.

#### **5. Religion made Relevant**

The move towards homogenisation by Hindus was intended as a re-orientation of Hinduism through neo-Hindu movements, such as, the *Sai* movement. This re-orientation of Hinduism practised religion in a manner that was meaningful and relevant for the lives of Indian South Africans. It has not been possible for Indians to retain the caste and linguistic differences of India in South Africa where so many more interest (political, economic, religious) groups contend for power. While the Indian community may be divided internally, it has been important for them to retain a united front in South Africa. One of the ways they have done this is, for example, through the recent Save Radio Lotus Campaign; another way to unite has been through an Indian spiritual practice, that combines two of the most dominant forces in the Durban Indian community - Hinduism and Christianity. Sai Baba integrates many religious beliefs into his religious teachings, but the Isipingo *Sai* community combines Hinduism and Christianity. This is evident

from their celebrations of the birth of Sai Baba and the birth of Christ in a very secularized manner (see Chapter Six).

## **6. Religious Character of the Local Movement**

Christians, Muslims and Jews are welcome to join the *Sai* movement. In most other countries, there is a cross section of people, from different religious affiliations who have joined the *Sai* movement. This was clear from the interviews featured in the documentary, **God Lives in India**, which was televised on EastNet (a sub-channel of M-Net) in 1995. There were many foreigners, a catholic Italian, a black American Christian and many other non-Hindu devotees who had visited Sai Baba at his *ashram*.

In South Africa, the Group Areas Act of 1950 effectively prevented the spread of the *Sai* movement to other race groups. The *Sai* phenomenon emerged amongst the Indians and remained contained within those areas because the Indians were grouped together in separate areas. Within the Indian community, the Christian and Muslim Indians in South Africa, partly because of the exclusiveness of their religions, have been less partial to change. Christianity and Islam are religions that are firmly attached to their places of worship. There is only one supreme authority for each of these religions. Hinduism is markedly different. Its polytheistic approach embraces many aspects of God in many forms. Individuals are free to choose the form that suits their needs.

## 7. The Role of Women in the *Sai* movement

There are important patterns that begin to emerge when one examines the *Sai* movement in Isipingo. The initial contact with Sai Baba in India was made by women. Through their initiative, *bhajans* began in KwaZulu-Natal. Their devotion and commitment to the movement eventually led to the establishment of the Isipingo *Sai* Centre. The first qualified teacher of *Bal Vikas* classes in KwaZulu-Natal was an Indian woman from the Fiji Islands who had trained in India. Presently, the *Bal Vikas* classes in Isipingo are conducted by women who sacrifice their Saturday mornings to teach these classes voluntarily.

For the weekly congregations, the makeshift shrine of Sai Baba is set up by the women. Women also create an atmosphere conducive to meditation and spiritual awareness by lighting lamps or candles and incense sticks for weekly congregations and for special celebrations. Amongst *Sai* devotees both men and women are considered equals within this movement. Division of labour may differ according to the strengths and preferences of individuals but women are certainly not treated as being subservient, inferior beings.

In many Indian households the women have been seen as lesser beings whose lives have been controlled to a large extent by their fathers, brothers and husbands. Kim Knott (1987) focuses on this particular issue in her discussion of the role of women in the Krishna Consciousness Movement which was founded and led by Bhaktivedanta Swami in the United States:

In the Vaishnava bhakti tradition of which he (Bhaktivedanta Swami) was a part, the emphasis had been on the spiritual progress of men...In addition, the normal role of women in Indian society was one of domestic subservience (Knott 1987: 123).

In another account J. Stillson Judah described the place of women in this movement as follows:

Swami Bhaktivedanta...regards them (women) as prone to degradation, of little intelligence, and untrustworthy. They should not be given as much freedom as men, but should be treated like children: they should be protected all during their lives, by their fathers when young, later by their husbands, and in old age, by their sons (Judah 1974: 86).

Yet another criticism of this movement by Daner goes on to say:

Ideally, the woman must be completely submissive and a constant servant to her husband (Daner 1976: 68).

Through Sai teachings, however, the devotees of the Sai movement have worked towards greater humility and a keen sense of respect for one another which comes through recognition of one's inner strength and love for fellow human beings.

Afrikanerdom has the *volksmoeder* concept. Brink (1990) argues that the role allocated to women in Afrikaner society in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was bound by the notion of *volksmoeder* or "mother of the nation". In terms of the *volksmoeder* concept, the Afrikaner woman was depicted not only as the cornerstone of the household but also as a central unifying force within Afrikanerdom.



The women of the *Sai* movement, by virtue of their significant roles within the movement, may be perceived as a unifying force similar to that depicted by the Afrikaner women. The fact that they are in numerical majority (see statistics of Chapter Four) accords even greater strength to their role within the *Sai* movement.

Associated with the significant role of women in the *Sai* community, is a move away from religious despotism where God was perceived as the patriarchal authority. In the *Sai* context, there is clearly a reconstitution of this archaic Christian view. *Sai* devotees speak of the "motherhood" and the "fatherhood" of God. *Sai* Baba is seen as a homo-religios figure (see Chapter Six).

## **8. Music and Spirituality**

There are many elements that contribute to the realisation of one's spirituality within the *Sai* movement. These are the transformative elements of ritual which form an integral part of *Sai* worship (see Chapter Five). The *Sai* centre creates religious spaces (a sanctuary), far removed in spiritual terms, from the industrialized, mechanized routine of the western world. Musical globalism, as represented by the popular music industry, has taken on new meaning within the context of the Isipingo *Sai* centre. Popular music has been sacralized to make the texts of *Sai* songs more accessible to its devotees in contemporary society (see Chapter Six). Musical syncretism in the choice of melodies, the texts and the instruments speaks

of an eclectic style that is appropriate for the Indian South African. The choice of musical styles (see Chapters Five and Six) are far removed from the Rap, Metal and Punk styles of the 90s. The latter denote a harnessing of violence into a cultural code. There is no *Sai* Rap even though there are many examples of Tamil and Hindi Rap in Durban. *Sai* music appeals to the sensory spaces to maximise the creation of spiritual spaces for the devotees. Music is the vehicle used for the realisation of spirituality and the promotion of a moral ethic within the *Sai* community.

#### **F. Framework of the Dissertation**

The remainder of the dissertation is as follows: Chapter Two focuses on the origin of the *Sai* movement from its beginnings in India to its subsequent growth in South Africa. An historical background delves into the early beginnings of this movement in South Africa, the kinds of activities that lend impetus to its popularity, the sources of financial assistance, the choice of venues for singing congregations and the need for recognition as official "centres" by the Sri Sathya Sai World Council.

The third chapter presents a broad overview of the teachings, the philosophies and the basic tenets of this movement. The manner in which the goals of the *Sai* movement are being realised is also discussed with specific reference to the different activities that have been implemented by the *Sai* centres towards this end.

In Chapter Four the findings of an empirical study conducted through questionnaires are presented. Various relationships are explored. These include those of spirituality and music; personality profiles; levels of participation in various *Sai* activities; attitudes of devotees, linguistic abilities, religious affiliations. These relationships were taken from data in questionnaires that were completed by at least one third of a regular congregation and subsequently analysed. The findings of these questionnaires focus on the role of men and women within the movement. Whilst the teaching of this movement lends itself to gender equality, it creates serious conflict between traditional Indian male-female roles. Many South Africans do not accord equality to both sexes; thus *Sai* teaching conflicts with the practices of most South Africans as well as with the roles traditionally assigned to men and women in India. In more westernised contexts equality enhances and makes for personal growth and development from a holistic point of view. A significant aspect of this chapter focuses on the empirical data pertaining to *Sai* musicians, their music and their songs. Here, the expertise of the musicians and their vocal and instrumental knowledge and training is discussed.

The group devotional singing of the Isipingo *Sai* centre is documented and analyzed in Chapter Five. Song texts, English explanations of the texts, notation of relevant excerpts of music and a description of the song material is included. Throughout this discussion reference is made to a written set

of guidelines for conducting *bhajans* (see Appendix 1). These have been gleaned and compiled by *Sai* devotees from the many discourses of Sai Baba, much of which has been compiled into book form for local centres.

The specifics of two *Sai* celebrations are investigated in Chapter Six. The preparation for these celebrations are examined. The types of presentations, and the rationale governing the choice of song material are assessed. The celebrations that I have selected for this purpose are Sai Baba's Birthday celebration and the Christmas celebration because these are two of the most popular celebrations amongst the devotees. According to *Sai* belief, these are parallel celebrations because both celebrate the births of two *avatars* (see glossary). In this chapter I examine the *homo-religios* attributes that have been ascribed to Sai Baba in relation to the male/female characteristics of God. Another crucial aspect of my discussion examines the sacralization of popular music by *Sai* devotees.

Finally, Chapter Seven presents my concluding remarks and findings regarding the *Sai* movement in a "new South Africa".

## G. ENDNOTES

1. Of all the gods of the Hindu pantheon, Ganesha is the most interesting not only on account of his importance but also because of his iconographic peculiarities. He is depicted with an elephant head, a broken left tusk and a hanging belly, riding on a rat. His elephant head suggests wisdom and strength. The big belly symbolises wealth and prosperity. The rat is a symbol of destruction as it chews everything it can get its teeth on. Ganesha, by using the rat as his vehicle can be said to have conquered time and symbolises eternity. In one interpretation the rat also symbolises our wandering mind which needs restraining all the time, for when if it is left loose it can cause untold suffering and damage as do rats. The scythe, held in one hand, suggests that he is the destroyer of sins; in the other hand he has food which suggests sustenance; his upraised hand signifies compassion and that he is the protector of the innocent.
2. According to Hindu belief, Parvati is the consort of Lord Shiva. She is seen as the mother of the universe.
3. Lord Shiva is the name given to the third aspect of the Hindu trinity, known as the destroyer (Brahma is the creator and Vishnu is the protector and preserver). These are seen as aspects of one supreme reality. The name Shiva signifies auspiciousness; he who gives happiness and prosperity; the father of the universe; God engaged in the mergence, disintegration and destruction of the universe.
4. 1990 was the year of major political change in South Africa when the President F.W. de Klerk announced the dismantling of the *apartheid* regime.
5. The *Om* is the first sound in Hindu belief. All other sounds are derived from this sound (see Chapters Five and Six).
6. The harmonium is a reed organ. Its keys control the flow of air across metal reeds. Air pressure is provided by bellows operated by the players one hand or feet, depending upon the construction of the instrument. Below the keyboard are levers which may be pressed to increase or decrease the volume. The harmonium has "stops" by which the quality of the tone may be changed. This instrument was developed in France early in the 1800s. Today, the harmonium is most commonly played in India.
7. *Bhajan* comes from the root *bhaj* meaning "to worship". It is a devotional hymn in praise of a particular deity. It has reference to religious and moral codes and is often a form of supplication. The *bhajan* is popular amongst Indians in South Africa because of its musical appeal and its role as a devotional form. Several *bhajan-mandal* groups (troupes of singers and musicians whose repertoire

is entirely devotional) exist throughout the Hindu community. They render *bhajans* at religious festivals and at weekly congregational meetings. The participants generally sit cross-legged on the floor and sing in a chorus with a lead singer. They are normally accompanied by the harmonium and a variety of percussion instruments, such as, the *talam* (finger cymbals) and the *manjiras* (tambourine-like instrument).

8. *Bal Vikas* is the Sanskrit word for "blossoming of human excellence". The *Bal Vikas* programme was devised by Sai Baba to allow the child's personality and character to blossom to its fullest potential. Towards this end, teachers have been trained by the Sai movement to teach free of charge for one hour per week. Specific techniques are used. The success of the programme is reflected in reports from the United Kingdom, the United States, Argentina, Australia and South Africa.
9. According to Hindu doctrine, an *avatar* is an incarnation of the Formless God in human form. The belief is that when the decline of morality and spirituality in society degenerates so uncontrollably, the intervention of an *avatar* becomes necessary to lead humanity back to *dharma* (right conduct). This Hindu doctrine of divine incarnation is also found in other faiths.
10. *Shivarathri* is the great night for Lord Shiva. This festival is celebrated between February and March. It is a sacred occasion for all devotees of Lord Shiva. According to Hindu tradition, Shiva consumed the deadly poison which emanated from the ocean of milk as it was being churned by the *devas* (Gods). In doing so, he saved the universe from destruction. The prayers that were offered on that night have been repeated annually. In Hindu mythology, a great deluge occurred which left the entire world in darkness. Parvathi, Shiva's consort, offered intense prayers to the Lord to restore light to the world. Parvathi's prayers were answered.

Devotees of Shiva fast during the day and night for this festival to keep their minds unruffled and their thoughts focused on Shiva. Those who attend temple services keep an all night vigil at the temple, offering prayers and chanting sacred hymns dedicated to Lord Shiva. All Hindu temples are illuminated on this night.

11. *Saraswathi Puja* is celebrated by Hindus in honour of the deity Saraswathi. She is represented as a young female of fair complexion with four hands. In one of her two right hands she holds a flower which she offers to her Consort, Brahma. In the other hand she holds a book of palm leaves signifying that she is ready to impart knowledge to those wishing to learn (the wish is expressed in the form of worship). In one of her left hands she holds a string of pearls called the *Shiva Mala* which

serves as a rosary and in the other a *damara* (a small drum). She is most often seen in white standing on a lotus, holding a *vina* (Indian string instrument) which represents music.

Saraswathi is worshipped with offerings of perfumes, white flowers and rice. Along with these will be placed the implements of learning such as pen, paper and books. Devotees are expected to abstain from writing or doing work of an academic nature on this occasion as they ascribe the power of exercising these abilities to be derived from the goddess.

12. *Kavadi* is a festival celebrated in the Tamil month of *Thai* (January to February). The festival falls on a full moon day when devotees, after performing special rituals and maintaining a strict vegetarian diet walk to a nearby river and offer prayers. They then return to the temple carrying a *kavadi* (usually made of wood and decorated with flowers) on their shoulders. Many Tamils in South Africa observe this festival. Whenever misfortune strikes an individual in the family, for example, a child suffers from a protracted illness or disability, the parents take a vow that they will, together with the afflicted person, perform the *kavadi* ritual.
13. **Shri Vaithianatha Esperar Alayam** (commonly known as the Umgeni Road Temple), is an unusual name which owes its origin to the mother shrine in Tanjore, India. There is a small town in Tanjore district about 250 kilometres from Madras which is known as the *Vaithia Esperan Koovil*. This temple is so called because it is dedicated to Lord Shiva, the divine healer.
14. *Arutpa Khazagam* - *Arutpa* means songs and poems produced under divine inspiration. *Khazagam* means society.

## CHAPTER TWO

### A. THE ORIGIN OF THE SAI MOVEMENT

Each one, every one,  
they for themselves,  
to their own gods,  
in their own way;

Each one, every one,  
will indeed attain  
the feet of  
their own god,

each one's god  
every one's god  
is a god  
without faults;

each one, every one,  
his own fate,  
his own way,  
stands to attain.

(translated by A.K.Ramanujan in Dehejia 1988)

This hymn, composed in the ninth century by the Tamil saint, Nammalvar, and translated into English by Ramanujan (Dehejia 1988: 110) speaks of the universality of the concept of God, irrespective of the path that one may choose to follow. Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba of Puttaparthi in South India is for many the embodiment of this universality of religion and spirituality. He has been the charismatic force behind the spiritual regeneration movement called the *Sai* movement.

I have divided the history of the *Sai* movement into four distinct periods. They are Shirdi Sai Baba in India, Shirdi Sai Baba in South Africa, Sri Sathya Sai Baba in India and Sri Sathya Sai Baba in South Africa.



## 1. Shirdi Sai Baba in India

This spiritual movement originated in modern India. I refer to this movement as a spiritual one as opposed to a religious one. A religious movement would normally expound the teachings of one specific religion, for example, Christianity or Islam. This spiritual movement includes all religions. Its main goal is the realisation of humankind's spirituality through various means, such as, the singing of *bhajans*.

In the remote village of Shirdi in the State of Maharashtra which is approximately 300 kilometres from the city of Bombay, the ascetic sage or holy man, an enigmatic figure known as Sai Baba ( - 1918), impacted on the spiritual lives of thousands of people for many decades, spanning approximately seventy-five years in the nineteenth century. He is reputed to have had immense spiritual power and wisdom. For many people his life appeared to be a puzzling one for he was quite at home being a Muslim and a Hindu at the same time (Souvenir Brochure 1985).

Since the first Islamic conquest of India in 1192, India has suffered many feuds between Muslims and Hindus in their fight for dominance. These religious disputes eventually led to the division of India into India and Pakistan in 1947. Later, in 1965, India and Pakistan became embroiled in another feud over the rule of Kashmir. In 1971, the Bengali people were driven into India by the Pakistani army. Once again India intervened and created the state of Bangladesh. Between the years 1980 and 1984 Mrs Indira Gandhi, the prime minister of India, became

involved in a dispute with the Sikh religious party<sup>1</sup>. In October 1984 Mrs Gandhi was shot dead by her own Sikh bodyguards. In the light of India's religious disputes, one can understand the stance exhibited by Shirdi Sai Baba. He preached about the unity of religions and the need to practice tolerance and forbearance. His mission revolved around the reconciliation of Hindus and Muslims in the region, teaching the model of exemplary life. Before he died in 1918, he informed his devotees that he would return in 1926.

In the early nineteenth century, Sri Shirdi Sai Baba's teachings and popularity spread from the states of Maharashtra and Gujerat to further afield in North India, and to a lesser extent down South. Some of the Indian immigrants to Natal from Gujerat had knowledge of this sage and hence accepted him as their spiritual master (*guru*) in South Africa.

## **2. Shirdi Sai Baba in South Africa**

There is not much historical information available, however, as to the prevalence or extent of devotion to, and worship of, the Shirdi Master in Natal in the late nineteenth century. The tradition of worshipping the *guru* in India was perpetuated in Natal by two Gujerati-speaking people in Durban, namely, Mr.B.M.Rana and Mr.D.H.Makanjee. The former is said to have been a devotee for more than forty years and built a shrine to house the image of the sage. It is important to note, however, that the early Sai movement, with the spiritual leader as Sri Shirdi Sai Baba, did not develop in Natal as it did in India.

### 3. Sri Sathya Sai Baba in India

In 1926, eight years after the death of Sri Shirdi Sai Baba, Sri Sathya Sai Baba was born into a poor but devout Telegu-speaking family in the remote village of Puttaparthi. This village is located in the state of Andhra Pradesh in South India which is approximately 160 kilometres by road from the city of Bangalore. He was named Sathyanarayana (meaning "the true God") at birth but was later referred to as Sathya Sai Baba.

Although Sai Baba did not have much formal schooling or teaching in the Hindu scriptures, he demonstrated a most intimate and extensive knowledge of philosophical and classical literature as a young child. This earned him the respect and reverence of renowned scholars. His capacity for spontaneous oratory, his ability to hold the rapt attention of large audiences and his knowledge and authority of things spiritual captured the attention of thousands of people.

At the age of fourteen he effectively assumed leadership of the Sai spiritual regeneration movement. He was endowed from birth with extraordinary powers, wisdom, love and charm. He is seen by his devotees as the reincarnation of a legendary spiritual figure, so many are the miraculous and extraordinary happenings associated with him. His stature is that of an avatar. At the Second World Conference of Sri Sathya Sai Seva Organisations held in Bombay in 1968, Sai Baba astounded the delegates, especially those from abroad, by explicitly declaring his *avatarhood*.

Although his personality and style of leadership differed in many respects from that of Shirdi Sai Baba, his fundamental philosophy and message displayed in his actions and words, bespoke a continuation of the spiritual mission of the earlier leader. Further, Sri Sathya Sai Baba has confirmed the inner identity of the two entities.

Through the spiritual guidance of Sri Sathya Sai Baba, the *Sai* movement acquired greater impetus, pressing on to a third phase, as it were, and carried its influence to the five continents, principally by his ability to transcend the barriers of time and space. It is significant that it was only in 1968 that Sri Sathya Sai Baba travelled out of India for a two-week visit to Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania.

#### **4. Forging links with the "Mother" Country**

Many South African Indians, with their rich cultural heritage from India, have always felt the urge to visit their "mother" country. This is evident from the large numbers of South African Indians who travel to India each year either on holiday or religious pilgrimages or a combination of both. It was particularly after India gained independence in 1947, that South Africans have been drawn to this destination.

India, one of the first countries to do so, imposed sanctions against South Africa on 17 July 1946. This was a direct result of South Africa's *apartheid*<sup>2</sup> policy. It was this policy that alienated South African Indians from the land of their birth.

Although the Indians contributed much towards the economy and towards academic fields since their arrival in 1860, they were always treated during the *apartheid* regime (1948 - 1991) as "second class" citizens.

According to information obtained from the Cultural Centre of the Indian Embassy in Durban, South Africa was forced to withdraw from the Commonwealth in 1961 because of pressure from India. During the time of the boycott, South Africans of Indian origin could still visit India. However, because South African Airlines were not allowed to land in India, people who wanted to visit their motherland had to go to India via other countries. It was virtually impossible for white South Africans to visit India during this period.

With the lifting of sanctions on 25 September 1993 and with the Indian airlines and South African Airlines being able to fly freely between the two destinations, there has been a phenomenal increase in the number of visitors to India. Indian-South African ties were also re-established in 1992 with the opening of a Cultural Centre in Gauteng. On 6 May 1994 the Indian Embassy was officially opened in Johannesburg. The Durban office opened only in July 1994. In my opinion, the increased possibilities for travel may not affect the racial composition of the *Sai* movement in South Africa in the next five to ten years. The reason is that the racial segregation of the previous government effectively prevented any other spiritual/religious movement from gaining a foothold in the

white, black or coloured communities. Their essential Christian faith (as practised by the different denominations of churches) has been firmly entrenched through every facet of their lives. Education, the media and even political campaigns have used Christianity as its emotive base.

#### **5. Emergence of the Sai Phenomenon in South Africa**

Pioneer members of the Sai Movement in Natal record the years 1970 to 1972 as being the time when the name "Sai" and "Sai Baba" emerged amongst the Indian community. In 1971 a certain Sri Narayana Baba of Hyderabad (India), who claimed to be a disciple of Sri Shirdi Sai Baba, visited Durban for a week. The home of his host was inundated with people as they were led to believe that he possessed spiritual healing powers. He handed out *vibhuti* (sacred ash) and distributed metallic objects such as rings and pendants with the figure of Shirdi Sai Baba embossed on them or photographic images clasped inside them. Although these materializations were believed to be genuine at the time, the authenticity of the man concerned has since come into question. However, his visit stimulated interest in the Sai phenomenon and many South African Indians started visiting the tomb of the departed Sri Shirdi Sai Baba in India.

#### **6. Sri Sathya Sai Baba in South Africa**

The first reported contact with Sri Sathya Sai Baba by Indians from Natal was made by three women from Pietermaritzburg in 1969, while they were on a tour of Madras (Mesdames Govindamma

"Gala" Naidoo, Gnanam Naidoo and Ammoy Govender). A mutual friend had taken them to the *ashram* at Whitefield (outside Bangalore) where Sai Baba immediately recognised them as visitors from South Africa. When "Gala" Naidoo ("Gala" being her nickname) returned to their car and opened her handbag, which had been left behind in the car during their visit, she was surprised to find a deposit of *kumkum* (vermilion powder) in it. She was overwhelmed by this display of Sai Baba's supernatural power, as were her companions. On her return to Natal she distributed the *kumkum* amongst relatives and friends. At the suggestion of her mother, she began *bhajan* services at her home in Pietermaritzburg.

In the same year (1969) "Gala" Naidoo's sister, Mrs. Joy Reddy, started two *bhajan* groups in the greater Durban area, one at her mother's home in Welbedacht and the other at her own home in Isipingo. Prior to the formation of the latter groups, a few people from Durban used to travel weekly to Pietermaritzburg to "Gala" Naidoo's home for *bhajans*. Later, these people from Durban started attending *bhajans* at Joy Reddy's house where Sai Baba began to leave his famous "visiting cards", that is, inexplicable materializations such as the appearance of *amrith* (nectar) or *vibuthi* (sacred ash) on photographs or statues of himself or other God forms being worshipped.

Through these "visiting cards" Sai Baba reached out to potential devotees in Durban and Pietermaritzburg and

instigated the formation of many *bhajan* groups in various localities. Also, from 1970 onwards, people from Natal began to visit the *ashram* of Sri Sathya Sai Baba. They came back with remarkable first-hand experiences of materializations of rings, pendants, icons of deities, photographs and *vibhuti*, and of private and group interviews with Sai Baba himself. They also commented on the amelioration of their personal problems as a result of their contact with Sai Baba. The *bhajan* groups that emerged easily included pictures and images of Sri Shirdi Sai Baba, emulating the practice of Prashanthi Nilayam. The Shirdi Sai Baba devotees were also drawn into this growing *Sai* movement, with Sri Sathya Sai Baba as leader (Personal Communication: June to November 1995).

#### **B. FORMATION OF CO-ORDINATING ORGANISATIONS**

In 1973 two independent bodies were constituted in Durban, Natal. They were the Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba Foundation of South Africa (headquartered in Durban) and the Sri Sathya Sai Seva Samithi of Natal. Their main intention at the time was to function as co-ordinating bodies of the various *bhajan* groups, particularly for the celebration of important religious festivals. The Sri Sathya Sai Seva Samithi of Natal comprised three areas - Merebank, Havenside (Chatsworth) and Phoenix. The Foundation, at one stage, had nearly forty affiliated *bhajan* groups, covering the following areas in Natal - Pietermaritzburg, Welbedacht, Mandini, Chatsworth, Westville, Clairwood, Reservoir Hills, Isipingo Beach, Umhlatuzana Township, Overport, Shallcross, Northdene, Mobeni Heights,



Westcliff and Springfield. All of these areas were designated as Indian areas through the Group Areas Act of 1950. In the Gauteng area, *bhajan* groups in Benoni, Springs and Pretoria were also affiliated with the Foundation.

One of the most significant celebrations hosted by the Natal Samithi used to be the nine-day *Navarathri*<sup>3</sup> festival which was conducted nightly under a large marquee. The tent was regularly filled to capacity with enthusiastic devotees. The Foundation sponsored joint functions for other important Hindu festivals such as *Shivarathri*, *Sri Ramnaumee*, *Easwaramma Day* (the mother of Sai Baba), *Gurupoornima*, *Krishna Asthamee*, *Ganesha Chaturthi*, *Deepavali*, *Dassara*, *Akanda Bhajan* (24 hours continuously) and Sai Baba's birthday on 23 November.

The Foundation and the Natal Samithi functioned as a co-ordinating body under their respective constitutions, but each body also operated as independent *bhajan* groups in the Overport and Merebank areas respectively. This dual functioning created some confusion amongst the devotees at times. *Bhajan* activities were extended in later years to include service to the poor and needy, especially during special celebrations such as *Deepavali* (the Hindu festival of lights) and Christmas.

Both these bodies adopted constitutions with ambitious objectives for the *Sai* movement in South Africa, but without consulting with the World Council of Sri Sathya Sai Seva Organisations in India. Their belief was that they could

function autonomously as national or provincial co-ordinating bodies. They maintained contact with the world body by sending copies of the constitution and reports of their activities. It was, however, only in 1979 that they were registered and listed as recognised overseas Sri Sathya Sai Organisations by the Indian headquarters. Although the Foundation sought to be accredited as the national co-ordinating body and to retain its name, the World Council was prepared to accord both bodies only "Centre" status<sup>4</sup> under its prevailing constitution. It was only in 1981 that the World Charter and constitution was revised to provide for the recognition of overseas national co-ordinating bodies. It is thus clear that the Foundation and the Natal Samithi were rather ahead of their times both in terms of their constitution, and the scope of their organisation. However, after their registration as "Centres", other *bhajan* groups also sought registration.

The formation of the Bhagavan Sri Sai Baba Foundation of South Africa may be attributed to the determination of a businessman from Durban, Mr S.A.Pather of Overport (Durban). He drafted a constitution which provided for a host of officials: five honorary Life Vice-Presidents; a President; three Vice-Presidents; a Chairman; a Secretary; a Treasurer; nine Council members and later five Trustees. In later years an Educational Adviser was added. The educational wing of the *Sai* movement with its training of teachers for *Bal Vikas* classes needed co-ordination and guidance. Officers were appointed through biennial elections. In its formative years when the Foundation

had not yet acquired its own premises, its council meetings, *bhajans* and other functions were held on the premises of the Admiral Hotel in Overport or the Rajmahal Hotel in Merebank which was owned by a *Sai* devotee.

During these early years the Foundation and the Natal Seva Samithi maintained constant contact with developments in India by sending their delegates to participate in the Second and Third World Conferences of the Sri Sathya Sai Seva Organisation held at Prashanti Nilayam, the *ashram* of Sai Baba, in 1975 and 1980 respectively (Souvenir Brochure 1985).

Increasingly during Christmas and New Year, South African devotees appeared to be drawn to Prashanti Nilayam, on a pilgrimage to the feet of *Sai*. The tiny village of Puttaparthi has been transformed from an obscure village in India to another *Tirupathi*<sup>5</sup>, the equivalent to *Sai* devotees as the Vatican is to Catholics or Mecca to Muslims, as an endless stream of pilgrims visit Puttaparthi to obtain *darshan* (the blessing) of Sai Baba. In recent times Prashanti Nilayam has been made even more accessible to devotees from all over the world with the construction of the Sri Sathya Sai Airport near the village.

In a programme produced by the Netherlands Sri Sathya Sai Organisation entitled **God Lives in India**, which was televised on EastNet (a sub-channel of M-Net) in 1995, it was estimated that there are approximately fifty million devotees of Sai Baba

all over the world. One million devotees were estimated to have been at a single birthday celebration of Sai Baba with thousands of devotees attending the Christmas celebrations each year. Every day there are between ten and twenty thousand people at Prashanti Nilayam with these numbers increasing on special occasions. These statistics are staggering when one considers that most South Africans have never heard of Sai Baba.

It was only in 1979 that the Foundation was registered with the Sai World Council and received recognition as an overseas Sri Sathya Sai Organisation. This recognition prompted the Council of the Foundation to encourage *bhajan* groups to upgrade their standard of work and to be on par with regular Sri Sathya Sai Baba Centres elsewhere by instituting *Bal Vikas* (child development education) classes, study circles, *mahila vibhags* (women's circle) and *sevadals* (volunteer workers). The Foundation then assisted these groups in registering them with the World Council. This new status lent impetus to the movement and ensured the viability of the different Centres. The Foundation in Durban embraced a broad spectrum of Sai activities and was thus regarded as the "Senior" Centre. *Bhajan* groups and Centres looked to the local Councils for guidance. However, the link with Gauteng was not sustained, partially because the Foundation was not formally accorded a national co-ordinating role in South Africa by the World Council.

The expansion and consolidation of the *Sai* movement in KwaZulu-Natal between 1970 and 1980 may be largely attributed to the initiatives of the Foundation's Council. Regular meetings and planned activities have sustained the interest and involvement of *Sai* devotees. In July 1979 and in October 1980 two highly successful symposia were held by the Foundation that focused on spiritual regeneration and the relevance of the Sri Sathya Sai Baba's development programmes for children and adults. The latter helped give balance to the popularity of the *bhajan* sessions (Personal Communication: August 1995).

#### **1. The Building of a "Mother Centre"**

The *Sai* movement in Natal was strengthened even further when the first chairman of the Foundation's Council, the late Mr S.A.Pather took steps to secure a plot of land, at a nominal price from the Durban Corporation, in order to build the first Sri Sathya Sai Prayer Hall in South Africa. In July 1978, the Foundation received the Title Deed to a piece of land, one acre in extent, in Moorton, Chatsworth, Durban.

The acquisition of a site for building was only the beginning of another phase in the growth of the Foundation. Funds had to be raised to erect the prayer hall. This task was a difficult one because, under the rules of the governing Sathya Sai Organisations the world over, donations could not be elicited from the membership or the public for any undertaking, nor should the names and amounts of donations be published. It was clear that donations of money, labour or material should

be made voluntarily, arising from a sense of social responsibility and sacrifice. Sai Baba emphasised correct motivation as a *sine qua non* for correct *sadhana* (spiritual practice). To give selflessly, without the need to be acknowledged for what has been given, is considered an important part of spiritual practice for Sai devotees. The building of structures, whilst necessary, is thus regarded as being part and parcel of spiritual growth.

This project was thus started when sufficient funds were accumulated through personal pledges of the Council members of the Foundation. After the approval and blessing of the building plan by Sai Baba had been obtained in January 1979, the foundation stone was laid in the following year on *Krishna Asthmee* (Lord Krishna's birthday), when Sai Baba manifested one of his "visiting cards" at the ceremony. As soon as the foundations were laid and the brickwork had reached windowsill level, *bhajans* began to be held every Sunday morning. These attracted increasing attendance in a structure that did not have a roof, doors and windows and which stood amongst builder's rubble. Such was the enthusiasm of the devotees. The Sunday morning *bhajans* continue to this day in a hall generally filled to capacity (though now with a roof!). The prayer hall was eventually completed in stages in time for the *akanda bhajans* (24 hours of devotional singing) of November 1983. With the assistance of the various Centres, the prayer hall at Moorton, Chatsworth has come to assume the status of a "Mother Centre" for all the Sai devotees in Natal. This

building facilitated the activities of the *Sai* Movement especially after the formation of the Co-ordinating Committee of Sri Sathya Sai Organisations of Natal in July 1983 under the direction of the World Council and its chairman, Mr Indulal Shah.

In 1983 the Foundation began the construction, on the same site, of a magnificent twin-domed shrine dedicated to Lord Ganesha and Lord Shiva, in memory of its first President, the late Mr B. Venketarathnam. The Foundation also erected a two-storey building, alongside the prayer hall, to provide additional space (six classrooms, which may be converted into a mini hall when necessary, on the upper floor) for the expanded activities of the Foundation and the Co-ordinating Committee, especially for the *Bal Vikas* Programme.

This building houses the Sri Sathya Sai *Bal Vikas* Academy and provides for the systematic training of *Bal Vikas* teachers (*gurus*), the development of teaching material, and the evaluation of the children's programmes by the Co-ordinating Committee. This committee comprises men and women *Sai* devotees who have a thorough understanding and knowledge of these programmes. They have acquired this knowledge through their visits to India, where these programmes are used extensively; from the available literature and teaching manuals that have been obtained from India and, in some cases, from training programmes and seminars that they have attended in India. Another programme called the Education in Human Values

Programme also shares the facilities of the Academy.

In January 1981 the *de facto* co-ordinating role of the Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba Foundation of South Africa and of the Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Seva Samithi of Natal was officially taken over by the Co-ordinating Committee of Sri Sathya Sai Organisations of Natal. This was established at the Mauritius Mini-Conference for Africa (1983) in terms of the Charter of the Sri Sathya Sai World Organisations granted by Sai Baba and adopted by the Third World Conference in January 1981. The Foundation readily extended hospitality to the new body to locate its headquarters on the premises in Moorton and to conduct its activities from there. Thus, the Sai movement entered into a new phase of expansion and consolidation (Personal Communication: August 1995).

### **C. THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ISIPINGO SAI CENTRE**

The Isipingo Sai Centre, where my research is located, is based in Isipingo Hills. It started in the home Mrs Asothi Puckree in Isipingo Rail in 1972. When this family moved to Isipingo Hills in 1975, the venue for weekly *bhajan* singing transferred to their new home. During these years, this family became increasingly devout because of the miracles with which they were blessed. The number of devotees increased steadily. The congregation moved from the lounge of the Puckree's home, to their garage. By 1981, the number of people attending the weekly *bhajan* singing exceeded one hundred. It was thus decided to move the gathering to the Hindu Society Hall which



stands adjacent to the temple. This move was also necessary because many of the devotees wanted to put into operation other wings of the *Sai* movement, such as, the *Bal Vikas* classes, the service wing and the spiritual activities, all of which were prerequisites for recognition by the World Council of "Centre" status. It was only in 1984 that the Isipingo group finally acquired this status.

(Dr. Rajen Cooppan; Mrs. Jayarani Moodley and Mrs. Asothi Puckree: Personal Communications, November 1995).

In 1991 when the *Arutpa Khazagam*<sup>6</sup> temple was finally complete, the Isipingo *Sai* Centre moved their congregation from the hall to this temple next door. It was here that I conducted most of my fieldwork. This included video-recordings, audio-recordings, interviews and the distribution and collation of questionnaires

#### D. ENDNOTES

1. The Sikhs are a religious sect of northwestern India which was founded in the early 1500's as an offshoot of Hinduism. The Sikh religion differs sharply from Hinduism, especially in being monotheistic and in denying caste. Sikhs are famous as soldiers (World Book Dictionary 1992).
2. *Apartheid* was the South African government's policy of racial segregation, held from 1948 until its abolition in 1991. Its original goal was the separate development of the nation's several racial groups. The word *apartheid* means "separateness" in Afrikaans, one of South Africa's official languages.

*Apartheid* not only segregated whites and non-whites, but it also segregated South Africa's non-white groups from one another. For example, certain residential areas, called townships, were reserved for people of a particular racial group. To enforce segregated housing, the government moved thousands of families.

Until the 1980's, a non-white needed an identity card to enter a white neighbourhood. State schools were completely segregated. Non-whites could not hold jobs reserved for whites (World Book 1992).

3. *Navarathri* is observed, in Hindu ceremony, in honour of the consorts of the Trinity. The motherhood of God is celebrated. The ten days following the new moon in the month of September is a period of solemnity and religious fervour. The adoration of Shakti, the cosmic force, is central to the occasion. *Navarathri* or nine nights are set aside by seers to be shared equally among the three goddesses. The first three nights are dedicated to the worship of Shakti, the multi-faceted goddess and the consort of Shiva. The second three nights are devoted to Lakshmi, the consort of Vishnu, the goddess of wealth and prosperity, and the last three nights are for Sarasvathi, goddess of learning and consort of Brahma. The tenth and concluding day is celebrated in honour of Devi, the goddess of the Hindu pantheon.
4. In order to qualify for "Centre" status, the centre must have prescribed wings of the *Sai* movement in operation. They are the *Bal Vikas* classes, the weekly *bhajan* congregation, the service wing and the study circle (spiritual wing).
5. *Tirupathi* is a temple in the state of Andhra Pradesh in India that attracts thousands of devotees each year. This temple honours the goddess Mariamman - the goddess of rain (Mari means "rain"). Her function is also to protect people against small-pox, cholera and other contagious diseases. The Mariamman temple in Isipingo has a similar appeal for Hindus in South Africa.

6. "Arutpa" means poems and songs produced under divine inspiration; "Khazagam" means society. The temple built by this society is essentially a Hindu temple which includes all Indian language groups. There are some members of this society who are also members of the *Sai* organisation.

## CHAPTER THREE

### A. AN OVERVIEW OF THE SAI MISSION

...and you find it difficult to believe in miracles? I, on the contrary, find it easy. They are to be expected. The starry world in time and space, the pageant of life, the processes of growth and reproduction, the instincts of animals, the inventiveness of nature... they are all utterly unbelievable, miracles piled upon miracles...

(Professor W. MacNiele Dixon in Murphet 1971: 11)

#### 1. The Basic Philosophy of the Sai Movement

When Sai Baba was still a young man, his older brother sought to dissuade him from performing miracles and gathering masses of people around him, believing that his brother was possibly just satisfying his ego. To this Sai Baba replied, in part:

I have a task: to foster all mankind and ensure for all of them lives of Ananda (bliss). I have a 'vow': to lead all who stray away from the straight path again into goodness and save them. I am attached to the 'work' that I love: to remove the sufferings of the poor and grant them what they lack ([s.n.]: 1988).

This quotation encapsulates the gist of the mission of the Sai movement.

#### 2. "Ministering to the Oppressed"

In a paper on the Independent Charismatic Churches in Durban (1995), Thompson discusses modes of sacrality similar to those of the Sai Movement, that is, the prosperity gospel and divine healing. This form of Charismatic Christianity emerged in the early 1980's, a time of extreme social and political tension in South Africa. This was a "white-orientated", middle-class

religious movement. A significant trend was the blurring of previous opposites; especially, the secular and the sacred, formal and popular religion, and ethnicity and non-racialism. The effect has been to create a global popular religiosity which is transcultural, eclectic, and fluid (Poewe in Thompson 1988: 362).

In South Africa, the Sai Movement has followed a similar pattern to that of the Charismatic Churches. The development of the former must be seen against the backdrop of political and social tensions of the early 70s. Although the Sai Movement embraces all faiths, a geographically peculiar situation arose in South Africa.

Through the Group Areas Act of 1950, different race groups were segregated and confined to live in specific areas. The popularity of the Sai Movement amongst the middle-class Indian community remained within the precincts of the Indian community largely because of the lack of interaction with other race groups. With the huge following of white Americans, British, Australian and European devotees, it is somewhat odd that South African devotees (with the exception of a few whites) are generally Hindus of Indian descent. The reasons thereof have already been mentioned in Chapter One.

In addition to the focus on divine healing and prosperity, Sai Baba also stresses education as the key to spiritual upliftment. In South Africa, white Christian missionaries

stressed the importance of western education for the upliftment of the black population. Of course, this idea of education did not appeal to the black population because it was in direct contrast to the teachings of their culture. Oral tradition was the means of transmitting knowledge amongst the black South Africans. The *Sai* system of education is discussed later in this chapter.

The *Sai* movement like the Charismatic Churches in Durban has combined formal religion with popular global religion. Their focus is on experiencing the divine, engaging in spiritual quests and forming experiential gestalts as, for example, in narrative testimonies (Thompson 1995: 2). My own "encounters" with Sai Baba is evidence of this.

The question of a blurring or fusion of the secular and sacred, of sacralizing popular culture, is discussed in Chapter Six where popular melodies form the basis of sacred songs.

### **3. Towards the Realisation of the *Sai* Mission**

*Sai* devotees identify four ways in which Sai Baba's goals are being realised in *Sai* communities (Personal communications, *Sai* devotees, October 1994 - June 1995).

3.1. He has captured the attention of people and has established his spiritual authority.

Sai Baba has done this through the performance of miracles of healing, the unexpected materialization of objects,

transformation of one substance to another and so on whenever he deems it necessary to do so. There is evidence of his omnipresence, of omniscience, and of doing anything he wishes. His power has been interpreted as divine power for he defies present day rational knowledge and the limits imposed by the rational world. This is an important observation because it draws attention to Sai Baba and his abilities. From the vast body of literature that deals with personal experiences of professional and well-qualified people from different parts of the world, some of which I cite during the course of my discussion, , one becomes aware of a phenomenon that is not ordinary. One becomes aware of a man who is no ordinary man. As Sri Aurobindo (1873-1950), the Indian philosopher, once said:

I might have to speak of laws and forces not recognised by reason or physical science.

(Murphet, 1971: 171)

Howard Murphet, the author of Sai Baba - Man of Miracles, was educated at the University of Hobart. Being a Westerner devoted to science and logic, he spent many months with Sai Baba researching and investigating the many inexplicable powers of this man. He found that:

along with Christ-like miraculous powers went a Christ-like love, compassion and the God-knowledge that opens the door to a new vision of life (*ibid*, back cover).

Sai Baba's power serves the needs of humanity. Recognising the

power vested in this being, who looks like us but who is more than just a human being, generates faith in him and his leadership.

3.2. He has led an exemplary life.

Sai Baba has said:

My life is my message. Expansion is my life. No reason for love, no season for love.

He emphasises the need for love at all times. Love should not be dictated by reasons or seasons. In his strenuous daily routine of service activity, ministering to hundreds of people from all parts of the world, unruffled and always gentle, one sees Sai Baba the embodiment of divine love. Such creative energy and sustained activity over the years can only be the manifestation of divine love. He has reached out to people in remote parts of the world without the constraints of space and time. Amazing events in different parts of the world have led people to believe in Sai Baba. Dr. John S. Hislop, in his book, My Baba and I, states:

My wife and I first heard of Baba in 1968 through a description of him given to a friend of mine by a lady who had visited India... My wife and I heard the story of Baba on a Monday, and the same week we were aboard a plane to India (Hislop 1984: 3).

Dr. Hislop received his doctorate in the School of Education of the University of California (UCLA). He met Sai Baba in January 1968. He is presently the co-ordinator of the Sathya



Sai Baba Organisation of the United States. This is but one example of the manner in which Sai Baba has reached out to people and changed their lives.

3.3. He has developed moral and spiritual education programmes. Education plays a vital role in the teachings of Sai Baba for he depends on the process of education to eradicate egoistic impulses and the pursuit of sensual pleasures which destroy individual and social well-being. His lucid discourses have been compiled by devotees into many series of books. Some of the most well-known books are the Vahini Series, Summer showers in Brindavan, Sai Baba Speaks and Sathyam, Shivam, Sundaram. He has initiated a programme of value-oriented education, in the five basic human values of Truth (*Sathya*), Right Conduct (*Dharma*), Peace (*Shanthi*), Love (*Prema*) and Non-Violence (*Ahimsa*), which is aimed at all people, especially the young. Towards this end, a programme has been implemented in schools in India which follow the educational teachings of Sai Baba. Included in this programme is *sadhana* (spiritual practice), such as *bhajans*, *japa* (meditation), spiritual literature study and service.

One of his most significant programmes is called *Bal Vikas* meaning (*Bal* - Child) and (*Vikas* - Development/Blossoming). The aim of this programme is the gradual unfolding of spirituality from within the child and the expansion of consciousness. Children from the age of six years are guided by their *Bal Vikas* teachers, step by step, for the duration of

nine years. They are taught to realise human perfection. Sai Baba says:

The end of education is character (*op cit.*: 7)

Character depends on human qualities at spiritual, emotional, physical, mental and intellectual levels which are not fully catered for in normal school curriculums in South Africa and in most countries of the world. Hence, there is the need for *Bal Vikas*. I shall focus on this important aspect of *Sai* education in the section on *Sai* activities (later in this chapter) with particular reference to prayers and singing.

3.4. Sai Baba has established institutional structures.

Sai Baba has established full time educational institutions in Puttaparthi, from kindergarten to university level, as models of the ideal educational system in India. This educational system incorporates ethical, moral and spiritual development with physical, intellectual and technical skills development. The Sri Sathya Sai Organisation in India has implemented the *Sai* method of instruction in the schools of most states of India. The emphasis on the five human values - truth, right conduct, peace, love and non-violence - lies at the core of the *Sai* educational philosophy.

In the light of the large scale unrest and devastation experienced in various parts of the world in 1994 alone, one can understand the desperate need for an education that would

help people to retain their faith in humankind. Such faith would help people to cope in times of crisis and help future generations re-focus their energies to make life incorporate more than just violence, anger and bloodshed. The following global events from the 1994 calendar featured in the 1995 Year Book of the World Book encyclopedia is an illustration of the times in which we live:

February 5 : A mortar shell explodes in Sarajevo's central market, killing 68 people and wounding more than 200 in the deadliest attack on civilians since the civil war in Bosnia-Herzegovina began in 1992.  
March 4: Four defendants in the 1993 World Trade Centre bombings in New York City are convicted of conspiracy. Six people were killed and more than 1000 injured  
(Groman and Carey 1995:12).

And in South Africa:

March 11: The president of the South African homeland of Bophuthatswana agrees to allow residents to participate in national elections following widespread protests and a mutiny by homeland troops. South African troops enter the homeland to restore order and to expel armed white extremists.  
March 28: A march on the headquarters of South Africa's African National Congress in Johannesburg's business district, by supporters of the Zulu-based Inkatha Freedom Party, erupts in gunfire, killing at least 53 people, including two police officers (*ibid.*: 14).

Ethnic, religious, political and socio-economic differences - all contribute towards the violence, be it physical or otherwise, that people are subjected to in their daily lives. The unity of faiths propagated by the Sai movement through their many spiritual and educational programmes addresses this perennial problem facing the contemporary world.

## **B. SAI ACTIVITIES**

The Sri Sathya Sai World Organisation, under a Charter to organise and regulate the hundreds of Centres that are being established in different parts of the world, is the focal point, at the physical level, of the flow of Sai Baba's spiritual energy. This new social organisation is aimed at uniting people of various faiths, races, colours, and nationalities. An analysis of global trends of unity reveals strong parallels with the Sai movement. There is, for instance, the "global village" phenomenon that is evident through the television networking of "CNN" which brings the happenings around the world "into the living rooms" of its viewers. There are environmental issues, for example, "global warming" that have become the concern of all people in all parts of the world. There are humanitarian issues, such as "gay" rights, child abuse, women's rights, and AIDS. The "world music" phenomenon is yet another trend that aims at uniting people from all parts of the world.

Each Sai centre has five distinct wings of activity to train the membership in active spiritual life. These activities of the Sai movement spans a wide range of programmes which include amongst others, the weekly congregational singing (discussed in Chapter Five), the study circle meetings at which various scriptures from different religions are discussed, the preparations and rehearsals for different celebrations and festivals, such as, Sai Baba's birthday celebration (23 November) or the Christmas celebration (Chapter Six) and

the service wing which includes men and women being involved in community projects that benefit the under-privileged.

The *Sai* path of education is well structured, beginning with the *Bal Vikas* from early childhood. In India there are primary schools, residential schools, colleges in different states and a university at Prashanti Nilayam. There are also special training centres for educators. Besides the formal aspects of schooling, there is non-formal education that is purpose-orientated, such as, health education (door-to-door), vocational guidance and study circles for different categories of people, such as, student community, intellectuals and industrial workers.

Sai Baba's programme of health care in India was highlighted on the South African Broadcasting Corporation's CCV Channel on the programme, **Impressions**. This documentary, *The Miracle of Puttaparthi*, was screened on 19 November 1995. It detailed the construction of a super-speciality hospital in the rural village of Puttaparthi. This hospital offers free treatment, including heart surgery, to all patients, irrespective of whether they follow Sai Baba's teachings or not.

This massive building, complete with ornate architecture, well laid-out gardens and modern technology took exactly a year to build. The chief architect, from London, (also the architect to the Prince of Wales) stated when interviewed that such a building would have taken five years to complete in England

(a first world country). He expressed amazement that Sai Baba had said at the outset that the first heart operation would take place exactly a year from the start of construction. Sai Baba was true to his word. A teenager from a neighbouring village was the hospital's first patient exactly a year later.

### **1. Study Circle**

This activity is considered crucial as a mechanism of a better understanding of spiritual literature. In Natal, workshops have been conducted to enable facilitators of these programmes to reach out to people having different levels of intellectual ability. Within the South African context there is a need for continuing experimentation and adaptation of content as well as methodology. For instance, amongst groups that follow Hinduism there has been a positive response by Sai devotees to a narration of the incidents of the Ramayana, Mahabharata and Bhagavatam and the lives of saints and explanations of the various Hindu festivals. The Hindus of India, because of the religious nature of their daily lives, are familiar with these Hindu scriptures and festivals. They are matters which are taken for granted in India. In South Africa, the Hindus have to make a conscious effort to familiarize themselves with Hindu literature and festivals because the normal school curriculums have a western Christian bias.

### **2. Bhajans**

*Bhajans* have emerged as the most popular Sai activity as reflected by the empirical data in Chapter Three. The

Foundation's Prayer Hall alone attracts hundreds of devotees each time on Sunday mornings and Thursday evenings. In Isipingo *bhajans* are sung only on Thursday evenings between 18H30 and 19H30. The format of *bhajans* has been standardized as recommended by the World Council. *Bhajan* books containing the words of songs in Sanskrit and other Indian languages also include detailed meanings in English for the benefit of the large English-speaking communities in Natal.

### **3. Service Activities**

All *Sai* centres follow Sai Baba's teachings on *Narayana Seva* (service to the community) and have therefore adopted less fortunate communities, welfare homes, old-age homes, slums and clinics in their area according to their individual Centre resources. The collection and donation of food, clothing, medicine and drugs have been undertaken as relief measures by some centres. The Isipingo *Sai* Centre has been involved in an ongoing project that provides practical assistance to a local black school by maintaining the buildings, furniture and equipment. Blood donations, which form a vital part of one's service, are made on a regular basis to the local health clinics. Workshops on personal skills needed for the planning of service projects have been conducted for the various centres.

One of the most interesting of all *Sai* activities for me, is the concept of *Bal Vikas*.

#### 4. *Bal Vikas* (Child Development/Blossoming)

Sai Baba in his preface to the book Divine Guidelines to *Bal Vikas* states:

Your classes are named *Bal Vikas*. *Vikas* means blooming, blooming of the flower. The flower pleases us for it is beautiful, fresh and fragrant. Every child is a flower in the garden of *Sai*. The tenderness, simplicity and innocence make the child charming

(Sai Baba in EHV Manual for *Bal Vikas* 1986).

This *Sai* Spiritual Programme is designed such that it would enable the child to realise his inherent divine qualities. This spiritual education is designed to inculcate ethical, moral and spiritual values through the teaching of the unity of all religions. Through all of their activities children are made aware that they are only instruments of God.

The first teacher of *Bal Vikas* classes in South Africa who had been trained at Prashanti Nilayam was an Indian woman from the Fiji Islands, married by Sai Baba to a South African *Sai* devotee in Verulam, a Mrs Diljit Singh. At present there are classes being conducted by trained teachers at most of the affiliated centres of Natal.

Sai Baba once said:

You don't fertilise the branches. It is done at the roots.

This precept touches the heart of the *Sai* educational philosophy. The five basic values of truth, right conduct,



peace, love and non-violence are prompted by the five components of the course which are prayer, group singing, story-telling, group activity and silent sitting. The three groups of children that represent the different stages of *Bal Vikas* are the six to nine year olds (age of doing and making); ten to twelve year olds (age of making and planning); and thirteen to seventeen year olds (age of planning and achieving). This nine year programme, which is intended to develop the five-fold faculties of the growing child, also teaches the child to practise these values in daily life.

There is a clear relationship between the five components of the *Bal Vikas* course and the development of the child's total personality. Prayer, for instance, promotes faith and devotion in the initial stage of learning. It also improves the child's memory. In the second phase the child's concentration improves and his intuition is sharpened. In the final phase of this course, humility is instilled and the spiritual conception of unity is realised. Prophet Mohammed has been quoted in one *Bal Vikas* manual (1986) to have said:

The daily prayers are like fresh river-waters which are flowing by the yardside of your house. Whoever takes a bath therein will keep himself pure and clean.

The words of Tennyson attests to the power of prayer:

More things are wrought by prayer than this world dreams of.

Mahatma Gandhi reflected on the need for prayer:

Prayer is a definite need of the soul...each repetition of God's name carries you nearer and nearer to him (God) (ibid.).

The children attending *Bal Vikas* courses learn two types of prayer that follow Hindu tradition. They are *Stuti* and *Stotra*, on the one hand, and *Prarthana* on the other. *Stutis* and *Stotras* are prayers that focus on the adoration of God, his glory, his supreme powers, his splendour, his magnificence and grandeur and his supreme love and compassion for all beings. These hymns should be spontaneous outpourings of love and joy sung by all devotees of God.

*Prarthanas* refer to the act of praying to God for succour and help, for protection or for prosperity whether they be for our physical and material well-being or for our moral and spiritual welfare and upliftment. This call should be done with devotion, faith and confidence to ensure that God will assist one through life's turmoils.

The prayers that are usually chanted combine *Stuti*, *Stotra* and *Prarthana* and dwell on the splendour of the different names ascribed to God. Prayers form the basis of all religions, that is, communicating with the supernatural or the cosmology, whether they are conveyed through the Vedic hymns of the Hindus or the Psalms of the Old Testament sung as hymns by the Jews or the Biblical hymns and prayers of the Christians. This vast heritage of prayers, which embellishes the different names of

God, have been bequeathed to us by seers, sages and saints. They were revealed or composed by them in their intuitive and ecstatic rapport with God.

It is the contention of the *Sai* movement that children are able to memorize *stotras* more easily than adults are. Their young and receptive minds easily capture and commit to memory even the most difficult texts and wordings of *stotras*. However, most of the texts of these prayers are simple with melodies that have high aesthetic appeal. Children of the *Sai* movement are exposed to prayers and group singing (*bhajan* singing) from childhood.

Group singing promotes devotion and reverence at an early age. In the second phase of *Bal Vikas* the child develops his or her musical sense and promotes the harmony of his or her body, mind and spirit. When older, the child learns to control his or her outer senses and develops his concentration and powers of meditation. Whether a class is conducted at eight o'clock in the morning or at two o'clock in the afternoon the children are taught to tune their minds and bodies towards God and their own spirituality.

##### **5. "SACRED MUSIC AND SACRED TIME"**

According to Sullivan (1984), "sacred music plays on notions of time." He sees sacred music as being "a substance in the cosmos... taking its place among the occult arts". The very nature of sacred music, because of its religious connotations,

makes it an appropriate vehicle for multiple experiences of time.

An appraisal of the relationship between sacred music and time is possible only in those cultures which associate musical performance with exercises of the spirit. The values which a culture assigns to breath, sound, rhythm, and techniques of performance make known in what way social institutions and roles serve as concrete expressions of living spirituality (*ibid.*: 47).

Devotees of Sai Baba experience these notions of time during prayer and *bhajan* singing, not as separate entities but rather as integral parts of the whole spiritual experience. The dynamic nature of temporal experiences presents itself even at the stage of early learning at *Bal Vikas* lessons. The duration of these lessons is determined by our daily experience of commercial time, that is, time dictated by the hands on a clock. Children attend their classes according to commercial time. Within the confines of the venues at which these lessons are conducted, however, class time comes into play. Depending on the content of the lesson, cosmic/musical time associated with chanting, prayers and devotional singing then takes over. The subject matter of prayers and songs could be interspersed with another component of *Bal Vikas* instruction, that is, story-telling. This would then easily transport the child into the realm of mythical time. The enactment of certain rituals such as the waving of lighted camphor around a shrine of Sai Baba would then lead the devotee into ritual time.

All of these notions of time are essential parts of the entire

time experience which is determined at each point by the context in which the devotee finds himself (Pillay 1995). Rather than being fragmented, there is a sense of wholeness, of soundness which is articulated in symbolic forms, referents, images, tones, and visions which are brought together not to cancel each other out but to form a whole. The human performance resounds throughout the cosmos, drawing power from the times which transcend the mundane present (op.cit. 1984: 48).

Through this multiple interplaying of time, there is a sense of timelessness that pervades the entire spiritual experience.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### A. SOCIAL DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE DEVOTEES AT THE ISIPINGO SAI CENTRE

In this chapter the findings of an empirical study I conducted are presented. The study is based on responses gleaned from questionnaires administered to devotees at the Isipingo Sai Centre. This centre is but one of many such centres which may be found throughout the country and indeed throughout the world. According to Sai Sangeetham (Reddy 1990), there are more than 10 000 service organisations all over the world.

#### 1. Objectives

The objective of this empirical study was multifold:

- (a) To ascertain the personality profiles of the devotees;
- (b) To determine their linguistic abilities and religious affiliations;
- (c) To investigate their levels of participation in terms of Sai activities;
- (d) To gauge the attitudes of the devotees towards the Sai movement.
- (e) To examine the roles of men and women and
- (f) To assess the musical expertise of the devotees.

#### 2. Survey Methodology

To fulfil the objectives of this study both quantitative and qualitative data (Cook and Riechard 1979) was collected since both were considered necessary for the presentation of a comprehensive analysis. Data collection thus demanded that the

questionnaire include both pre-coded and open-ended questions. These questionnaires were administered to a random sample of devotees comprising approximately one third of the total number of devotees who attend a regular congregation. Appendix 5 contains a copy of the questionnaire.

### **3. The Sample**

The universe consisted of devotees of the Isipingo *Sai* Centre who reside predominantly in the Isipingo area (refer to map on page vii). This centre was chosen as a case study because it has been in existence for a significant period of time (12 years). As a stable community the meaningfulness of any analysis and/or assessments would thus be justified.

The sample was randomly selected from the given congregation. The questionnaires were answered voluntarily and the devotees were assured of strict confidentiality and of their anonymity.

### **4. Pre-testing the Questionnaire**

Pre-testing the questionnaire was considered an important first step in order to identify potential problems in terms of the level of language used, possible ambiguities or even basic misinterpretations of the questions. A small group of randomly selected devotees was chosen for this pre-test. Because I have lived in Isipingo and because I have taught at a local school for the past ten years, I knew many of the respondents. This greatly facilitated my fieldwork because there was a willingness to co-operate and to be of as much assistance as

possible which in another area might not have been quite so forthcoming. This pre-testing of the questionnaire was the beginning of my direct contact with the devotees as a researcher. During this time even casual conversations presented new insights into the thinking of the devotees, into their understanding of their beliefs and into their commitment to the *Sai* movement.

All conversations were conducted in English. All of the respondents were literate so the questionnaires were filled in without any assistance. However, some of the questions reflected ambiguities and those questions that did not specify the nature and/or number of possible responses presented a dilemma for some of the respondents as they were not always sure what was required.

##### **5. Administering the Questionnaire**

After revisions the final questionnaire was completed. This was then administered to a random probability sample of sixty devotees of a congregation of approximately one hundred and fifty people at the Isipingo *Sai* Centre. Devotees were allowed to take the questionnaires home to ensure that they were filled in after some thought had been given to the questions. Whilst this method provided the devotee with sufficient time to fill in the questionnaire in the relaxed atmosphere of his home, I



experienced some difficulty in retrieving all of the questionnaires since some devotees took up to three weeks before returning the questionnaires whilst six devotees had either lost, mislaid or had completely forgotten about their questionnaires. Finally, fifty-four of the sixty questionnaires were retrieved which reduced the total sample to approximately one-third of the total number of people at the given congregation.

After completion, the questionnaires were checked for accuracy and then coded. The analysis of the data was effected with the aid of the Superstats computer programme, primarily using the frequency response and the cross-tabulation options.

#### **6. The Reliability of the Data**

In this case study, the impact of the Sai movement on its devotees was assessed at a particular point in time. It should be noted that the impressions of the devotee, the beliefs and the commitment of the devotee could be a highly dynamic process in response to his or her continued exposure to the teachings and activities of the Sai movement. Ideally, the experience of the devotee should be analyzed over a period of time to obtain a more realistic assessment.

The purpose of my research and the complete confidentiality of

the information provided were explained to the respondents. They were given the assurance that their responses would not jeopardize their involvement with the Sai movement in any way. Despite this it may be argued that human nature demanded that respondents present "socially acceptable" answers or responses that they considered to be "correct". Whilst acknowledging that this argument may be valid in some cases, it must be emphasised that I enjoy a cordial relationship with the devotees. The devotees' recognition of the sincerity of my intentions and the seriousness of the research would have acted as a deterrent to misrepresentation. Instances of the latter are thus likely to be the exception rather than the rule.

## **B. THE SURVEY RESULTS**

### **1. Personal Characteristics of the Devotees**

Almost sixty-seven percent of the respondents to the questionnaires were women whilst thirty-three percent were men. This must be seen against the backdrop of the appeal of this movement. The essential gentleness, calmness of spirit and sensitivity needed for the Sai approach to spirituality appeals to the more feminine character of people. In an aggressive, competitive society where dominance of the male image reflects the "success" and "worth" of the human being, the Sai movement clearly provides an outlet for the gentler, more feminine aspects of human beings where one can be totally relaxed

without the pressure to compete or assert one's self with any degree of aggression. The male-female ratio of respondents is summarised in Table 1.1.

**Table 1.1.**

**SEX**

	Count	Percentage
Male	18	33,33
Female	36	66,66

N = 54 Source: Survey Data

Table 1.2. illustrates the marital status of the respondents in the survey sample.

**Table 1.2.**

**PROFILE OF MARITAL STATUS**

	Count	Percentage
Single	12	22,22
Married	41	75,92
Separated/Divorced	0	0,00
Widow	1	1,85
Widower	0	0,00

N = 54 Source: Survey Data

Seventy-six percent of all devotees were married, twenty-two percent were single and one respondent had been widowed. These statistics are favourable in the light of the high divorce rate

in South Africa today where the sanctity of marriage is all but totally disregarded. The fact that in many instances husbands and wives attended the Sai congregations together speaks of stability within the home environment. Many respondents indicated to the author that this movement had become a uniting force within their families.

The age structure of the sampled group is illustrated in the following table.

**Table 1.3.**

**AGE OF RESPONDENTS**

Age Group	Count
18 - 29	13
30 - 39	19
40 - 49	18
50 - 59	4
N = 54	

Source: Survey Data

The average age of the sample as a whole was thirty-six years with the oldest being fifty-two years and the youngest, eighteen. The largest number of respondents fell into the 30 - 39 year category. From these statistics one may deduce that the majority of devotees are not very young and impressionable nor are they very old people who may be set in their ways. Here we have people in the prime of their lives with choices to make with what one would consider to be a good degree of

maturity. It must be stated, however, that the questionnaires were restricted to devotees who were eighteen years and older to ensure a good understanding and a reasonable level of maturity when answering the questionnaire.

An analysis of the educational achievements of the respondents as summarised in Table 1.4. indicates that the level of formal education attained was notably high. All respondents had acquired at least Junior Secondary education, that is, standard six and seven; fifty percent had obtained Senior Secondary education, that is, standards eight to ten whilst almost forty-one percent had tertiary education. When one examines the occupations of these respondents a very clear pattern begins to emerge. A significant correlation between their educational achievements and their present occupations is evident. The data as illustrated in Table 1.5. revealed that the greatest number of respondents (31,48%) were office workers holding "white collar" job descriptions. Of the 24,07 percent "other" occupations more than half that number of respondents were students at university. 16,66 percent were professional people such as doctors, teachers, lawyers and so on whilst only 3,7 percent held jobs in factories. One may indeed question the "class" composition of this society. It is true that the Isipingo area comprises a middle-class society but one needs to assess the appeal of Sai Baba's teachings. The rational,

non-restrictive (in terms of religion) scope of his teachings would appeal to people who would not want to follow blindly the dictates of a particular religion. For this group of fairly well-educated individuals this demand has every indication of being fulfilled within this movement.

**Table 1.4.**

**HIGHEST EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENTS**

	Count	Percent
No formal education	0	0,00
Primary	0	0,00
Junior Secondary	5	9,25
Senior Secondary	27	50,00
Tertiary	22	40,74

N = 54 Source: Survey Data

**Table 1.5.**

**OCCUPATION**

	Count	Percent
Professional	9	16,66
Businessman	6	11,11
Factory Worker	2	3,70
Housewife	7	12,96
Office	17	31,48
Other	13	24,07

N = 54 Source: Survey Data

## 2. Linguistic Skills and Religious Affiliation

An analysis of the various languages as understood by the respondents revealed that besides English 66,6 percent of the respondents understood Tamil - a widely spoken Indian language in South Africa; 61,1 percent understood Afrikaans; 59 percent understood Zulu; 20 percent Telegu and 18,5 percent Hindi. Tamil, Telegu and Hindi are popular Indian languages spoken by people generally of Indian origin. This summary is presented in Table 1.6..

Table 1.6.

### UNDERSTANDING OF LANGUAGES

	Count	Percent
Tamil	36	66,66
Telegu	11	20,37
Hindi	10	18,51
Gujerati	1	1,85
Afrikaans	33	61,11
Zulu	32	59,25
Other	1	1,85

N = 54

Source: Survey Data

Table 1.7. summarizes the responses of devotees in terms of languages other than English which the respondents speak.

Table 1.7.

SPOKEN LANGUAGES

	Count	Percent
Tamil	18	33,33
Telegu	6	11,11
Hindi	7	12,96
Gujerati	0	0,00
Afrikaans	16	29,62
Zulu	25	46,29
Other	0	0,00

N = 54

Source: Survey Data

The statistics of the linguistic ability of devotees and their religious affiliation is most interesting. One hundred percent of the respondents were Hindus. This could be attributed largely to the homogenous composition of this society. The Isipingo area through the Group Areas Act of 1950 of the old *apartheid* regime had restricted people of certain races to specific areas. Isipingo was designated an "Indian" area. It remains an area inhabited by an Indian majority with a vast number of people being followers of Hinduism in terms of religion. Since all the respondents were Hindus it is not surprising that Indian languages featured prominently amidst their linguistic abilities.



### C. TOWARDS THE HOMOGENISATION OF SOUTH AFRICAN HINDUISM

Hindu South Africans have been subject to many processes that have created fertile ground for the move towards homogenisation. The Group Areas Act of 1950, with the relocation of many Indians to smaller homes, effectively broke up the joint family system. Since parents were important for the perpetuation of Hindu rituals within the household, this type of worship has become relatively unimportant. A direct effect of this move away from ritual-worship has been the selective worship of deities. Neo-Hindu organisations have promoted the reading of literature that would be relevant for Hindus in South Africa. This appeals to the literate, educated Hindu who wants to understand every prayer that he chants and every *bhajan* that he sings. According to Goodall (1989) the high rate of urbanisation (in the case of Indians this is 90,6% 1982 census) brings the community in close contact with the secularisation process and this has also had a homogenising effect. Hinduism has evidently undergone a re-orientation to suit the South African lifestyle.

**D. IMPACT OF THE SAI MOVEMENT ON THE DEVOTEE**

Table 1.8. indicates the period over which respondents had become Sai devotees.

**Table 1.8.**  
**TIME PERIOD AS A DEVOTEE**

Length of Time	Count	Percent
0 - 6 months	4	7,40
6 - 12 months	3	5,55
1 - 5 years	13	24,07
5 - 10 years	10	18,51
+ 10 years	24	44,44

N = 54 Source: Survey Data

The vast majority of respondents (forty-four percent) had been devotees for over ten years. This is clearly not a movement that has sprung up "overnight" but rather one that has grown over the years. Twenty-four percent had become devotees during the past one to five year period whilst almost nineteen percent had joined the movement over the past five to ten year period.

An overwhelmingly large percentage (eighty-one percent) of devotees had discovered the movement through family members and friends. This clearly illustrates the importance and impact of personal contact for effective communication. However, a small seven percent cite dreams/visions as their inspiration while

others cite literature and talks as being sources of their introduction to the movement. Table 1.9. tabulates these findings.

**Table 1.9.**

**INTRODUCTION TO THE SAI MOVEMENT**

	Count	Percent
Literature	2	3,70
Family & Friends	44	81,48
Dreams/Visions	4	7,40
Talks	2	3,70
Other	2	3,70

N = 54

Source: Survey Data

Table 1.10. notes that almost sixty-nine percent of respondents had changed their attitude towards their religion. Some of these changes were explained thus:

Have become involved in religious activities - understand religion better.

I depend on the Sai movement for spiritual nourishment...I wish we could meet every evening.

Have greater understanding of my religion. The significance of certain observations and festivals have become clearer in my mind.

Source: Survey Data

The above speak of a more positive attitude and certainly greater awareness of the spirituality in man.

Table 1.10.

CHANGE OF ATTITUDE TO RELIGION

	Count	Percent
Yes	37	68,51
No	17	31,48

N = 54

Source: Survey Data

The data illustrated in Table 1.11. indicates that almost ninety-three percent of devotees attended the weekly congregations of this movement. Significantly, the major part of these services comprised *bhajan* singing.

Table 1.11.

ATTENDANCE AT SAI CONGREGATIONS

	Count	Percent
Weekly	50	92,59
Fortnightly	2	3,70
Monthly	0	0,00
Special occasions	2	3,70

N = 54

Source: Survey Data

The close correlation between the respondents' attendance at Sai congregations and their participation in Sai activities is illustrated in Table 1.12..

Table 1.12.

**PARTICIPATION IN SAI ACTIVITIES**

	Count	Percent
Weekly Singing	51	94,44
<i>Bhajan</i> Practice	15	27,77
Study Circle	22	40,74
Sport	21	38,88
Spiritual Talks	21	38,88
Other	11	20,37

N = 54 Source: Survey Data

As the above table indicates, of all the activities, singing enjoyed a phenomenal ninety-four percent participation rate. Other activities enjoying a good degree of participation were study circle, spiritual talks and sporting activities.

**E. MUSICAL IMPACT OF SAI BHAJANS**

Further evidence of the devotees' involvement with singing was their indication that eighty-three percent of the respondents sang bhajans regularly. This is depicted in Table 1.13.

Table 1.13.

**REGULAR SINGING OF BHAJANS**

	Count	Percent
Yes	45	83,33
No	9	16,66

N = 54 Source: Survey Data

Amongst these enthusiastic singers almost fifty-four percent stated that they were only choristers while almost twenty-eight percent indicated that they were both soloists and choristers as the circumstances demanded. A very small percentage stated that they were only soloists. It would thus appear that chorus singing is an important function of the majority although a minority still enjoy the privilege of leading the congregation through their solo efforts. It must be emphasised, however, that although a particular soloist may be admired for his or her musical renditions, the less talented singer is still afforded the opportunity to lead the chorus if he or she wishes to do so.

**Table 1.14.**

**SOLOIST OR CHORISTER**

	Count	Percent
Soloist	3	5,55
Chorister	29	53,70
Both	15	27,77

N = 54

Source: Survey Data

Approximately seventy-three percent of respondents indicated that their singing of *Sai bhajans* was not confined to the weekly public gathering they attended (See Table 1.15.). They considered singing at home to be of equal importance. For these devotees singing *Sai bhajans* was clearly a way of life.

Table 1.15.

SINGING OF SAI BHAJANS

	Count	Percent
Public gatherings	10	18,51
Home	3	5,55
Both	39	72,22
Other	0	0,00

N = 54

Source: Survey Data

Table 1.16. notes the devotees' perception of their understanding of *bhajans*. Fifty percent considered their ability as being fair whilst forty-four percent rated themselves as being good. These statistics are most interesting since many of the *bhajans* are written in Sanskrit, Hindi, Telegu and other Indian languages and most singers are English speaking.

Table 1.16.

UNDERSTANDING OF BHAJANS

	Count	Percent
Good	24	44,44
Fair	27	50,00
Poor	3	5,55

N = 54

Source: Survey Data

Table 1.17. illustrates the musical training of respondents.

Table 1.17.

MUSICAL TRAINING

	Count	Percent
Yes	12	22,22
No	42	77,77

N = 54

Source: Survey Data

Through all of their enthusiasm for music, the data revealed, however, that almost seventy-eight percent of the respondents did not have any musical training. A much smaller twenty-two percent indicated that they had some formal training. It is thus clear that musical training and expertise is by no means a prerequisite for effective *bhajan* singing. The fulfilment that comes from singing is dependant on the peaceful and reverent mood that is inspired within the devotee. A significant number of devotees, that is, eighty-five percent stated that their mental/emotional state was indeed affected by *Sai bhajans*. The following table depicts this data.

Table 1.18.

EFFECT ON MENTAL/EMOTIONAL STATE

	Count	Percent
Yes	46	85,18
No	8	14,81

N = 54

Source: Survey Data



The range of effects varied as the following statements indicate.

I feel absolutely calm and serene.

I feel at peace with myself.

I feel great...uplifted.

sometimes it is so powerful that it takes me into a trance-like state.

I feel closer to God.

Source: Survey Data

Closely associated with the effect of music on one's mental/emotional state is the practice of meditation since meditation is a discipline that could lead to an altered state of consciousness. Fifty percent of the respondents indicated that they practised meditation as the following table illustrates:

**Table 1.19.**

**PRACTICE OF MEDITATION**

	Count	Percent
Yes	27	50,00
No	27	50,00

N = 54

Source: Survey Data

The ultimate assessment of the influence of singing on the

devotees was revealed in the final data as reflected in Table 1.20. Seventy-two percent of respondents selected *bhajan* singing as their most enjoyable *Sai* activity. This clearly illustrates the popularity of *bhajans* and that this aspect is very noticeably an integral part of the respondents' spiritual upliftment.

**Table 1.20.**

**MOST ENJOYABLE SAI ACTIVITY**

	Count	Percent
<i>Bhajans</i>	39	72,22
Spiritual Talks	4	7,40
Study Circle	10	18,51
Sport	1	1,85

N = 54

Source: Survey Data

**F. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

The empirical data dealt with facts concerning various aspects of the lives of the *Sai* devotees. However, through all of this data emerged individuals - devotees - men and women committed to the path of realising their own spirituality. These are middle-class people, living ordinary lives - working, taking care of their families, shopping, socialising with friends and family - but the force that unites these devotees is their belief in the *Sai* Movement as illustrated in their regular attendance of the weekly congregations.

For the vast majority of devotees music is perceived as "the most powerful vehicle for worship among the world's people on all levels of culture..." (Simon, 1988/89: 116). Since the majority of devotees have had limited formal training in music one can deduce that the Indian belief that "one learns not by instruction so much as by imitation" (*ibid.*:114) would hold true for many of the respondents. Their expression of sheer joy for *bhajan* singing as an activity and their enthusiasm to be a part of the congregation, be it as soloist or chorister, clearly illustrates the importance of music as an essential medium to spiritual fulfilment.

For as Robert L. Simon in his reference to Tyagaraja, often celebrated as South India's greatest classical composer, states:

For Tyagaraja, [as for the *Sai* devotee], music was the means for expressing his deepest spirituality; each of his compositions is an act of worship. In virtually every facet of his life, music was his conveyance for God-realisation (1988/89:114).

The chanting of the *omkar*, the singing of *bhajans* and the singing of prayers are expressive domains that create an atmosphere, for the *Sai* devotee, appropriate for realising his sense of spirituality.

## CHAPTER FIVE

### A. GROUP DEVOTIONAL SINGING (*BHAJAN*) IN ISIPINGO

Let every moment be a *Bhajan*.  
Avoid all lesser talk.  
Know the purpose of *Bhajan* and  
Devote yourself wholeheartedly to it.  
When you sing *Bhajan* songs,  
Dwell on the meanings of the songs and  
The message of each name and form of God  
And roll on your tongue its sweetness.

(Sri Sathya Sai Baba in Sri Sathya Sai  
Bal Vikas and EHV Programme 1988)

#### 1. Aesthetics of *Bhajan* Performance

In South Africa, the Sai devotees, established a spiritual/religious community in the early 1970s. They constructed a regime of cultural truth which was not only in opposition to the hegemonic rule of the state but also in opposition to the highly ritualised forms of worship that had been imported into South Africa from India by their forefathers. These rituals were many, though little understood by the later generations of urbanised, educated (in the western tradition), emergent middle-class Hindus. This regime of cultural truth was facilitated by the performance of *bhajans*. The latter followed a set pattern. Each act or ritual within this pattern could be logically explained and was thus meaningful for the Sai devotee. These "structures of experience" (Kligman 1988: 280) together with spiritual

discourses or "structures of feeling" (Williams in Rosaldo 1993: 106) have facilitated an acceptable and relevant structure of cultural truth.

This chapter documents and analyses the group devotional singing of *Sai* devotees at Isipingo. In addition, other practices that were witnessed, such as meditation and the chanting of the *Omkar* will form a part of my discussion. Towards this end I attended the weekly congregations that were held each Thursday evening at the **Arutpa Khazagam** temple in Isipingo. One such congregation was video-taped as a representative sample of the type of experience that I had witnessed each week. The video illustrates very clearly the ritualistic nature of group devotional singing where the focus is on a shared community experience rather than on an exhibition of professional expertise. As Lortat-Jacob so eloquently states in his article on the Berbers of the High Atlas:

talent and skill as professional musicians does not entitle them to replace the village musicians, who must accomplish their task in the usual way

(Lortat-Jacob 1981: 97).

The *Sai* devotees of Isipingo cannot be seen as villagers as the empirical study reveals that most of the devotees have "white-collar" occupations. However, a parallel may still be drawn

since the musical skills of *Sai* devotees vary as do those of the Berbers of the High Atlas. Another similarity is that the music of the High Atlas in Morocco is fundamentally collective. This does not mean that individualized music-making is excluded, but, since the collective takes precedence over the personal, collective music automatically holds a pre-eminent position over personal music in the conception and performance of music (*ibid*: 87).

One of my principal themes in this project is the aesthetics of *bhajan* performance. The aesthetic manifestation of the regime of cultural truth (Muller 1995: 394) is considered in the performative and the textual content of *Sai bhajans*. The process of song performance is intrinsically a social one which is enhanced by the collective nature of the *bhajan*. The specific qualities of *bhajans* make it an effective medium for bringing people together, for articulating who they are, for furthering their religious and spiritual goals and for making their lives meaningful. In this collective nature of performance, lies the power of *bhajan*.

## **2. *Bhajan/Kirtan* Debate**

The concept of *bhajan* or group devotional singing must be fully understood before any discussion of the songs themselves is attempted.

Goodall defines *bhajan* as follows:

As a vocal genre a *bhajan* is a worshipping or adoring song. It has a refrain and is very often sung antiphonally between a leader and the rest of the congregation, proceeding couplet-wise. The text can tell of incidents in the life of a deity which have a moral message, or the song itself is a moral exhortation (Goodall 1993: 6).

She goes on to describe the *kirtan* as follows:

This type of song sings the fame of a particular deity or saint by repeating the many names and epithets associated with him or her... As a musical form the *kirtan* is very similar to the *bhajan*, sung couplet-wise, often antiphonally between a leader and the rest of the congregation. Since the congregation knows the names it is a simple matter for them to follow on from the leader, and no-one uses a written text for a *kirtan*. Another feature of the *kirtan* is that it usually increases in speed after its first singing. This might move immediately to double time or it might increase gradually to that point (*ibid*: 6-7).

Goodall cites the major difference between the *bhajan* and *kirtan* as being in their texts (*ibid*. 7).

In another paper Goodall states quite categorically that:

In some societies, Sri Satya Sai Organisation for instance, *kirtans*, are preferred for this reasons, and *bhajans* are never heard (Goodall 1989: 52n.).

The analysis of songs sung at a typical weekly congregation of the *Sai* movement in Isipingo clearly disproves this statement

for not only are their songs a combination of the *kirtan* and *bhajan* described by Goodall but most devotees do indeed carry their *bhajan* books to their weekly congregation. The Centre also provides booklets of the songs to be sung each week for devotees who do not have books with them. The singing of correct texts is extremely important for the *Sai* devotee. The understanding of texts in Sanskrit or in the vernacular is made possible since almost every *bhajan* book contains English translations of the songs contained therein. These English translations, where the songs are not already in English, are crucial for the continued development and success of the *Sai* movement in Durban and indeed South Africa as almost seven out of eight Indians in Durban have English as their home language (Goodhall: 6).

### **3. Framework for *Bhajan* Singing**

A characteristic feature of these weekly congregations was the structured framework within which the group functioned. This speaks of the discipline, the predictability and the sense of safety and belonging that the devotees have come to expect from this spiritual sojourn. Within the parameters of this format there was evidence of freedom - freedom of religion (statistics of Chapter Three indicate that all devotees at that point in time were Hindus), freedom to lead the group with the song of one's choice, freedom of expression in terms of clapping or



playing an accompanying instrument, but most of all the freedom to relax and aspire towards a higher mental state in an atmosphere that almost guaranteed that realisation.

My perception of the devotees' discipline, however, must be seen against the backdrop of the Guidelines or Discipline for conducting Bhajans as gleaned and compiled by devotees from the Sathya Sai Baba Centre of Santa Barbara, in California, from the many discourses of Sai Baba in a book entitled Bhajanamavali ("bhajan" means devotional song; "nama" means salutations; "avali" means row). These guidelines appear in Appendix 1.

#### **4. Bhajan Rehearsals**

*Bhajan* rehearsal before the weekly Thursday congregation is intended to maximise group participation by teaching a thorough knowledge of the text and the melody. Songs are taught by rote to the core of devotees who attend *bhajan* practice. The singer who intends to lead that particular song at the congregation is the teacher. This is a dynamic process because song leaders vary from week to week. One of the guidelines for *bhajan* singing (See Appendix 1, no. 21) focuses on the need for the participation of as many devotees as possible in leading the singing. A devotee may select a *bhajan* from one of the *bhajan* books or learn a song beforehand from an audio cassette which

may have been obtained directly from India or from another Sai centre or from one of the record/cassette/compact disc music outlets in Durban, such as, Musica or Roopanand's. In their choice of songs devotees try to bear in mind that any devotional song, in any language may be sung as long as all can follow (See Appendix 1, no.7). The ideology of music making imparted by such teaching suggests to devotees that there is a correct way to perform each song or song tune. Attention is accorded to the melody, the time and tempo and the voice (See Appendix 1, no. 14). As in Bulgarian music (Rice 1994: 103), the details of the melody varies from singer to singer, performance to performance and verse to verse, because there is no extramusical way, such as notation, to fix them. Only the texts of the songs are available through the *bhajan* books or prepared booklets. A usual practice is to compile new booklets of songs each week that contain the texts of all the songs to be sung for a specific service. In this way the participation of the entire congregation is guaranteed and a sense of community is achieved. In Isipingo, the instrumentalists make the final decision whether a song may be sung or not. Their decision is determined by the complexity of the melody and rhythm, that is, whether or not they can play them.

Informal conversations with many devotees revealed varied

reactions to the guidelines for *bhajan* singing. One devotee who is considered by most devotees to be good lead singer stated:

When these people (the devotees) come back from the *ashram* (in India) they are all fired up to live by every "rule", but, give them three months and they are back to their old selves again. Nobody says anything  
(Personal Communication, August 1995).

She went on to explain:

I just sing the way I always do and I'm sure that *Swami* hears me (*ibid.*).

These sentiments were echoed in many ways by other devotees who rejected the idea of "rules" that they should live by. Despite this overt rejection, it was clear from my observations that they did indeed follow these guidelines for *bhajan* singing.

One member joined the *Sai* movement two years ago. When these guidelines were read out to the congregation she became irate:

I will not be going back there. They cannot dictate to me as to what time I should come and go. They are cutting down on important *bhajan* time and spending far too long on meditation (Personal Communication, September 1993).

This devotee not only went back to the weekly congregations but she rarely misses a week without good reason. Despite her

initial reaction she went back because of the sense of peace she felt whilst at the congregation. Singing was an important "drawcard" for attending this congregation. The statistics of Chapter Four attest to this fact. According to Swami Premananda of the Ramakrishna Centre in the United States, music "holds" the individual when he/she goes to *satsang* or a congregational meeting. Hindus, in particular, understand sound to be the most basic stuff of the universe, the original first vibration of creation as depicted by the Nadaraja figure (See Fig. 5, Appendix 4). As a Hindu educator Swami Premananda uses music for the purpose of attracting and binding.

#### **5. Video Sequences**

The accompanying video tape which was recorded in June 1995 is a typical example of a *Sai* congregation. These congregations are held every Thursday evening between 18H30 and 19H30. The video tape reveals a set sequence of events which is described in Appendix 2.

As soon as the congregation was ready to begin their group devotional singing, the *Omkar* was chanted to create the appropriate atmosphere (See Appendix 2, no.3).

## 6. Significance of the Omkar

Listen to the Primeval *Pranava*, *Om*, resounding in your heart as well as in the heart of the Universe.

(Sai Baba in Sri Sathya Sai *Bal Vikas* and EHV Programme 1988).

The *Om* is perceived as the all-embracing symbol and name of God. It is also seen as the *Maha Mantra*, the best aid and means for an individual to realise God. In the Sri Sathya Sai *Sarva Dharma* symbol, Hinduism is represented by *Om*.

In the timeless beginning, it is said, *Brahman* was alone. It was of the nature of Supreme Silence. Out of the Supreme Silence emanated the *Nada Brahman*, the sound aspect and expression of God. That was the Primeval Sound. That was *Omkara*. Out of the Primeval Sound became manifest all creation composed of the five elements namely, space, air, fire, water and earth. Further, *Omkara*, permeates all creation. It is the life-principle of creation. That is why the sound of *Om* is also called *Pranava* - meaning that which runs through *Prana* or pervades all life (*ibid.*).

Everywhere there is sound. According to Hindu beliefs all sounds are connected with the primordial, the first sound being *Omkara*. All other sounds are derived from this primal sound. There are three aspects of sound which blend into one whole. They are *Srushti*, *Sthithi* and *Laya* meaning creation, sustenance and destruction. In Hindu scriptures they are represented by Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshwara. These three aspects are contained in the sounds of the letters A U M - *Akara*, *Ukara*, *Makara*. The combination of these three sounds make up the

*Om*kara. The actual production of this sound is explained in Chapter Six.

Chanting of the *Om*kar is considered an important practice in creating the appropriate atmosphere for the purpose of spiritual upliftment. The mind becomes focused, concentration improves which in turn elevates one's mental state. This is the ideal towards which all devotees aspire, even if there are physical distractions such as people shuffling noisily into the seat next to you or a baby nuzzling your face, as is evident in one segment of the video-tape. Despite these less than perfect conditions, however, there is generally a harmonious and tranquil atmosphere that pervades which is what most devotees seek. Sai Baba states (see Appendix 1, no. 24):

People should return from *bhajan* carrying the elevated, uplifted and sublime mood created by the atmosphere at the *bhajan*. Therefore, after the *bhajan* people should disperse quietly, maintaining silence. Then the joy and peace derived at the *bhajan* will linger and abide in the heart (Bhajanamavali [s.a.]: 11).

Being at this congregation is for many a refuge from the daily "rat-race" and violence that many are confronted with in their day to day lives. On 29 November 1995, the six o'clock news bulletin on the South African Broadcasting Corporation's Television 1 reported that at noon on that day people had gathered at different venues throughout the country to observe

a minute of silence for all those people who had been affected in one way or another by the rampant violence. This was also a protest against the unprecedented level of violence that is being experienced throughout the country. The report indicated that one murder was being committed every twenty-nine minutes somewhere in the country.

### **7. Significance of *Bhajans***

These songs revolve around the many names of God, globally, and they contain numerous beautiful and sacred thoughts. There are three important aspects that are essential for the singing of *bhajans*. The first aspect is *bhav* which refers to the feeling of devotion inherent in the songs. The second aspect is the *raga* or the melody. If the melody is learnt correctly it will sound tuneful and pleasing to the ear. The third aspect is the *tala* or the beat. This means maintaining the correct tempo or beat or rhythmical cycle. A perfect blend of these three aspects in devotional songs is intended to give one *sukha* (pleasure) and *shanti* (peace).

### **8. Song Repertoire: Samples of Typical *Bhajans***

In this section, different aspects of the music are examined - the melodies, the texts, the singers, the instruments, the purpose and the identity of the devotees.

The first *bhajan* that features in the video-recording, significantly, is dedicated to Lord Ganesha, the remover of obstacles according to Hindu belief. Hindus usually seek the blessing of Lord Ganesha before embarking on anything to ensure that whatever is being done will be unhindered by obstacles. An article in the Daily News on 25 September 1995 reported:

If the "miracle" drinking of milk by statues of Lord Ganesha, which has now apparently spread [from India and the United Kingdom] to South Africa, is to be believed, then this could be a sign of good times to come... As Ganesha is the Remover of Obstacles, this may be the heralding of a new era (Bissetty 1995).

This unusual phenomenon which gained national and international coverage (through CNN) is significant because singing the praise of Lord Ganesha in Isipingo (at a micro level) gains greater relevance through the experiences of people around the world (at a macro level).



The texts and translations of this first *bhajan* are presented in the book Bhajanamavali:

GAJAVADANA GANA NATHA

*Gajavadana Gana Natha Gajavadana Deena Natha  
Siddhi Data Shiva Tanaya  
Siddhi Pradayaka Gajanana  
Parvati Nandan Bhava Bhaya Bhanjana  
Yuga Yuga Vanditha Jayati Ganesha*

Worship Elephant-Faced Lord Gajavadana, Lord of Demi-Gods. Prince of Lord Shiva and Mother Parvati confers and bestows success and removes the fear of crossing the ocean of life and death. Victory to Lord Ganesha, who is worshipped and prayed in all Yugas (periods of time)  
(Bhajanamavali [s.a.]: 95).

Although the Sai movement embraces all religions, one cannot avoid the unmistakable Hindu bias that is clear through the songs and the teachings of Sai Baba. The religious composition of the devotees in Isipingo is largely Hindu, hence the tendency to sing Hindu-related *bhajans*. Further, Sai Baba, himself, relies heavily on Hindu scriptures to illustrate his various messages. Based in the mother country, India, it is not surprising that Hindu beliefs form the basis of many *bhajans* and teachings as this second *bhajan* illustrates.

JAYA GURU OMKARA JAYA JAYA

*Jaya Guru Omkara Jaya Jaya  
Sadguru Omkara...Om  
Brahma Vishnu Sada Shiva  
Hara Hara Hara Hara Mahadeva*

Victory to the Supreme *Guru*, who is in the form of *Om* and is the Embodiment of Brahma (Creator), Vishnu (Sustainer) and Maheshwara (Lord of Lords and the Destroyer of Evil). O! Lord, destroy our sins (Galdes 1989: 111).

#### **B. INDIA AS "MOTHER" COUNTRY**

India is home to the oldest major religion in the world, Hinduism (World Book 1992). As such, India has become a spiritual space for people as is Jerusalem to many Jews and Christians. For example, the United States, one of the richest nations, has devotees of the *Sai* movement and of other eastern movements, such as, the Krishna Consciousness movement. These Americans look to India, one of the poorest nations, for their spiritual home. It is a country shrouded in mysticism. The Indians boast an advanced level of understanding of yoga and meditation. These are appealing practices for people from a "first world", highly competitive country. The Hindu temples, with their associated performances of dance and song, create an atmosphere of spiritual upliftment, which is sadly lacking in the United States. Further, Hinduism as a religion is well documented in numerous literary works such as the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Bhagavad Gita. For the educated Western

world these are meaningful sources of enlightenment. As Molyneux (1990) aptly states:

The role of written expression in the literate Western world is so prominent that it might be assumed to be the only medium of communicated thought worthy of serious attention (1990: 153)

The sense of devotion that the devotees of Isipingo display in their singing of the *bhajans* is an indication of their deep level of understanding of the texts of the songs that they sing. Since many devotees have been brought up in an essentially Indian household, they are familiar with the names of Hindu deities and with the various aspects of God that they depict.

Through some *bhajans* these devotees are reinforcing Indian Hindu beliefs but other *bhajans* which have more universal references convey the message that they are also South Africans acknowledging and accepting the different religions of the world in their attempt to promote peace and harmony. The idea of a global religion propagated by the *Sai* movement fulfils the spiritual needs of its devotees in South Africa. They are Hindu South Africans, not in the midst of an identity crisis, but establishing a cultural truth that blends in with their strong Indian heritage, their assimilation of western practices and their essential South Africanism.

The third *bhajan* of this congregation focuses on the female (mother) aspect of God. There are many levels at which this particular sense of identity functions within the *Sai* movement. Through songs, the glory of the female aspect of God is sung. The perception of Sai Baba as being a *homo-religios* figure and other female (mother)-related issues are discussed in Chapter Six.

*DEVI DURGA LAKSHMI SARASWATHI*

*Devi Durga Lakshmi Saraswathi Sai Jaganmatha  
Sai Jaganmatha Maam Pahi Jaganmatha  
Sai Jaganmatha Maam Pahi Jaganmatha*

O Divine Mother of the whole universe, Mother *Sai*,  
You are the embodiment of Durga (Parvati- creative-  
power), Lakshmi (goddess of wealth), and Saraswathi  
(goddess of knowledge).

O Divine Mother of the whole universe, protect us  
(Galdes 1989: 84).

It must be emphasized that the songs that are sung each week are not songs that are sung only in Isipingo. All the *bhajans* are taken from different *bhajan* books that have been compiled by various people from all over the world - from Australia to the United States to Japan. The songs themselves have been composed by Sai Baba and devotees from various countries.

The audio-cassette has played a vital role in the transmission of these songs from their initial singing to their final recording. Mass marketing of religious music in connection

with cassette technology has been a unique, if logical event in the realm of international popular music (Manuel 1993). In India, music has always played a central role in Hindu devotion. Manuel states that no other major culture outside India has such a flourishing diversity of devotional musics, playing such central roles in cultural life. The recordings of *bhajans* in India tended to represent relatively polished versions sung by professional vocalists rather than the collective amateur song sessions more typical of popular worship. A veteran *bhajan* singer stated:

*Bhajans* have always been popular in certain segments of our society. But now the catchy tunes have been successful in attracting the youth. Essentially, it is the cassette medium which is responsible for the growing sales rather than growing interest (Manuel 1993: 111).

Sai Baba is not directly involved in the recording or publication of songs that he sings during his discourses. These have been taped, written down and translated whenever necessary, and published by *Sai* devotees. Two important books are currently being used by all devotees in South Africa - the one is entitled Bhajanamavali which is a collection of familiar devotional songs being sung at *Prashanti Nilayam* and Bangalore in India. Discourses by Sai Baba on *Gayatri* (meaning Universal Prayer) and *bhajan* are also included in this book. The other book entitled Sai Sangeetham is a comprehensive collection of songs sung by *Sai* devotees worldwide. This was compiled and

published by South African devotees in 1990 for the very first time, an historical achievement for South African Sai devotees.

During the course of the *bhajan* service, songs were sung alternately by women and men. This was done consciously by the co-ordinator to ensure an equal balance of male and female lead singers. Unlike the women in the Krishna Consciousness movement, the women of the *Sai* movement appear to enjoy equal status with their male counterparts (see Chapter Six).

The next song in the video was sung by the co-ordinator, Morgan Moodley, who was also an instrumentalist, playing the *Nal* (South Indian drum). He led the *bhajan* sung in praise of Lord Rama.

*RAM RAM SAI RAM*

*Ram Ram Sai Ram  
Parthi Purisha Sai Ram  
Ram Ram Sai Ram  
Madhura Manohara Sundara Nam  
Shyamala Komala Nayanabhi Ram  
Ravi Kula Mandala Rajala Ram  
Parama Pavana Mangala Dham*

O Ram! Lord Sai Ram! Thou art Lord of Parthi. Thy very sweet, beautiful name enchants the mind. Thy cloud-like, soft complexion pleases our eyes. O beloved Lord, descendant of the race of the sun. Supreme Saviour. Thou art the abode of all auspiciousness

(Galdes 1989: 135).

The choice of songs for this congregation leaned heavily toward Hindu scriptures. It has to be borne in mind that these devotees had no pre-knowledge of my wanting to video-tape their singing on that day. Their permission was sought approximately fifteen minutes before they began their usual service. This was done quite deliberately in order to obtain as realistic a situation as was possible. The fifth song was a refreshing change for me. Not only was it in English (five of the *bhajans* were in Sanskrit) but it also included two other major world religions, that is, Christianity and Islam.

#### SPREAD YOUR LIGHT

Spread your light that all may see, O Sathya Sai Baba  
Some say you are Vishnu, Some say you are Shiva  
You are my only love, O *kali yuga avatar*

Spread your joy so all may share, O Sathya Sai Baba  
Some say you are Rama, Some say you are Krishna  
You are my only love, O *kali yuga avatar*

Spread your joy that all may feel, O Sathya Sai Baba  
Some say you are Jesus, Some say you are Allah  
You are my only love, O *kali yuga avatar*

(Reddy 1990: 265)

#### C. SYMBOLISM OF LIGHT

The concept of light in this *bhajan* is a significant one. In most religions, light is considered an important focus if one is to attain spiritual enlightenment. In its physical form, be it through clay lamps, brass lamps or through candles,

devotees of God use these as symbols of the light that burns within their hearts, their minds and their souls. Hindus usually light brass lamps or clay lamps daily in their homes. *Deepavali* ("deep" means light and "avali" means row) is the Hindu festival of lights. It signifies the triumphant return of Lord Rama after 14 years in exile to Ayodhya. Many Hindu homes in South Africa have clay lamps burning at various points around their homes on the night of this celebration. This is a symbolic practice because light is the antithesis of darkness and ignorance. On *Deepavali* day the numerous lamps that illuminate Hindu homes serve as a reminder that prayer dispels all ignorance and light leads to a proper understanding of life. In the western world (Europe), the acquisition of secular knowledge was referred to as the period of enlightenment. Zionists light candles and leave them burning on the beaches in Durban on Sunday mornings. Shembe women light candles for their meetings to invoke the presence of their ancestors (Muller, Personal Communication, November 1995). Here, through song, this concept of light is stressed. The prayer *Asato Maa* which usually follows the period of meditation, after the *bhajans* are sung, focuses on the concept of light and peace.



ASATO MAA

Asato Maa Sadgamaya  
Tamaso Ma Jyotirgamaya  
Mrithyorma Amritam Gamaya  
Om Shanti...Shanti...Shanti

From the unreal, lead me to the real  
From darkness, lead me to the light  
From death, lead me to immortality  
Om...Let there be peace...peace...perfect peace  
(Galdes 1989: 159)

The *arathi* song is accompanied by the Hindu ritual of waving lighted camphor around the photograph of the deity being worshipped (in this instance, Sai Baba). This ritual symbolises the removal of ignorance. In Sai centres in the United States and in the United Kingdom, where Hinduism is not the major religion of the movement, the waving of camphor is omitted. In Isipingo the Hindus place high value on this ritual and it is considered a special privilege if one is accorded the opportunity of performing the *arathi*. This song follows the spiritual talk by one of the devotees and the announcements concerning the various activities of and the matters relating to the Sai movement.

ARATHI SONG

*Om Jai Jagadisha Hare Swami Sathya Sai Hare  
Bhaktha Jana Samrakshaka (2 times)  
Parthi Maheshwara  
Om Jai Jagadeesa Hare*

O Lord Hari, Lord of the world... You are the destroyer of our grief, ego and ignorance.  
O Lord who has manifested in Parthi, you are guardian and protector of your devotees.

*Shasivadana Sreekhara Sarva Prana Pate  
Swami Sarva Prana Pate  
Ashritakalpalateeka (2 times)  
Apadbandhava  
Om Jai Jagadisha Hare*

You are as lovely, graceful and charming as the moon. You always do auspicious, happiness yielding acts. You are the master and indweller of all beings. You are the divine wish-fulfilling tree (*Kalpalatika*). At the time of calamities and distress, you are friend, kinsman and protector.

*Matha Pita Guru Daivam Mari Antayuneeve  
Swami Mari Antayuneeve  
Nada Brahma Jagan Natha (2 times)  
Nagendrashayana  
Om Jai Jagadisha Hare*

You are mother, father, teacher, God and everything. There is no other except you. O Lord of the universe. You are the primeval sound that pervaded the universe when there was naught else. You are reclining on the coiled serpent. Hail to thee... Lord of the universe.

*Omkara Roopa Ojaswi  
Om Sai Mahadeva  
Sathya Sai Mahadeva  
Mangala Arathi Anduko (2 times)  
Mandara Giridhari  
Om Jai Jagadisha Hare*

O Lord Sai Mahadeva, you are pranava... the very essence of om. You are strength, vigour, splendour and light. You are Vishnu who bore the weight of Mandara Peak. Please accept this auspicious waving of the *arathi*.

Narayana Narayana Om Sathya Narayana  
Narayana Narayana Om  
Narayana Narayana Om Sathya  
Narayana Narayana Om Sathya  
Narayana Narayana Om  
Om Jai Sadguru Deva

(this verse is repeated three times with slow, moderate and fast tempos)

We chant the name of Narayana... the indwelling Lord, in reverence to Baba (Sathya). Then...Om...Hail!...Perfect teacher..God!

Om...Shanti...Shanti...Shantihi

Om...Peace...Peace...Perfect Peace.

The camphor, in physical terms, creates the light that is used for this ritual. The song refers to the "splendour and light" of God in symbolic terms. Light, then, functions at different levels to establish its importance as the expression of this ritualistic experience. The performative and the textual context serve as a powerful medium for creating heightened moments of community unity and identity (Turino 1993: 94). Within this religious frame as a whole, Hindu Sai devotees in Isipingo articulate some of the most important things that they have to communicate about themselves and their particular views of the world.

The final *bhajan* that was performed was in praise of the Shivan-Shakthi (see Fig. 5, Appendix 4), that is, the male-female aspect of God (see Chapter Six). This *bhajan*, I was

told, was one of the older songs that was selected for that day (Jayarani Moodley, Personal Communication, November 1995). The singing of familiar *bhajans* is advocated by Sai Baba (see Appendix 1, no. 6), so that all devotees can share *ananda* (bliss).

*SHIVA KUMARANE SHAKTHI BALANE*

*Shiva Kumarane Shakti Balane*  
*Va Va Va*  
*Saravanabhava guha Shunmuga vela*  
*Va Va Va*  
*Omkara Tattuvame nee Va Va Va*  
*Parthipureesha Sayi Nada Va Va Va*  
*Kanda Va Va Va*  
*Vela Va Va Va*  
*Sayi Va Va Va*

Come to me the son of Shiva and Parvathi  
Come to me, Shunmuga, who is the controller of the mind  
and senses  
Come to me, Lord Sai of Puttaparthi

(Jayarani Moodley, Personal Communication, November 1995)

**D. Instrumental Accompaniment of the *Bhajan***

All of these *bhajans* were accompanied by the *harmonium* (Indian keyboard instrument), the *nal* (South Indian drum), the *tablas* (North Indian drums), the *manjiras* (cymbals) and hand-clapping (during each repetition of the *bhajan*). The instrumentalists made a concerted effort not to overpower the voices of the lead singer and the chorus. They also tried to create a balance amongst the instruments (see Appendix 1, no. 5). In one

segment of the video the *nal* player (an adult) turns quietly and tells the *tabla* player (a 13 year old boy) to play softly. It is quite understandable that a child could easily become over-exuberant while playing any instrument (especially when a video-camera is being focused on him!). It is also significant that drums originally from both the North and the South of India were played together. This is not the norm in Indian music performance because there are marked differences between the timbres and the technique of playing between drums from the North and the South of India.

The ratio of male to female amongst the instrumentalists leans in favour of males. The *harmonium*, the *nal* and the *tablas* were all played by males. Only the *manjiras* were played by a woman. Yet, there were a greater number of women in this congregation than men (see statistics of Chapter Four). This disproportion harks back to the traditional Hindu patterns of Indians in South Africa. The playing of instruments was considered the domain of men whilst dance was a predominantly female pursuit. Singing was practised by both men and women. In Isipingo this disproportion is currently being addressed by the introduction of weekly lessons on the violin, the *harmonium* or the *tablas* for young children (boys and girls) and for interested men and women. These classes are conducted by a talented local musician and members of his family.

### **E. The Form of the *Bhajan***

All *bhajans* that were sung followed the same form. They began at a moderate tempo. Each line was sung first by the lead singer which was then repeated by the entire congregation (antiphonal singing). The entire *bhajan* was then repeated at a fast tempo following the same antiphonal pattern. During this fast repeat of the *bhajan*, all devotees included hand-clapping in time to the song. Finally, the first line of the *bhajan* was sung slowly by all devotees.

This structured format is clearly discernable not only in the *bhajans* but in many aspects of the devotees lives. Their weekly Thursday congregational meetings follow the same, almost ritualistic pattern each week. The many *Sai* activities, such as, weekly study circle meetings, *bhajan* practices and the volunteer work of the men (usually on a Saturday morning), create a structured pattern for the daily lives of *Sai* devotees. This sense of structure lends itself to the establishment of their spiritual/religious community and their construction of a regime of cultural truth.

The singing of *bhajans* was followed by the singing of the *Sarva Dharma* prayer. For this prayer, the *nal*, the *tabla* and the *manjiras* were not played. The slow, plaintive quality of the melody lent itself to a simple drone with a single melodic line

played on the harmonium.

*SARVA DHARMA PRAYER*

*Om That Sat Sri Narayana Tu Purushottam  
Guru Tu  
Siddha Buddha Tu Skanda Vinayak Savita  
Pavaka Tu  
Brahm Mazda Tu Yahva Shakti Tu Eshu Pita  
Prabhu Tu  
Rudra Vishnu Tu Ram Krishna Tu Rahim  
Tao Tu  
Vasudeva Go Vishwarupa Tu Chidananda  
Hari Tu  
Advitiya Tu Akala Nirbhaya Atmalinga  
Shiva Tu*

*Om Tat Sat: That thou art; Thou art truth. Sri Narayana: Lord Narayana who is radiant, splendid, glorious, beautiful, graceful; also who is bestower of prosperity, welfare, treasure, riches, good fortune, success, wealth, high rank, power, might etc.; also Lord of Luxmi-goddess of wealth and prosperity. Purushottam Guru: Supreme Lord, who is embodiment of perfection. Siddha: God worshipped by Jains. Buddha: One who is enlightened. Skanda: Lord Subramanyam- destroyer of evils; son of Lord Shiva. Vinayaka: Lord Ganesh, Supreme Leader, who is embodiment of wisdom and grantor of success. Savita: Sun God, who sustains and nourishes the entire world and is the source of life. Pavaka: Fire that purifies. Brahm: Infinity-one that pervades the entire universe. Mazda: Great. Yehva: Jehovah- God of Hebrews. Shakti: Divine power or energy. Eshu: Christ. Pita: Father. Prabhu: Almighty God. Rudra: One who purifies- Lord Shiva. Vishnu: All-pervading and nourishing Lord. Rama: Lord Rama. Krishna: Lord Krishna. Rahim: One who is all kindness. Tao: One who is embodiment of knowledge. Vasudev: Principle that resides in the entire creation. Go: Cow or Mother earth. Vishwarupa: Omnipresent, omnipotent, omniscient and infinite form. Chidananda: Embodiment of supreme consciousness and bliss. Hari: One who destroys illusions. Advitaya: One without a second. Akala: One who is beyond time, timeless. Nirbhaya: One who is fearless. Atmalinga: Formless symbol of creation, no beginning, no end. Shiva: Most auspicious Lord Shiva. Tu: Thou...You (Bhajanamavali [s.a.]: 1-2).*

The *Sarva Dharma* prayer with its thirty-six names of God was

intended to bring men and women of different faiths together. This was followed by a short period of silent sitting and meditation.

#### **F. Meditation and Music**

Meditation is considered so important for the spiritual development of every of the Sai organisation that it heads the list of nine guidelines for *sadhana* (spiritual exercises), in the "Code of Conduct", for devotees (see Appendix 3).

Music plays an important part in spiritual awareness because, of all the arts, it is most closely allied with meditation. Whereas poetry and painting (visual arts) suggest form and contour, music alone can act as the bridge between the form and the formless (God).

According to Hindu belief, every note in Hindu music corresponds with the vibration of a certain planet and every note reflects a certain pitch of the animal world. The whole of creation started from the primal sound *Om*. From a scientific point of view, however, matter is energy in vibration and vibration is sound. Because people are matter, sound is able to affect one's physical and mental composition. Certain sound frequencies can cause the disintegration of matter. The opposite is also possible and harmonization of



matter can occur through sound (Reddy 1990: 27).

Meditation and *bhajan* singing create energy fields that emit vibrations which harmonize with the universe. It is a Hindu belief that being at one with the environment helps to neutralize the harm that humankind inflicts upon itself. The period of meditation was followed by the singing of *Asato Maa* which has already been explained in this chapter.

A spiritual talk was then presented by one of the *Sai* devotees. These talks usually focus on topics that have been discussed at the weekly study circle meeting. A broad spectrum of topics was covered including a study of the different religions, explanations of important festivals, the teachings of saints, Hindu mythology and so on. Announcements of the *Sai* activities and information relating to *Sai* affairs followed immediately after the spiritual talk. All devotees, except the *harmonium* player and the drum players, who needed to be seated in order to play, then stood up to sing the *Arathi* song (discussed earlier in this chapter). If the *manjiras* were not being played then the devotees clasped their hands together in prayer.

Turino (1993) states:

In his discussion of culturally specific styles of movement, Edward Hall emphasises how synchrony of movement between individuals becomes an important medium for social bonding beginning soon after birth. Moving together and sounding together-*being in sync*-are fundamental to being together, and are crucial to feelings of belonging within a social [religious/spiritual] situation

(Turino 1993: 111).

He goes on to say that music brings the state of being in sync to a heightened level of explicitness. Each repetition of a piece extends the possibility of "being in sync" and the social union is thus intensified. In such contexts, extended repetition does not lead to boredom; it is the basis of aesthetic power (*ibid.*).

The singing of the *Arathi* song was followed by the short prayer, *Loka Samasta*. The *tabla* and *nal* were not played for this slow, repetitive melody whose text echoed one basic idea.

#### LOKA SAMASTA

*Loka Samasta Sukhino Bhavantu* (this line was repeated three times)

May the world be happy for all time

(Galdes 1989: 159).

Devotees sat down once more for the singing of the *Vibuthi* song. I was fascinated by the rehearsed manner in which the

sequence of singing accompanied by the different rituals was conducted. It gave me the impression that most devotees had been attending many of these congregations. The prayers, in particular, were sung with much confidence. This was to be expected because only the *bhajans* change each week. The prayers remain the same for every congregation.

#### **G. Significance of *Vibuthi***

*Vibuthi* or sacred ash is normally distributed after *Arathi* (see Appendix 1, no. 23). The *vibuthi* is taken and put onto the forehead of the devotee. This symbolises the final end of all humankind. Whether one is cremated or buried upon death, all people end up as ash/dust. Wealth, fame, intelligence, power or beauty do not make a difference when one dies. The *vibuthi* that is distributed at the Sai congregation serves as a sharp reminder to all devotees to live their lives in such a manner that their final ash would be of some significance. According to Sai belief, each devotee should ask themselves whether or not the world has benefitted from his or her existence (Reddy 1990: 25). After taking the sacred ash, all devotees kneeled to pay their respects to Sai Baba before leaving the temple. The devotees left quietly, in an attempt to maintain the same frame of mind as was established during the singing of *bhajans* (see Appendix 1, no. 24).

## **VIBUTHI SONG**

*Paranam Pavitram Baba Vibuthim  
Paranam Vichitram Lila Vibuthim  
Paramartha Ishtartha Moksha Pradatam  
Baba Vibuthim Idamashrayami*

Sacred, holy and supreme is Baba's *vibuthim*  
Pouring forth in brilliant stream, this display of  
*vibuthim*  
So auspicious is its might, it grants liberation  
Baba's *vibuthim*, its power protects thee  
(Galdes 1989: 159).

### **H. Towards a Re-Orientation of Religion**

The Sai devotees of Isipingo are almost exclusively Hindus. I say "almost" because I have had occasion to speak with one or two white devotees (I have focused on one white devotee in a video segment) who are Christians. Many of the Hindu devotees are well educated individuals who have reacted to their inferior status as citizens of this country and also to the frustrated spirit of the twentieth century. The Indian South African has realised through experience that, in spite of one's western education qualifying one to participate in and contribute to the social, political, educational and economic institutions of the country, the Indian South African has paradoxically been ostracised from them and relegated to a position of inferiority. In spite of the many talents or skills with which one may be endowed, the Indian South African can rarely lay claim to equality of opportunity or superiority of any kind.

Many Hindus have used religion as an outlet for the frustrations they have experienced in the different spheres of their lives. In Hinduism there are endless opportunities of equality which are denied in other fields. Political portfolios, positions in commerce and industry and in the academic field have been limited for Indians through racial discrimination. Further, spiritual goals have no race, colour or language barriers. In addition, the polytheistic nature of Hinduism makes it accessible to all people. Hinduism within the context of the Sai movement makes religion even more accessible. Hinduism has been re-orientated to fulfill the needs of Indians in South Africa. When Sai Baba was questioned in one interview about the worship of countless Gods by Hindus (Balu 1983), he replied thus:

India has a wonderful religious tradition. It has something for everyone, to suit everyone's needs. Many people do not understand this idea and make derisory comments on [Hindus] having too many gods. This tradition has evolved to suit the needs of different people, just as we have shirts of varying types and sizes to fit different people. With the ideal of one God, there is only one shirt and, if it does not fit or if it is unsuitable, people turn away from God (*ibid.* 340).

Christianity or Islam, for instance, are exclusive religions that do not practise the wide catholicity and tolerance of Hinduism. In South Africa, the emergence of neo-Hindu organisations has made Hinduism even more accessible to Hindu

South Africans.

In the past, Hinduism was inextricably linked to formal, ceremonial, symbolic and ritualistic practices. Although these practices are in no way fundamental, they nevertheless gravitate around the essential core of Hinduism. A vast labyrinth of such practice has built steadily as a superstructure on the core of Hinduism and to the masses, it is this that represents the Hinduism to be believed and practised.

The educated Hindus of South Africa, in increasing numbers, are displaying their disapproval of these overshadowing anachronisms. They have revolted and paved the way for a re-orientation of religion from the formal to the fundamental aspects of Hinduism. Highly educated doctors and teachers in Isipingo have attached themselves to the *Sai* organisation, which dispels the myth that educated young Hindus have no time for religion. The sincerity of their attachment cannot be questioned for it is not just casual, of a patronizing nature in some honorary capacity, but characterised by devotion, active participation and dedicated service.

The awakening of religious and spiritual consciousness among the educated Hindu South African has created a fresh interest

in religious events punctuating the Hindu calendar. There has been a shift in emphasis, however, from blind faith to purposeful enlightenment of the fundamental aspect of Hinduism.

## CHAPTER SIX

### A. SAI CELEBRATIONS

Music must be a felt experience. Do not sing with one eye on the effect it has on the audience and the other on the effect it might have on God. Let your heart throb for God; then the *raga*<sup>1</sup> and the *tala*<sup>2</sup> will automatically be pleasing and right

(Sri Sathya Sai Baba in Balu 1983: 280).

#### 1. Introduction

*Sai* ritual and its effect on *Sai* performers and the *Sai* congregation forms the basis of this chapter. In addition, I focus on the concept of *Sai* as being *homo-religios* and more specifically on *Sai* as feminine (mother) space. This notion is in opposition to the Judeo-Christian view of God as the patriarchal authority, that is, of God as man. The virtues of the female/mother aspects of God are embodied in *Sai bhajans* (*Devi, Durga, Luxmi, Saraswathi* in Chapter Five is one example). Finally, I consider the use of popular (secular) music for essentially sacred purposes.

I examine these themes in two significant celebrations, *Sai* Baba's birthday celebration (*Prashanti Darshan*) and the *Sai* Christmas celebration, both of which are central to the *Sai* ritual calendar.



## **B. PRASHANTI DARSHAN**

### **1. Motivation for Assistance**

It was 23 November 1993, an important day in the calendar of all *Sai* devotees. This auspicious day heralded the birth of their teacher, *guru, avatar* - Sri Sathya Sai Baba. Rehearsals for this birthday celebration had begun in earnest, almost three months earlier. My assistance in training the *Sai* choir had been enlisted by Dr. Rajen Cooppan. As mentioned in the introduction, because of my periodic association with members of the *Sai* movement in Isipingo I was treated as an insider and thus accepted as being very much a part of this group. I had accepted the challenge of training this choir because they were a group of untrained singers who exhibited the kind of enthusiasm I had always cherished in my students at school. Also, I considered the melodies of the songs to be quite "catchy" whilst the lyrics conveyed very positive and morally sound messages.

### **2. Purpose of the Programme**

Entitled "*Prashanti Darshan*" (meaning Blessing at Prashanti) the theme of this programme of narrations, music and slides was intended to offer devotees and non-devotees an insight into some of the teachings of Sai Baba and also a glimpse into a typical experience at Prashanti Nilayam, the abode of Sai Baba. This construction of India in South Africa was made possible

through ritual, music and religion. The choice of a theme such as this speaks of a desire that many a devotee has expressed the desire to visit Sai Baba in person at his *ashram*<sup>3</sup> in Puttaparti in India. Because *Sai* devotees accept that Sai Baba's powers transcend time and space, many feel the need to experience the gift of his physical aura. Shakuntala Balu (1983), a journalist, discusses the testimony of an aura expert:

Professor Frank Baranowski, an American, specialises in research on auras and works at the University of Arizona. He is an expert in bio-magnetic field radiation photography. He has photographed and interpreted the auras of countless men and women with the ultra-sensitive kirlian camera.

He has examined the auras of very many holy men and yogis in India and elsewhere...Everyone has an aura...Sri Sathya Sai Baba also has large bands of blue aura beyond white. This is at least twice as much as any ordinary person...there are 5 different shades of auras (*tejas* in Sanskrit) denoting aesthetic, spiritual, intellectual, physical and moral aspects. These can all be scientifically explained. But the aura around Sri Sathya Sai Baba is beyond explanation (Balu 1983: 47-49).

One important finding of Professor Baranowski was the fact that Sai Baba's aura was at its fullest when *bhajans* were sung (*ibid.*49). This emphasised the far-reaching effect of music.

### **3. Rehearsal Procedure**

Rehearsals for this programme were scheduled for three evenings during the week. Since the choir comprised both children and

adults (male and female) the early evenings suited all since the children had to retire early enough for school the following day and most adults had to attend rehearsals after a normal working day. During these rehearsals I gained some insight into the collective personality profiles of these devotees. They were punctual; they listened attentively to instructions; they were disciplined - so much so that I had to spend much time creating a more informal, relaxed and spontaneous atmosphere to facilitate good tone during singing and easy, gentle body movement whilst singing.

Relaxation exercises, some of which I had learnt during my teacher-training years, were used to release tension or apprehension these singers may have felt. These exercises included the swivelling of the head, easing of the shoulders, arm swings, waist bends and "rag dolls". These exercises were followed by vocal warm-ups. Again, in true western tradition (into which I had been schooled), this choir went through their paces singing to various combinations of the tonic-solfa. These were new experiences for almost all members of the choir but they were most obliging and enthusiastic to give of their best.

#### 4. Programme Presentation

This particular programme was written and devised by Dr. Rajen Cooppan who contends that it was not he who was responsible for this artistic output. He firmly maintains that it was "Swami's" (meaning the Lord's), that is, Sai Baba's divine inspiration that made this programme possible. Dr. Cooppan claims that he was being used as an instrument towards fulfilling the Sai mission of love and peace. The accompanying audio-cassette is a recording of the narrations and music that was presented for Sai Baba's birthday celebration on 23 November 1993.

The choir was arranged on stage with no bias towards any particular voice type, for example, soprano, alto, tenor or bass since it was decided that all songs would be sung in unison to facilitate easy learning. I did, however, try to spread out the stronger voices in an attempt to create a more cohesive sound for performance purposes. Attired in white *punjabis* (Indian dress worn by females) and white pants and white *kurtas* (Indian shirt-like garments worn by males) or white shirts, the choir, together with the narrators and instrumentalists-cum-singers were a pleasing sight to behold. The wearing of white is the characteristic colour of Sai devotees all over the world. Here, the devotees' expressed the fervent wish that the purity that is traditionally associated

with white would symbolise the purity of their hearts, their minds and their deeds in participating in a presentation of this nature.

Gandhi's responses to the costumes of others and his experiments with his own attire indicate a growing awareness of the meaning of clothes - their importance as indicators of status, group identity, social stratification, and political beliefs (Bean 1989: 358-359)

Amongst *Sai* devotees, it is clear that the uniformity of dress in respect of colour and style reinforces their group identity. It also eliminates class distinctions. This is important for South African Indians because it is a movement away from the Indian caste system which is still a practice of Indians in India.

##### **5. Prelude to the Performance**

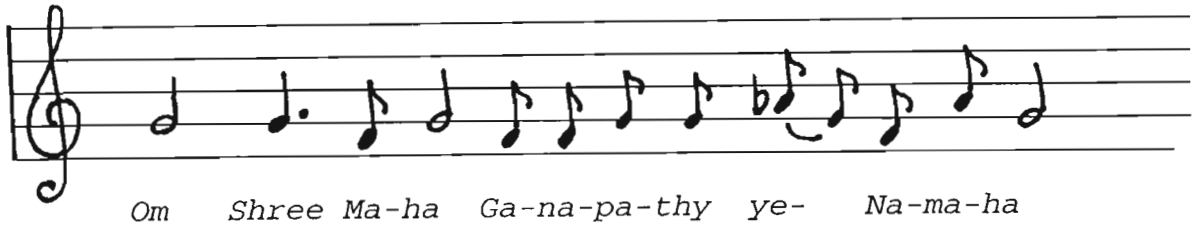
From about seven o'clock devotees and interested non-devotees filed into the Hindu Society Hall in Isipingo, many of whom knew from previous experiences that this hall with its capacity of four hundred people would soon be over-crowded on such an occasion. One was immediately struck by the sense of quiet expectation that pervaded the atmosphere. People spoke in whispers, members of the *Sai* Centre tested the sound system, the humming of the fans on the wall could be heard in the background and women clad in white *saris* (Indian garment) lit

incense sticks which created an ambience unique to this occasion.

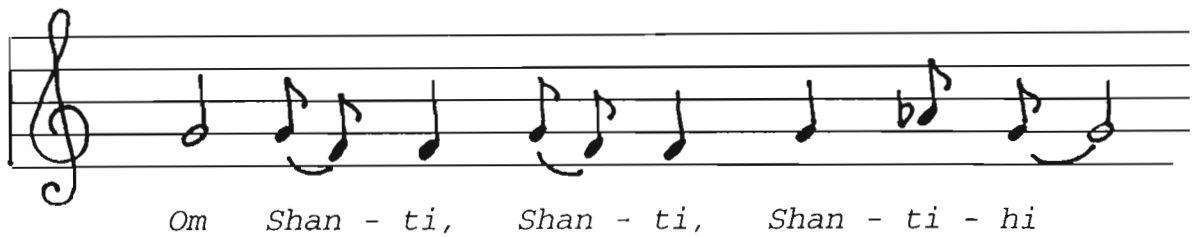
Meanwhile, members of the choir began their relaxation exercises and vocal warm-ups in the Hindu temple situated next to the hall. After some words of encouragement from Dr. Cooppan and myself, all members held hands and chanted the *Omkar* or *Aum* very slowly.

The combination of these three sounds, A, U and M make up the *Omkar*. The sound A arises in the throat (beginning softly). The sound U arises from the tongue (gradually becoming louder). The sound M arises from the lips (slowly softening). When pronounced properly it should sound like a plane coming from a distance, then drawing closer and closer to us and eventually flying away from us. It is generally believed amongst Hindus that the chanting of the *Omkar*s three times harmonizes the body, mind and soul. It is also recited to invoke the presence of God in all his spirituality. This chant was followed in true Hindu tradition by the *Ganapati* or *Ganesha mantra* (a prayer or invocation dedicated to Lord Ganesha). The particular prayer is usually the first prayer recited. It is dedicated to Lord Ganesha who is considered by Hindus to be the remover of all obstacles. The chanting of this *mantra* which is also repeated three times follows this musical pattern:

*Om Shree Maha Ganapathy Namaha*



Subsequent to this was the chanting of *Om Shanti, Shanti, Shanti* which literally means peace. The recitation of *Shanti* follows this musical pattern.



This is repeated thrice to invoke peace for the body, mind and soul. It is common practice among Hindus to chant *Om Shanti* at the end of any prayer. The division of the mind and body, and of intellect and emotion is a western concept whereas, the unity of all aspects of the human being is an eastern concept. This holistic view of an individual has immense appeal for westerners in contemporary society.

After these preparations were complete the choir felt calm, relaxed and more than ready to please Sai Baba with their

offering of music and words for his birthday celebration. All the members were confident that after having rehearsed so intensely, they simply had leave the details of this performance to the will of Sai Baba and nothing would go amiss. Being in the midst of people whose belief in Sai Baba was so unshakable, I began to be moved by their faith. I found my scepticism eroding away as I held their hands in prayer.

The stage was set, with a simple plain white backdrop onto which the slides were projected; the microphones were in position; the slide projector was in place and all members of the cast eagerly awaited their cue to begin this very special birthday presentation. As the curtains opened I did not feel the usual rush of adrenalin that one senses before a performance but rather a quiet uplifting ambience of profound love and happiness.

#### **6. Presentation of *Prashanti Darshan***

The first narrator, a sixteen year old girl in standard eight at the local high school (at which I teach) began her prologue:

Welcome, devotees of God. We, the children of Sai would like you to join us as we journey into the world of Sai where '*Prashanti Darshan*', the experience of supreme peace awaits us. But, before we embark on our journey, let us obtain the blessing and grace of Lord Ganesha - he who removes the obstacles of doubt, worry and laziness on our spiritual journey.



It was significant that the members of the audience were referred to as 'devotees of God' for this is an all-encompassing term. Irrespective of the religion that one follows, the common denominator is God. All believers of God were referred to as devotees. Thus, no-one was allowed to feel alienated from this experience. Once again, one encountered the aspect of God that removes obstacles. Hindus refer to this characteristic of God as Lord Ganesha. Thus, many of the members of the audience, having Hindu backgrounds, were able to identify with this reference to Lord Ganesha. It is important to identify the fine tension that exists between a transnational spiritual movement and the local meanings for Hindu members of the *Sai* movement in Isipingo. These meanings have been shaped by local socio-political structures.

#### **7. The Instrumental Ensemble**

The instrumentalists comprised players of differing skills whose scope of musical training and experience ranged from one extreme to the other: one of the most important players holding the melodic lines together was the keyboard player (a young medical doctor in his twenties who had no formal training on the keyboard); Dr. Cooppan and I played folk guitars (both of us were self-taught); Dr. Cooppan's brother, Visu, played the tambourine whilst a very talented young *tabla* player, a fifteen year old boy who had been trained by a Mauritian teacher of the

*tabla*, played a crucial role in maintaining the group's rhythmic stability.

In other circumstances this diversity of skill may have created a sense of frustration for the more highly skilled. The understanding and patience that the players exhibited toward each other was what held the group together. The inclusiveness of this movement as a whole was being demonstrated even at this level. The choice of western instruments, such as the tambourine, guitars and keyboard was "Indianized" by the inclusion of the *tabla*. This syncretic ensemble reflected a blend of western, Indian and Hindu practices. The local social organisation determined the character of this musical ensemble.

The first song as the narrator indicated was dedicated to Lord Ganesha:

We start with a prayer to the Lord, the one we call Ganesha. (repeat line)

He dances in wisdom. He dances in joy.  
His laughter is music, no world can destroy.  
And his song sings on and on and on and on.

We start with a prayer to the Lord, the one we call Ganesha. (repeat line)

At the cradle of fortune, he's there on his rat.  
At the gate of the mystery, he lifts up the latch.  
And his song sings on and on and on and on.

We start with a prayer to the Lord, the one we call Ganesha. (repeat line)

A story of prose, he's there with his pen.  
At the start of a race, he's there at the end.  
And his song sings on and on and on and on.

The entire song was then repeated much faster than the original moderate tempo. The melodic line underwent slight change only for the first line of the song. Then finally, the first line was repeated very slowly in its original form. This sequence of singing followed very closely the traditional style of *Sai bhajans*. Most *Sai bhajans* generally begin at a moderate tempo. The *bhajan* is then repeated very fast, followed by a slow repetition of the opening line. The difference here was that instead of having every line sung by a lead singer which the entire congregation would then repeat, all members of the choir sang the song in unison.

#### **8. Transmission of the Songs**

The entire repertoire of songs for this programme was orally transmitted. This is in keeping with the traditional Indian method of music instruction and the transmission of popular music. Although these are intrinsically diverse musics there is a commonality. These are the firm theoretical principles upon which the music is based. Further, whilst most of the songs follow western musical patterns, there is the underlying "Indianess" which is evident. It is possible to use western notation for the *Sai* repertoire of songs because they follow

major and/or minor keys. Subtle inflections of the voice, however, convey several characteristics of Indian music. There is, for instance, the manipulation of the dying sound, often suggesting notes which in a cold analytical light are not actually present. Other features that defy conventional western notation are slides, sustained notes slightly shaken in pitch, but not rising or falling as far as its neighbouring note and the indeterminate rise or fall, before or after the note is notated.

As most of the songs are in English they have become immensely popular since they are in a language that all can understand. For most young Indians even the vernacular languages are not commonly spoken at home.

As Goodall clearly explains:

the unavoidable fact is that most Durban Hindus are native English-speakers and do not understand *bhajan* texts which are in Tamil [or any other Indian language]

(Goodall 1993: 50).

This westernisation of the Indians in South Africa has resulted in severe repercussions in terms of retaining cultural roots. For instance, the concepts of *raga* and *tala* (see glossary) used traditionally in Indian music have not been accessible to all Indians in South Africa. Given these constraints it is not

surprising that the music of the *Sai* movement has such popular appeal for even the songs that are sung in languages other than English usually have English translations or explanations attached to the original copies.

### **9. Metaphors in Song Texts**

The metaphors inherent in the lyrics of this first song must be highlighted. The power and strength of Lord Ganesha is presented as a never-ending song. This is significant since song is seen as a multi-faceted entity which symbolises boundless energy. This metaphor is sustained in the first verse where dance depicts wisdom and joy while laughter is associated with indestructible music. Despite the many metaphors used throughout the song, it is evident that Lord Ganesha's ultimate strength lies in song, for "his song sings on and on and on and on." Throughout Hindu literature, such as the Bhagavad Gita there is the constant use of metaphor and symbolism to illustrate a teaching or a moral value. For example, the battlefield on which Lord Krishna finds himself may be interpreted as the battlefield of the mind. The war waged there has been perceived as the war of evil tendencies that battle with divine virtues. These metaphors in the song texts create links between the song performance and spirituality.

The second narrator, also a sixteen year old girl, continued with the message of love and peace. Already, the audience seemed spellbound by the unusual nature of this presentation. In previous years, dance, plays and conventional *Sai bhajans* used to be the norm. Here, a new precedent was being set with an originally devised programme with locally constructed texts and local adaptations of *Sai* and popular music.

She continued...

Nestled in the foothills of a range of mountains in South India, lies the tiny village of Puttaparti. Along the banks of the Chitravati river is a most sacred dwelling, *Prashanti Nilayam*, the abode of supreme peace. It is here that Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba, the *avatar* of the *Kali age*<sup>4</sup>, has his *ashram*. The age of *Kali* is indeed upon us, dear people. Hate, anger, jealousy and violence are the order of the day. Son turns again father, daughter against mother, killing is how we settle our differences. The demonic nature is rampant in man and mother earth groans under this tragic burden. Oh, how will it all end? Is there a future for us upon this earth? Who can stop the demonic man? Everywhere - fear, fear, fear, fear. Fear not, dear devotees, for the season of crying is almost over as we enter *Prashanti Nilayam*.

*Prashanti Nilayam* may easily have represented the "new" South Africa, for the season of the *apartheid regime* was over. In 1993, South Africa experienced one of its most tumultuous times politically, socially and in every other sphere of life. With the last vestiges of enforced *apartheid* crumbling away and with people in the throes of a new and changing South Africa, it was

inevitable that people would either collapse under the strain or blossom in the wake of a new and changing country with vigour and vitality. Through all of this uncertainty and fear, the *Sai* movement stood firm in their belief that despite their circumstances, there was hope for peace and tranquillity in their lives.

This second song "The Season of Crying" conveyed this message.

The season of crying is almost over.  
The season of longing is almost done.  
Here comes the river, washing your feelings.  
Here comes the one warm love to dry your tears.

Well, maybe the demons have got their reasons.  
But only love will make them feel shamed.  
Pretend that your vision goes yonder these four walls.  
That all very soon I think something will change.

What was once precious is now forsaken.  
What was nothing is all that remains.

Deep in a dream, something was waiting.  
Just what it was didn't have a name.  
Well a season of dreaming is now taking you over.  
Escape to a moment that time cannot take.

(Repeat from "What was once precious..." to the end).

For this song, the *bhajan* or *kirtan* format was not used. The entire song was sung at a fairly slow tempo by the choir. The lines "What was once precious..." was sung solo by Dr. Cooppan while the following line, "What was nothing..." was sung by myself. This arrangement was decided upon in order to create

some variety in our musical presentation.

From the turmoil of South Africa, the narrator transported the audience to an experience of imagined serene tranquillity at Puttaparti.

As the dawn breaks over the sacred skies of Puttaparti, the air is filled with the glorious *Suprabatham*<sup>5</sup>, the sacred hymn awakening us to the divine within us. He who sings this divine hymn every morning is assured of his freedom from worry, anxiety and fear and will live in supreme peace, *Prashanti*.

Even in South Africa devotees sing this divine hymn in an attempt to realise this peaceful and relaxed mental state. The latter is considered an essential by *Sai* devotees if they aspire towards realising their own spirituality. The slow, repetitive melodic line of this hymn with its powerful lyrics lends itself towards attaining this ideal. In the audio tape, the *Suprabatham* is sung in free rhythm by a soloist accompanied by a single held chord on the harmonium. This musical style differs markedly from other music on the tape. An excerpt of the text of this particularly long hymn has been included. Since the original *Suprabatham* is in Sanskrit, an English translation has been included.



*BHAGAWAN SRI SATHYA SAI SUPRABATHAM*

*Eeswar Ambaa Suthah Shreeman  
Poorvaa Sandhyaa Pra Varthathe  
Utthista Satya Sayeesha  
Karthavyam Daivam Aanhnikam*

O Son of Esmaramba! O Resplendent Majestic One! Dawn is heralding in the East. The daily tasks of Divinity which Thou hast undertaken has to be accomplished, therefore, awake, O Lord Sathya Sai!

*Utthistotthista Partheesh  
Utthista Jagathee Pathe  
Utthista Karuna Poorna  
Loka Mangala Siddhaye*

Awake. Awake, O Lord of Parthi! O Lord of the entire Universe and Mankind! Awake, O Compassionate Lord! So that the world attain auspiciousness, happiness, prosperity, welfare and blessings.

And this is how the day begins at Prashanti Nilayam - our minds filled with the sweet fragrance of Sai, our beloved Sadguru [the supreme teacher].

These are two of the ten verses that make up the entire *Suprabatham*. The "sweet fragrance of Sai" may be paralleled with the Shembe belief that heaven is characterised by a beautiful fragrance. This sensory space is in opposition to the industrialized, mechanistic associations of western culture. Throughout this hymn the overwhelming yearning of the one who sings this hymn is for the day to be an auspicious one.

Sai Baba is an *avatar*, a *poorna*, or full *avatar*, the descendant of God into human form to help man back onto the ancient highway, back to Godhead. As the supreme teacher, as the *Sadguru*, he leads us back onto the Godly path.

The "ancient highway, back to Godhead" emphasised the yearning of Indian South Africans to maintain their historical links with India.

(Note: The *bhajan* that was performed after this narration has been omitted because similar *bhajans* have been dealt with in Chapter Five).

### C. Sai as Homo-religios

The narrator then focused, in my opinion, on a very important aspect of God, that is, the perception of God as being both male and female. An analysis of the name "Sai Baba" reveals significant meanings. In Sanskrit "Sai" is derived from "Sa" and "Ayi". "Sa" means all and "Ayi" means mother - hence "Sai" the supreme mother of all. Baba means father. In Zulu, *UBaba* also means father. Sai Baba may be interpreted as the supreme mother and father of all. Thus, this homo-religios quality manifests itself within the name of Sai Baba. In Hinduism this is evident in the *Shivan-Shakti*<sup>6</sup> depiction of God (see Fig.5, Appendix 4) where both are seen as inseparable parts of one entity.

The feminine aspect of Sai Baba cannot be ignored. Physically, his hands and feet are characteristically soft and feminine. Although he exudes quiet strength and power through his discourses, through his cosmological powers and through his presence, one is also constantly aware of his gentleness, his protectiveness and his compassion which are characteristics that one would traditionally associate with a mother. The latter has immense appeal for men and women seeking to escape the modern rat-race. The demands of modern society are difficult to fulfil where ruthlessness and brute strength are the order of the day. Sai teachings, through the many centres around the world, provide a refuge, a sanctuary, a place where people may relax and be themselves. Devotees do not need to "fight" to be on par with the rest; men do not have to present a "macho" image of themselves to be accepted; there is no compulsion to even attend congregations every week; one does not need money or status to be a member of this group; always, the divine mother, that is, Sai Baba, is there to embrace you and welcome you to his fold. The narrator continued...

The Sai avatar has stupendous powers. He roams across the earth in all countries and even beyond into dimensions we know not of, healing, bringing love, *prema*, to all of his creations. In his past avatars, he has destroyed the wicked but in this *Kali* age who will be saved if the avatar chooses to uproot and destroy? No, our beloved Sai Mother has promised - the wicked will not be destroyed by this avatar - they will be corrected, reformed, educated and led back to the path from which they strayed. Is this not our divine mother?

Dr. Cooppan, in this instance, very cleverly reworked the popular song "Mother of Mine" which was sung originally by Neil Reid in the 1970s. Called "Mother Divine" the words of the original song were changed to suit the message that was being conveyed. Melodically, however, the song remained relatively unchanged. As we performed this song the smiles on the faces of many members of the audience indicated their recognition of this popular song. Their nods of approval did much to stimulate the enthusiasm of the choir.

#### MOTHER DIVINE

Mother Divine, you gave to me  
All of my life to do as I pleased  
I owe everything I have to you  
Mother, sweet mother of mine.

Mother Divine, when I was young  
You showed me the right way things should be done  
Without your love, where would I be  
Mother, sweet mother of mine.

Mother, you gave me happiness  
Much more than words can say  
I pray to you that you may bless me  
And I'll be yours and I'll stay that way.

Mother Divine, now I am grown  
I have to walk straight all on my own  
I'd like to give you what you gave to me  
Mother, sweet mother of mine.

Throughout my discussion there has appeared constant reference to the role of women and the concept of "mother as sacred space".

Both in the Quran and the holy Sanskrit writings, women are not only respected but revered, particularly as mothers, and the mother-cult survives strongly even today (Caplan 1987: 280).

In western Christian terms the "divine mother" originally referred to the Virgin Mary. In Hindu belief there has always been constant reference to the female aspect of God. This idea was propagated through the worship of numerous goddesses, each depicting a different virtue. In my various discussions thus far I have already mentioned the goddesses Mariamman (the goddess of rain), Durga (goddess of creation and power), Luxmi (goddess of wealth) and Saraswathi (goddess of knowledge).

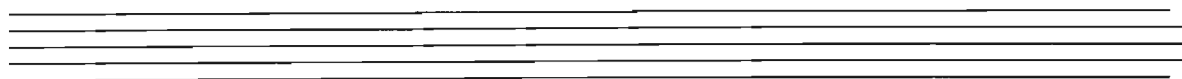
In the *Sai* movement these gender issues are of special significance because Sai Baba has been perceived by his devotees as being homo-religios. Devotees refer to Sai Baba as their divine mother and father.

To emphasise the immense compassion of Sai Baba the narrator went on to say:

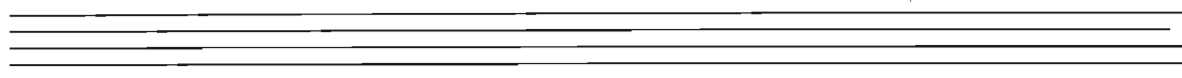
Yes, dear devotees, no matter how sinful your deeds, no matter how scarred your thoughts, no matter how wayward your behaviour, our *Sai* Mother says, 'Come, leave your worst sins at my feet and take only love, love, love.' Such is the compassion of our *Sai*. Bhagawan is the master of light. He can illuminate our way back home to our God-like state.

The basic melody of the next song was a rather simple, repetitive one but it was made more interesting by the addition of a descant solo part, as illustrated in the following transcription.

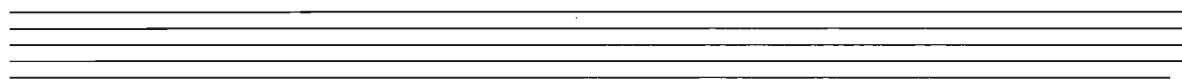
Transcription of the song "Master of Light".



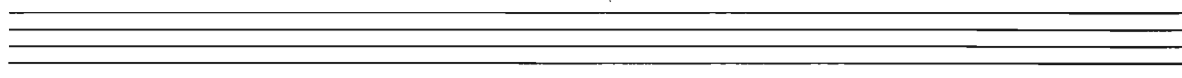
Mas - ter of Li-----ght



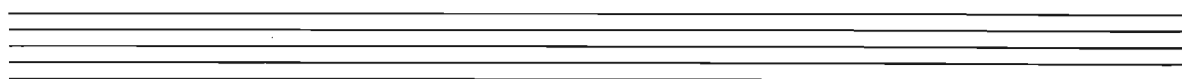
Mas - ter of Light



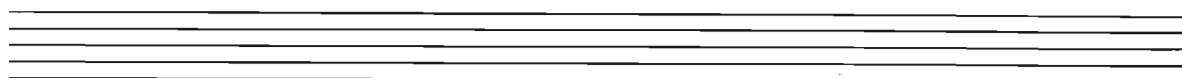
You burn bri--ght--ly with - in me



Il - lu - mi - na-----te



Il - lu - mi - nate



My way home

MASTER OF LIGHT

Master of light, you burn brightly within me.  
Illuminate my way home.

O, Sai Baba, you burn brightly within me.  
Illuminate my way home.

The symbolic significance of light is sustained in this song (see Chapter Five). The descant solo part superimposed over the basic melody, besides being melodically interesting, creates a bright, uplifting atmosphere through its higher tones. This song does much to symbolize the kind of spiritual upliftment that devotees of Sai seek.

The narrator then emphasized the need of mankind to take heed of divine teachings.

Evil is rampant upon the earth and righteousness has declined. For the protection of the virtuous, and the destruction of evil, and for the restoration of *Dharma* I incarnate, from age to age. Thus echoes the words of Lord Krishna to Arjuna on the battlefield of Kurukchetra. This battlefield is the battlefield of our minds and the war waged there five thousand years ago continues to this day in our minds - the 101 evil tendencies doing battle with our divine virtues of truth, righteousness, love, peace and non-violence - and the celestial song given by Sai Krishna all those many years ago as the Gita resounds in our ears even now. Listen, listen to the avatar's divine counsel.

*GOVINDA, GOVINDA*<sup>7</sup>

Arjuna surrendered to the wisdom of Krishna  
Hearing his words on the battlefield  
Turning with grief to his charioteers  
Arjuna prayed to him through his tears

*Govinda, Govinda, Radhe*<sup>8</sup> *Govinda*  
*Govinda, Govinda, Radhe Gopal*<sup>9</sup> (Repeat both lines)

With your whole being take refuge in me  
Through your devotion I will protect you  
Whatever is offered with love I receive  
Arjuna, Arjuna do not grieve

Govinda, Govinda, Jaya<sup>10</sup> Govinda  
Govinda, Govinda, Jaya Gopal (Repeat both lines)

Placing your thoughts firmly on me  
Becoming steadfast with an even mind  
And having abandoned the fruit of your actions  
You will be freed from the fetters of birth

Govinda, Govinda, Moksha<sup>11</sup> Govinda  
Govinda, Govinda, Moksha Gopal (Repeat both lines)

I am eternal, birthless and unchanging  
I manifest from age to age  
Behold this whole universe moving and unmoving  
Behold all creation residing in me

Govinda, Govinda, Sathya Govinda  
Govinda, Govinda, Narayana (Repeat both lines)

This song, composed and sung originally by a British devotee, touches on the crux of the belief in Sai Baba and hence the Sai movement - the concept of avatars, that is, God incarnating into human form from age to age. It is interesting that the composer draws on an incident from the Bhagavad Gita, one of the holy scriptures of Hindus in Sanskrit dating to A.D. 1, to illustrate the concept of war to symbolise the inner turmoil that most people experience in modern society. Again, through the lyrics of this folkish song, the necessity of having faith in God is reiterated.



Bhagawan Baba has told us that we should worship his teachings which are not different from those contained in all religions. He has not come to start a another religion or cult. His religion is the religion of love, unconditional love. His mission, our mission is to awaken to our own inner divinity and the truth that Sai is in everyone. In truth we cannot live without him. We are like fish swimming in the ocean. That is God. He is above us and below us, behind us and in front and also within us but we are lost in a dream, the dream that we are body.

Entitled "*Daya Karo*", meaning to have mercy, the following song also composed by the British devotee already referred to, sustains the idea of dreams.

*DAYA KARO*

Lost in dreaming, searching for your face  
And I forget to see you in each one  
I appeal to you, appear here beside me  
Help me realise you are seen in everyone

*Daya Karo, Daya Karo, Daya Karo, Bhagawan*  
I cannot live without you  
The power behind my life  
*Jesu, Vishnu, Sai Ram, Gopala, Radhe, Sai Shyam*

Equal minded, ah like the blue skies  
That bears no mark though thousands of birds fly through

*Daya Karo, Daya Karo, Daya Karo, Sai Ram*

Constantly to remember God in all things  
Through all people, through all time, in every place

*Jesu, Vishnu, Sai Ram, Gopala, Radhe, Sai Shyam*  
Most sacred Christ, most holy mother

It is clear from this song that Sai Baba is seen as a vehicle for realising God in whatever form. Jesus, Vishnu, Rama - all

have the power of spiritual inspiration. The mind is perceived as a powerful tool which, with proper (Godly) focus, has the ability to improve the quality of the lives of Sai members. This easy, singable, folklike melody lends itself to the type of thoughts being conveyed. The lyrics come off clearly with no room for ambiguity. For the audience, besides the aesthetic appeal of the music, (despite imperfections in performance) the most refreshing aspect was the emphasis on God in his/her various forms. Individuals were made to feel comfortable despite prior religious differences. The narrator went on to describe the Hindu historical perspective of Sai Baba:

Sathya Sai Baba is the tenth avatar of Lord Vishnu, the *Kalki avatar*, that glorious, radiant being riding on a white horse with a golden sword in his hand. The horse is symbolic of the human mind - ever restless and moving like a nervous horse. Sai comes to show us how to control this mind with the sword of truth.....[However], fear is what we now live by. Our very existence is tortured by fear - the fear of losing our beloved ones, the fear of not having enough food and money, the fear of not having or losing our material possessions, the fear of losing our lives. And in this tragic state of mind the *Kalki avatar's* sword of truth cuts asunder our delusion.

#### WHY FEAR WHEN I AM HERE

Why fear when I am here  
So says Baba, Sathya Sai Baba, Sathya Sai Baba, my Lord  
All I want is your love, my child  
All I want is your faith  
All I want is your love in God  
No matter what your faith  
So says Baba, Sathya Sai Baba, Sathya Sai Baba, my Lord

Krishna, Buddha, Jesus, Allah  
All came to this land  
All of them brought the message of love  
Love your fellow man  
Yes, love your fellow man  
So says...

Why fear when I am here  
The light you see in the dark of night  
Is that of God in man  
Find the light that's in your heart  
And reach the promised land  
So says...

Why fear when I am here

Once again, in this song the universality of the different religions through "Krishna, Buddha, Jesus (and) Allah" is emphasised. The metaphoric use of light is also sustained. However, through all of this philosophic, spiritual enlightenment, the harsh realities of man's fear is stressed. Even the least awakened member of the audience, spiritually-speaking, could not help but be aware of the fears that the narrator so bluntly described. Always, in the face of fear, one would seek a comforting outlet. Here, the uplifting experience of this song with its "message of love" serves this purpose. The juxtaposition of fear against love is startling yet effective.

The varied styles of music used for this presentation found favour with people of differing musical preferences. One of the most popular choices was definitely this next song entitled

"Don't Worry, Be Happy". Based on the popular reggae song of the same name, the basic melody of the original song, as performed by the American singer, Bobby McFerrin, was maintained by the Sai choir. Only the words were changed to suit this Sai Baba birthday celebration. The narration preceding this song has been omitted.

#### DON'T WORRY, BE HAPPY

This is a song about our *Swami*  
Sai Baba of Puttaparti  
Don't worry, be happy  
Whenever there's less right, more wrong  
He decides to come along  
Don't worry, be happy  
Don't worry, be happy  
Now Sai Ram (Don't worry)  
Sai Ram (Be happy)  
Sai Ram

Whether you're Hindu, Muslim or Jew  
Christian or Buddhist too  
Don't worry, be happy  
His love is like the rays of sun  
Reaching out to everyone  
Don't worry, be happy...

It doesn't matter what trouble you're in  
He's always there whenever you need him  
Don't worry, be happy  
He's always there at your side  
He's always there to help and guide  
Don't worry, be happy...

Live your life like you should  
Doing the things the way *Swami* would  
Don't worry, be happy  
Think of him in all you do  
All he wants is love from you  
Don't worry, be happy...

#### D. Sacralization of Popular Music

This somewhat frivolous-sounding melody with its highly rhythmical character caught the attention of the most conservative and the most inhibited members of the audience. It was quite apparent from the responsive clapping from the audience that they thoroughly enjoyed both the rhythm and the words of this song. Certainly, by this stage of the programme, even the most troubled person had relaxed and had begun to take heed of this message of love and hope being sung by this enthusiastic band of devotees. Whilst the overt spiritual intent of the music is clear, we cannot divorce ourselves from the entertainment value of the music. Whether done intentionally or not, it was the choice of popular melodies that first captured the attention of the audience with the sacred lyrics making their impact largely through the latter.

The setting of new lyrics to old popular melodies is not a new concept that Sai devotees have initiated. The melodies of two of the best known Afrikaans songs did not originate in South Africa (Andersson 1981). The first song, the patriotic "Boereplaas" of the *apartheid* era, was sung to the tune of the Red Flag, the old Soviet National anthem. This was ironical in a society so anti-communist as white South Africa. One of the most famous of all Afrikaans song, "Sarie Marais", was based on the old English folk-tune, "Ellie Ree". In the

1960's, the most successful Afrikaans singers were those who performed songs along these lines (*ibid.*: 147).

Sometime in 1978 an obscure songwriter, a final year medical student named John Ireland, had a hit with an updated version of "Greensleeves". Ireland set the old ballad to a disco beat, wrote some new words, and called it, "You're living inside my head" (*op.cit.* : 45).

Ireland's record reached the number one spot on the Radio 5 charts and within weeks he was presented with a gold disc (which represented sales of 25 000 units of a record) by his record company, Teal.

The impact of music on its listeners has undoubtedly been dependant on the choice of melodies. The use of popular melodies, then, is not a new idea. The *Sai* centre of Isipingo have added a new dimension to this practice. They have set essentially sacred texts to popular melodies such as, "Mother of Mine" and "Don't Worry, Be Happy". It is also noticeable that these popular melodies belong to completely different genres of music. The commonality, however, is their popularity with the listening audience.

#### **E. Inclusiveness as the Key to Identity**

The reference to different world religions such as Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, Christianity and Buddhism does much to attract

people to presentations such as this. In a country that has been divided by race and creed, the *Sai* movement provides an all embracing alternative for all where tolerance and love are the keys to happiness and spiritual fulfilment.

The members of the Isipingo *Sai* Centre are acutely aware of their need to embrace people of different religions and indeed different cultures if they are to maintain their place in such a complex, diverse and multi-cultural society that has evolved here in South Africa. The South African Indian, in particular, is placed culturally in a rather ambiguous position. On the one hand, Indians in this country have their rich heritage of music, dance, literature and many traditions that have been passed down from previous generations with some young Indians from South Africa having been sent by their families to India to be educated especially in the arts of music and dance. However, as Pillay very aptly states:

Indian South Africans do share a part of British culture, and I do not wish to pigeon-hole them into a homogeneous group affiliation, when indeed, they constantly code-switch from one role to another, fluidly moving [in many instances] from one frame of identity into another like an unending reel of film (Pillay 1995: 13).

It is clear that the Indian South African has to constantly define and re-define his/her identity within the framework of the larger South African society. One may have cultural roots

in India; one may have British influences to contend with in every sphere of one's life, be it in education, in politics, socially or through the media; one is above all a South African who shares in the tradition of "braaivleis, in some cases rugby, sunny skies..." and all else that may be identified as being uniquely South African.

Kondo (1990) expands on the question of identity by stating:

Identity is not a fixed 'thing', it is negotiated, open, shifting, ambiguous, the result of culturally available meanings and the open-ended, power-laden enactments of those meanings in everyday situations (Kondo 1990: 24-25).

It is this capacity of being able to "code-switch from one role to another" that makes possible the celebration of Christmas with all its Christian overtones at a Hindu temple by Indian South Africans who are essentially Hindus.

#### **F. SAI CHRISTMAS CELEBRATION**

On the 22 December 1994, the last congregation of *Sai* devotees before Christmas: people clad in white - women and girls in *saris*, *punjabis* or dresses; men and boys in trousers and shirts or *kurtas* entered the Hindu temple in Isipingo. All devotees left their shoes outside because shoes are not permitted inside the temple. Many people kneeled as they entered as a mark of respect for the house of God. Men took their seats towards one



end of the temple while the women sat on the opposite side. This is a common practice at all congregations to minimise distractions during the singing of *bhajans*. Some people were seated on plastic chairs whilst others were sitting cross-legged in typical "Indian style" on a huge carpet that had been spread out on the tiled floor.

Very quietly, copies of the songs to be sung for that celebration were passed around. Everyone tried to familiarise themselves with the words of the songs by paging through the hand-out. No-one found it odd that a picture of Jesus Christ had been placed towards the front of the temple, close to the many idols of the different Hindu deities. Devotees appeared to be perfectly comfortable with the proceedings for that evening - the 1994 Christmas celebration of the Isipingo Sai centre. The celebration of the birth of Sai Baba was paralleled by this celebration of the birth of Christ.

The cover of the hand-out as shown in Fig. 6, Appendix 4, depicts Christ in a meditative pose with "Om Sai Ram", the traditional greeting of Sai devotees, appearing decoratively at various points. This picture illustrates the unique blend of religions within the Sai movement where meditation which is generally associated with eastern religions is alluded to in the picture of Christ.

It is highly significant that the evening's programme led by a small core of *Sai* singers began with the song dedicated to Lord Ganesha already discussed in "*Prashanti Darshan*". The second song was one of the national anthems of South Africa, "*Nkosi Sikelela*".

**NKOSI SIKELEL'IAFRIKA**

*Nkosi sikele'iafrika  
Maluphakamis'uphondo Iwayo  
Yizwa imithandazo yethu,  
Nkosi sikelela, thina lusapho Iwayo*

*Chorus: Woza Moya (woza, woza),  
Woza Moya oyingcwele  
Nkosi sikelela  
Thina lusapho Iwayo*

*Morena boloka sechaba sa heso  
O fedisa dintwa le matshwenyeho (repeat both lines)*

*O se boloke, o se boloke  
O se boloke morena, se boloke,  
Sechaba sa heso (2 times)*

*Ma kube njalo! (2 times)  
Kude kube ngunaphakade (2 times)*

## GOD BLESS AFRICA

Lord, bless Africa  
Let its name be praised  
(May her horn rise high up)  
Listen also to our pleas  
Lord bless  
thy children  
Come spirit  
(come spirit and bless us)  
Come spirit  
Come spirit holy spirit  
And bless us, us thy children

Lord bless our nation  
And end all conflicts,  
O bless our nation.

(From: The Natal Mercury, Tuesday May 10, 1994)

The religious significance of the anthem is well-known but within the political fabric of South African society, the inclusion of this song makes a bold statement of pride, of faith and of love for a country that has been freed, in principle, from the shackles of oppression.

My focus of attention, however, is on the manner in which traditional Christmas carols and Christmas songs have been adapted to suit the *Sai* movement and their belief in Sai Baba. One has to take cognisance of the fact that in the minds of *Sai* devotees, Christ is *Sai* and *Sai* is Christ. There is no distinction between one incarnation of God and another. This philosophy eliminates any religious tension as devotees accept God in whatever form, "fluidly moving from one frame of identity to another".

One of the most famous of all Christmas carols, "Silent Night"<sup>12</sup>, was effectively adapted to include praise of Sathya Sai Baba in the fourth stanza. This was an additional verse, composed by Sai devotees, using the same melody as the original, preceding verses.

#### SILENT NIGHT

Silent night Holy night  
All is calm, All is bright  
Round yon virgin mother and child  
Holy infant so tender and mild  
Sleep in heavenly peace (Repeat line)

Silent night Holy night  
Shepherds quake at the sight  
Glories stream from heaven afar  
Heavenly hosts sing alleluia  
Christ the Saviour is born (Repeat line)

Silent night Holy night  
Son of God, Loves pure Light  
Radiant beams from thy holy face  
With the dawn of redeeming grace  
Jesus Lord at thy birth (Repeat line)

Silent Night, Holy Night  
Hail to thee, Lord of light  
Sathya Sai thy name so sweet  
Praise we bring to thy Lotus feet  
Bless the world with thy love (Repeat line)

Some of the most well-known Christmas carols and popular sacred and secular Christmas songs include "Silent Night", "Joy to the World", "Jingle Bells" and "We Wish You a Merry Christmas". All of these songs formed part of the repertoire that was adapted and sung at the Sai Christmas celebration in a sacred setting, that is, within the confines of the Hindu temple.

The devotees sang along enthusiastically with the lead group. There were no inhibitions, no reluctance to sing the praise of Christ, no conflict with their own religion, Hinduism. This ability to feel at one with different religious beliefs is not quite as remarkable as it appears at first. The powerful impact of the media in making certain types of music accessible to all must be examined.

In South Africa, under Christian National Education and state-controlled media, all non-Christians from the Black, Coloured and Indian communities of this country had no choice but to abide by this Christian approach if they expected to benefit at all from the existing education structures. There were many people who rejected this and suffered the consequences.

Radio and later television played a significant role in maintaining this Christian character of the media until the early 1990's. According to Andersson (1981), 49 Broederbond members (the secret right-wing organisation which had as its aim ultimate Afrikaner domination in South Africa), were the power behind the South African Broadcasting Corporation. The most important jobs belonged to Broeders. Professor Wynand Mouton, a member of the Broederbond, was the chairperson of the SABC in the 1980's. Piet Meyer, Broederbond chairperson from 1960-1972, had also been the chairperson of the SABC from 1958

to 1980. Wilkins and Strydom stated in The Superafrikaners:

As the older ones retire, the younger Broeders will take over and even under another government, the Broederbond will be firmly in control of the country's radio and television services (*ibid.*: 85).

Christian church choirs could be heard regularly on radio and seen on television. In a less obvious manner, popular versions of Christian hymn tunes and gospel songs have been played by disc jockeys on various radio stations and on television music programmes. The German group "Boney-M" or the legendary English singer, Cliff Richard, for instance, have contributed to the popularising of Christmas songs to such an extent that most young children hum these melodies as if they were nursery rhymes.

The audio tape and compact disc industry has also played its part in promoting these popular songs. In the period preceding the holidays for Christmas and the New Year, one is constantly bombarded by Christmas songs that are played in department stores, malls, public transport, restaurants and cafes. I have even had occasion to listen to a beautiful rendition of "O Come All Ye Faithful" in the women's cloakroom of a local airport.

It is not surprising that people who are not Christians are able to identify with these songs. This is basically a

Christian culture because this country has a history of white Christian dominance. The acceptance of all faiths by the Sai movement makes the transition into the realm of Christianity easy. The familiarity of the music and the open, tolerant attitude creates fertile ground for the absolute enjoyment of this Christmas celebration.

The lyrics of the following songs illustrate the oneness that Sai devotees feel with all incarnations of God.

JOY TO THE WORLD<sup>13</sup>

Joy to the world the Lord has come  
Let earth receive her king  
Let every heart prepare Him room  
And Heaven and Nature sing (repeat three times)

Joy to the world the saviour reigns  
Let men their songs employ  
While fields and floods  
Rocks, Hills and Plains  
Repeat the sounding joy (repeat three times)

Sai rules the world with Truth and Grace  
And makes the nations prove  
The Glory of His righteousness (repeat)  
And wonders of His Love (repeat three times)

One of the most commonly known of all secular Christmas songs is "Jingle Bells". In the Sai version of the song an element of frivolity comes through. This is reminiscent of the type of humour that Sai Baba has displayed in his discourses and in his personal interviews with devotees.

JINGLE BELLS

Jingle bells Jingle bells Jingle all the way  
Oh what fun it is to ride to Sailand on this day  
(Repeat both lines)

Dashing down the hills  
To Sailand on this day  
O'er the fields we go  
Singing all the way  
Cars and planes we take  
To bring us here today  
Oh what fun it is to ride to Sailand on this day

Jingle bells...

The Negro Spiritual "He's got the whole world in his hands"  
(made popular by the Charismatic movement in Durban) was also  
adapted with good effect by the inclusion of the following  
lines to the song.

His name is Sathya Sai Baba, Praise the Lord  
(repeat three times)  
He's got the whole world in his hands.

Finally, this programme was brought to its effective conclusion  
with "We wish you a holy Christmas", based on the melody of  
"We wish you a merry Christmas".



WE WISH YOU A HOLY CHRISTMAS

We wish you a holy Christmas (repeat three times)  
And a Sai new year  
Good tidings to you  
Wherever you are  
Good tidings for Christmas  
And a Sai new year

Following typical Hindu practice this programme would not have been complete if the devotees had not chanted, "*Om Shanti, Shanti, Shanti* " meaning peace, as an appropriate conclusion to this thoroughly transforming experience. Conversations with *Sai* devotees and non-devotees after the celebration verified this impression.

## G. ENDNOTES

1. The *raga* is a type of mode or ground-plan comprising five, six or seven notes. These notes form the basis of the melody in Indian music. Melody, based on the *raga*, is the most important element of Indian music providing the framework of all vocal compositions. Every *raga* must include one starting note (*shadja*), the principle note (*vadi*), and a second important note (*samvadi*). The ascent and descent (*aroha-avaroha*) of the notes in each *raga* may differ. Thus, a thorough knowledge of ascent and descent is extremely important and helpful particularly for the improvisation of the *raga*.
2. Underlying the creative aspect of the *raga* is the *tala* or the rhythm cycle which consists of a fixed number of units of equal value. The *tala* cycle is almost as important as the *raga* in Indian vocal music since this theory of measuring time is the basis of the pulse of the music. There may be six, eight, ten, twelve or sixteen beats (*matras*) in each *tala* cycle. More so than in *raga*, the tempo (*laya*) is crucial in keeping uniformity of time.
3. An *ashram* refers to a retreat for meditation and prayers.
4. In Hinduism, the *Kali* age refers to the dark age in which we presently live.
5. The *Suprabhatham* is a hymn which is recited in the early morning to remind the *Sai* devotee that God exists within him or her.
6. *Shivan-Shakti* refers to Lord Shiva and Mother Shakti in Hinduism. Shiva is the third God of the sacred Hindu trinity - known as the destroyer (Brahma is the Creator and Vishnu is the Protector or Preserver). These three elements are aspects of the one supreme reality. Shakti is the consort of Shiva. She is the great universal power of energy or mother nature. Shiva and Shakti are inseparable dimensions of a single entity. Shiva is the eternal spirit and Shakti is the phenomenon.
7. *Govinda* is a name for Lord Krishna meaning, one who tends and guards cows.
8. *Radhe* refers to one who constantly chants the name of the Lord.
9. *Gopal* is also a name for Lord Krishna. "Go" means cow and

"Paala" means protector. As a boy, Krishna tended the cows in the fields of Brindavan.

10. *Jaya* is a word of praise. Victory! Hail! Hail the glory!
11. *Moksha* means liberation from bondage.
12. The original words of "Silent Night" were written by the Austrian priest, Joseph Mohr, in 1818 on Christmas eve and set to music by the organist of Mohr's church, Franz Gruber, that same night (World Book 1992).
13. This song has been similarly used and transformed by Shembe youth choirs. It has been translated into Zulu as *Oyinkhosi Amakhosi*.

## CONCLUSION: MUSIC AND SPIRITUALITY IN THE SAI MOVEMENT

What would you like to be in the hands of the Lord? The flute, be straight, without crookedness; be hollow without pride, individuality, will, idea of self; inhale only the breath of God: Transmute that breath into melodious music conferring joy of eternity on every fleeting moment.

(Sai Baba in Reddy 1990: 13)

The ideal towards which *Sai* devotees aspire is the realisation of their spirituality through various expressive domains, amongst which music features prominently. The weekly *bhajan* services fulfil the need for devotees to participate in a collective activity which reinforces their sense of belonging and safety. The *Sai* centre provides feminine and spiritual spaces for the devotees. They attend services of the centre because it provides a sanctuary away from the violence and the mechanistic lifestyles of western culture.

For *Sai* devotees, their ideal religion is the religion of love. The concept of love is a universal idea that may be found in all religions. Jews, Christians, Muslims, Hindus and all other religions of the world are included in the *Sai* ideal of love. "Each one's god, every one's god is a god without faults". Whilst this ideal has created a better sense of community amongst the Indian Hindu South Africans, it has worked against them at a broader level. The reality in South Africa is that

this Sai ideal has become essentially an Indian practice, restricted mainly to followers of Hinduism. Despite the universalism of the movement, its appeal for Hindus in South Africa tends to isolate this community of devotees. Hindus have been more partial towards embracing this spiritual movement because the different linguistic groups needed to unite in the face of the National Christian education stance that was foisted upon them by both the British and the Afrikaner regimes.

The high levels of education attained by the Indians and their improved socio-economic status, since the time of their forefathers, created fertile ground for this move away from old ritualistic Hindu practices, that had been imported from India, to a new interpretation of Hinduism.

South Africa has become a democracy, in line with other western nations and with India. At the one level, democracy prevails in the political arena of South Africa. President Mandela's presence at events that include different religious groups endorses his commitment to a new face of the nation. There is a distinct move away from National Christian bias. In the religious sphere, Sai Baba democratizes religion by propagating the idea of a global religion. Another parallel may be drawn between Mahatma Gandhi (1869-1948), a political figure, and Sai

Baba, a spiritual/religious figure. Gandhi was a firm protagonist of non-violence during his twenty-one year stay in South Africa from 1893. Sai Baba, in his Education in Human Values Programme, clearly declares that *ahimsa* (non-violence) must be practised by all devotees of God. Religion and politics determine, to a large extent, the attitudes of societies and the stability of nations. The religious wars that have been fought globally in the past few years are evidence of this correlation.

The dynamics which underlie political conflict in South Africa have changed substantially during the last two decades (Olivier 1992). The period up to 1990 was for the most part characterised by conflict between the state and the disenfranchised majority. The recent period, especially since the beginning of 1990, saw the introduction of a horizontal dimension in the political conflict as more political groupings began to operate overtly in the political arena.

South Africa is caught up in two vicious cycles. One is that of violence and the other of economic decline, with one exacerbating the other. Both cycles have to be addressed simultaneously or the situation could deteriorate. The middle-class Sai devotees find themselves inextricably caught up in this conflict situation. Although most devotees are

economically stable by virtue of their occupations, they are affected by the political violence and social disorder. Their sanctuary is the religious spaces created by the *Sai* movement.

The rituals, the act of meditation and the calming effect of the music serve to remove the sense of fear and unease that most South Africans feel today. The *bhajan* is central to these acts of worship. Each devotee's understanding of the songs make them personal expressions of *bhakti* (worship). The texts, the aesthetics, the individual's image and the attendant extramusical associations affect each devotee in his/her own way. The Indian South African *Sai* devotees share similar beliefs because of their Hindu heritage. They identify with the polytheistic nature of Hinduism even though a re-orientation of Hinduism is evident. The white American *Sai* devotees approach this movement from a completely different religious and social stance. Although the same message may be sent to all devotees globally, the interpretation of the message varies according to each local situation. Guidelines for singing, for instance, are a unifying element but even this is subject to local interpretations and local meaning.

The role of technology, especially the cassette industry, in bringing the music of *Sai* from India to devotees in all parts of the world, cannot be overstated.

Manuel states:

Devotional songs may be addressed to spiritual leaders... Sai Baba's following is particularly widespread, and cassettes of *Sai bhajans* occupy a significant niche in the devotional market (Manuel 1993: 118).

In India [and in South Africa] the primary audience consists of members of the overwhelmingly Hindu, middle-class, who, for reasons of aesthetics, education, and social identity, prefer more refined-sounding musics than populist (Indian) film music, and yet lack appreciation of Indian classical music. This audience can to some extent be considered a specialized audience in comparison to the audience for common-denominator Indian film music (*ibid.*: 112).

The appeal of the *bhajan* lies in its simplicity and in its structured form.

Presentations of simple *bhajans* are ideal renderings that have an immediate and favourable impact on listeners. The extremely rich and devotional content affects the listeners with its straight and simple style. There are no artificial frills attached to [the] expositions and yet their impact on the listeners is soul-stirring, marked with a sincerity and an intense *bhakti* element (Joshi in Manuel 1993: 113).



Another description of *bhajan* notes:

To be effective, it does not stray, dilly-dally or seek to dazzle. It spurns over much ingenuity or cleverness and looks with disfavour on too many melodic variations (Wadhera in Manuel 1993: 113).

Within the complex fabric of the Indian South African community, the *Sai bhajan*, with its simple, yet effective "forthrightness" speaks a language that is easily understood. Its lack of ambiguity and the sense of order that it fosters serve to re-orientate Hindu Indian South Africans to function as best they can and to realise their innate spirituality within the westernized South African context.

## APPENDIX 1

### **Guidelines or Discipline for Conducting Bhajans from the book Bhajanamavali.**

1. Devotees must be seated a few minutes before the start of *bhajans*. Always remember and be convinced that Lord Sai is present and presiding. He has said, "Whenever my glory is sung, I shall install my-Self there". Late arrivals should take an available seat in the rear.
2. Do not look at others or smile or say hi or hello during *bhajans*, thereby disturbing their concentration.
3. Sitting arrangement should allow to seat men on one side and women on the other side, in proper lines, one behind the other. *Bhajan* leaders and musicians must be seated in the front rows.
4. Do not sway your body like a pendulum or clap out of (time) with others. Maintain perfect silence and restrict your movements to (the) minimum while sitting. Exercise self-control.
5. Musical instruments used during *bhajans* should not drown the voice of the singer and those who follow. If there is more than one instrument used, maintain balance among instruments along with singing.
6. "Sing familiar *bhajans*, so that all can share *Ananda* (Bliss)".
7. "Any devotional song, in any language can be sung as long as all can follow".
8. "Never be ashamed to sing the name of God or to do *Bhajana*. Be proud that you get the chance. Be glad that your tongue is put to the best use".
9. "The *bhajans* must be sweet to the ear".
10. "*Bhajan* has to be thrilling experience, which must leave the participants full of pure energy and elevated enthusiasm".
11. "*Bhajans* have to (be) sung and offered to God in an attitude of utter humility; they are not to be taken as exercises in an exhibition of talents and as a competition for mastery of musical skill. They have

to please the Lord, not your fans".

12. "*Bhajans* must be a felt experience. Do not sing with one eye on the effect the song makes on the listeners and the other, on the effect it makes on God. Let your heart pant for God: then the *Raga* and *Thal* will automatically be pleasant and correct".
13. With each *bhajan* song, the mind must be rendered purer, freer from passion and stronger in faith".
14. "Pay attention to the tune, the meaning, the variety, the voice, the *Raga*, the *Thala*, and the other fine points of the *bhajans*".
15. "*Bhajan* is a *sadhana* for all who share in it".
16. "When you sing *bhajans*, dwell on the meaning of the song and the message of each name and form of God".
17. "Unless you sing *bhajans* for your own joy, you cannot bring joy to others. It is only when the feeling arises in the heart that the song will appeal to the hearts of others. I am pleased only when love is the keynote, when the feeling of unity prevails, when the melody come(s) from cleansed, God-loving hearts".
18. "*Bhajan* is a good disciplinary process by which '*Kama*' and '*Krodha*' can be kept away. '*Kama*' is lust for physical pleasure, for power, for fame, for wealth and scholarship. '*Krodha*' is anger, which is the result of foiled lust. In this busy age of fear and anxiety, the remembrance of God and repetition of his name is the one means of liberation that is accessible to all."
19. "If your voice is not pleasant or sweet, keep quiet; that is the best service you can do".
20. "Do not cause discontent, discord or disharmony, insisting on singing because you are an office-bearer".
21. "Do not monopolize the time in *bhajans*, by singing one song for six or ten minutes, repeating the same line often. Repeat each line only twice and no more. Have only two speeds; one slow and the other, fast. In this way you can have one hour (of) *bhajan*, more songs on more forms, more tunes and more variety, giving more people the chance".

22. "After *bhajans* and before conducting *arati*, there should be meditation for five to ten minutes". During *arati* devotees should stand up and stay at their own places. Use of camphor for *arati* is advisable.
23. "There should not be any distribution of *prasad* at the public *bhajan* centres recognised by Seva Samithi, except the distribution of *vibhuti*".
24. "People should return from *bhajan* carrying the elevated, uplifted and sublime mood created by the atmosphere at the *bhajan*. Therefore, after the *bhajan* people should disperse quietly, maintaining silence. Then the joy and peace derived at the *bhajan* will linger and abide in the heart".

Note: Those rules that appear within quotation marks are direct quotes from discourses of Sai Baba.

## APPENDIX 2

### Video Sequences

1. A photograph of the famous "Lotus feet" of Sai Baba which forms part of a shrine set up by the women for this congregation is the initial focus of attention.
2. Devotees enter the temple and seat themselves on a carpet on the floor or on the chairs. The women are seated on one end whilst the men are on the other. Everyone faces the makeshift shrine that has been set up. There is very little talking before the service begins.
3. The service begins with the chanting of the sacred word for the Hindus, *Om*. This is referred to as the *Omkar*.
4. The singing of *bhajans* follow. A clear pattern emerges where women and men alternate as lead singers for each *bhajan*.
5. Already in the first *bhajan* different forms of accompaniment are highlighted - clapping, playing of the *manjiras*, *tabla*, *nal* and *harmonium*. It is important to note that this first *bhajan* is dedicated to Lord Ganesha, the remover of obstacles according to Hindu teachings.
6. After six *bhajans*, all of which follow a combination of the form, style and text for *bhajans* and *kirtans* already described by Goodall (1989) , there follows the slow singing of the *Sarva Dharma* prayer which has already been discussed in chapter two.
7. A period of meditation and silent sitting follows.
8. *Asato Maa*, another short prayer, which appears in chapter two, is then sung.
9. A spiritual talk by one of the devotees is then presented.
10. Announcements concerning the day to day activities of the Centre are made by the Chairman, Mr. A.Pillay, a retired school principal.
11. All devotees then stand to sing the *Arathi*, which is also taught at *Bal Vikas*, while one devotee turns lighted camphor around the makeshift shrine which includes a picture of Sai Baba. This is followed by *Loka Samasta* (see chapter two), another prayer.

12. The devotees then sit and sing the *Vibhuthi* song (see chapter two) while little containers of *vibhuthi* or sacred ash is passed around rather quietly.
13. After another period of silent sitting or meditation all devotees sing *Om Shanthi* three times.
14. All devotees then kneel before the shrine to pay their respects to their *Sadguru*, Sai Baba.

Running Time of video cassette: 1 Hour

### APPENDIX 3

The following nine point code of conduct was taken from the book Sai Sangeetham.

1. Daily meditation and prayer
2. Devotional group singing/ prayers with members of family once a week
3. Participation in educational programme (*Bal Vikas*) organised by the centre for children of *Sai* devotees
4. Participation in community work and other programmes of the organisation
5. Attendance at least once a month in group devotional singing organised by the centre
6. Regular study of *Sai* literature
7. Speak softly and lovingly to everyone
8. Not to indulge in talking ill of others especially in their absence
9. Put into practice ceiling on desires and to utilise savings generated for service to mankind

(Reddy ed. 1990: 44).

Lord Ganesha

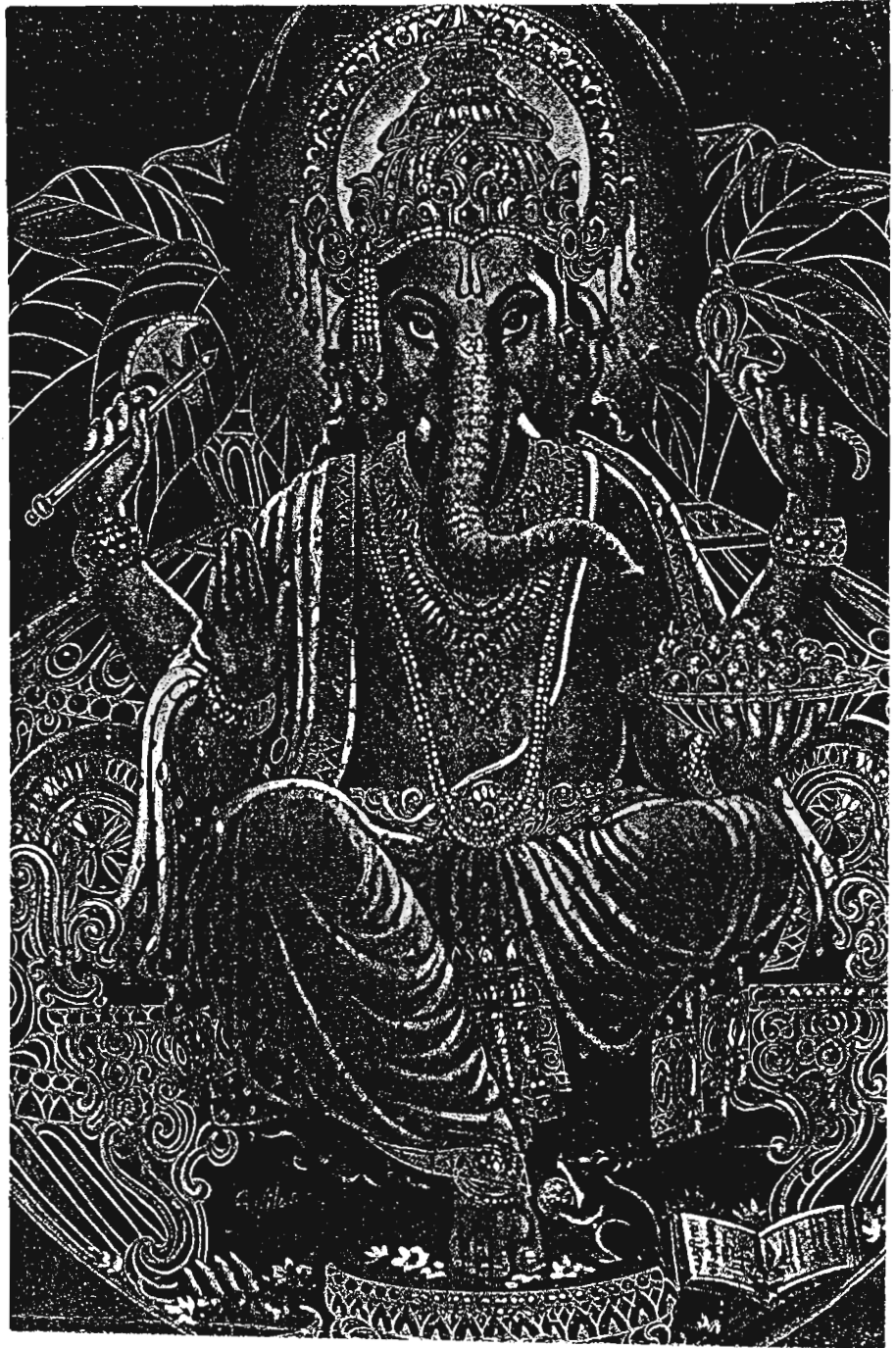


Figure 1



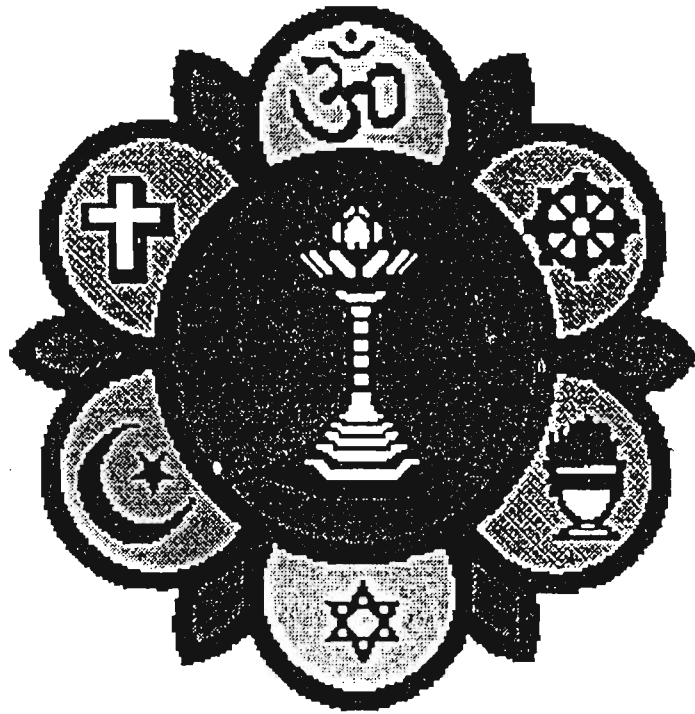
The Sai Emblem (*Sarva Dharma Symbol*) representing the unity of faiths.

## SARVA DHARMA SYMBOL

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OM SAI RAM

---



---

LOVE ALL - SERVE ALL

---

Figure 2

Sri Sathya Sai Baba



*Bhagavan Baba autographed His photograph with His Blessings and approval on 20 November 1989 during an interview.*

Figure 3

The Lotus Feet of *Sai*

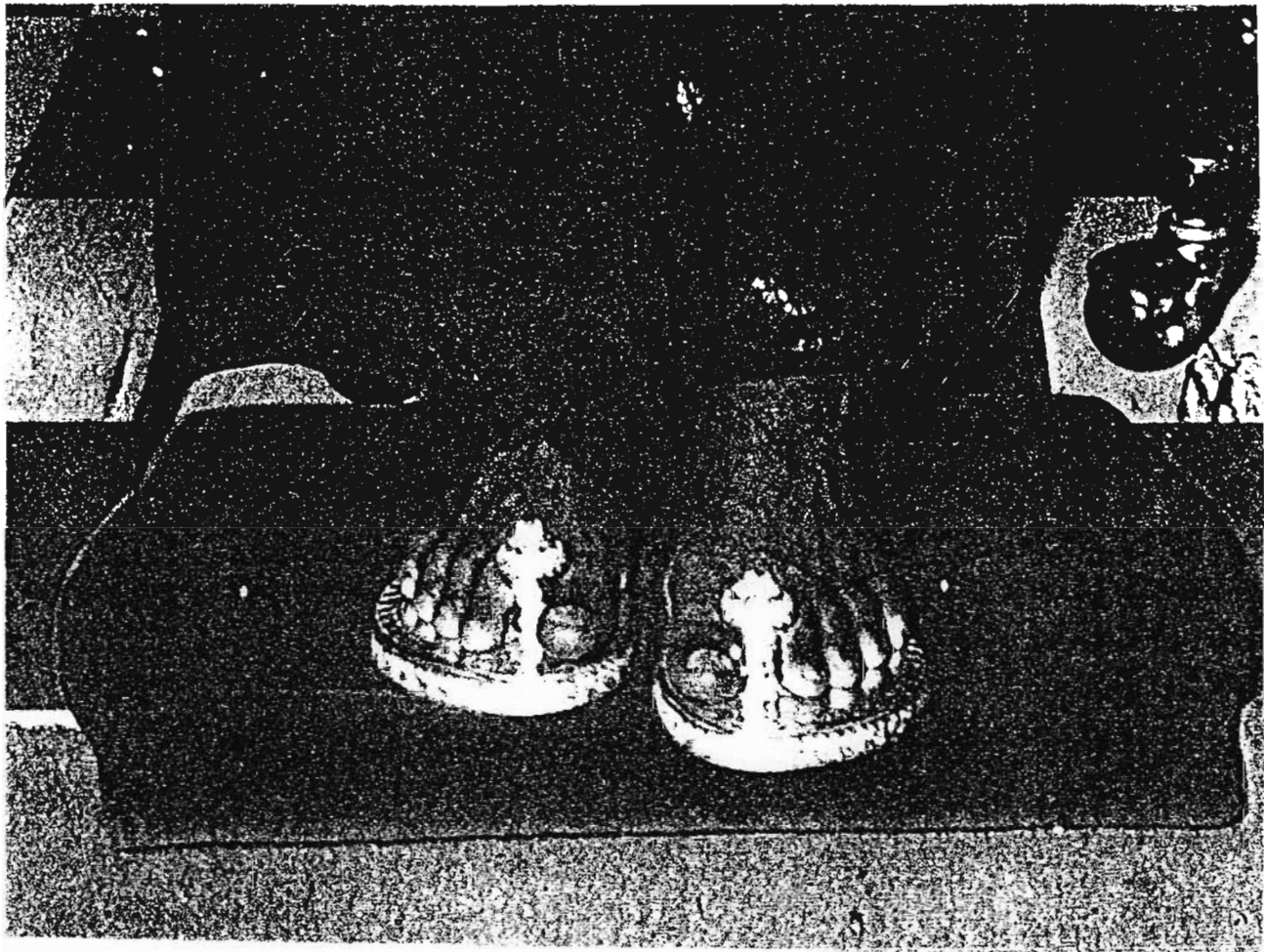


Figure 4

Shivan-Shakthi portrayal in Hinduism



Figure 5

Meditative pose of Jesus Christ



AUM SAI RAM  
ISIPINGO SAI CENTRE



**HOLY** ✨  
1994  
**CHRISTMAS**



Figure 6

APPENDIX 5

Musical notation for the first system. The upper staff contains a melody with a long note on 'Li' and a slur over the final notes. The lower staff contains a bass line. The lyrics are 'Mas - ter of Li-----ght' and 'Mas - ter of Light'.

Musical notation for the second system. The upper staff contains a melody with a slur over the final notes. The lower staff contains a bass line. The lyrics are 'You burn bri--ght--ly with - in me'.

Musical notation for the third system. The upper staff contains a melody with a long note on 'na' and a slur over the final notes. The lower staff contains a bass line. The lyrics are 'Il - lu - mi - na-----te' and 'Il - lu - mi - nate'.

Musical notation for the fourth system. The upper staff contains a melody with a long note on 'home'. The lower staff contains a bass line. The lyrics are 'My way home'.

## APPENDIX 6

## UNIVERSITY OF NATAL

## DURBAN

## SAI DEVOTEES' QUESTIONNAIRE

Dear Devotee

Kindly complete the following questions as accurately as possible. Please note that:

1. The information you provide will be used in a Research Study on the Sai Movement.
2. There is no need to write your name on this questionnaire, and all information provided will be treated in the strictest of confidence.
3. Most of the questions merely require you to place a cross (X) in the appropriate numbered box.

Thank you, in advance, for your cooperation.

1. Devotee's age \_\_\_\_\_

2. Gender

Male	1	Female	2
------	---	--------	---

3. Marital Status

Single	1
Married	2
Separated/Divorced	3
Widow	4
Widower	5

4. What is your occupation? \_\_\_\_\_



5. What is your highest level of formal education?

No formal education	1
Primary School (Class 1 to Std 5)	2
Junior Secondary (Std 6 to Std 7)	3
Senior Secondary (Std 8 to Std 10)	4
Tertiary Education	5

6. Besides English, which other language/s do you understand?

Tamil	1
Telegu	2
Hindi	3
Gujerati	4
Afrikaans	5
Zulu	6
Other (specify)	7

7. Besides English, which other language/s do you speak?

Tamil	1
Telegu	2
Hindi	3
Gujerati	4
Afrikaans	5
Zulu	6
Other (specify)	7

8. To which religion do you belong?

Hinduism	1
Christianity	2
Islam	3
Other (specify)	4

9. For how long have you been a Sai Devotee?

0 - 6 months	1
6 - 12 months	2
1 - 5 years	3
5 - 10 years	4
Over 10 years	5

10. How did you discover the Sai Movement?

Sai literature	1
Family and Friends	2
Dreams/Visions	3
Attending talks/lectures	4
Other (specify below)	5

11. Has your involvement with the Sai Movement changed your attitude toward your religion?

Yes	1	No	2
-----	---	----	---

If you answered "yes", please explain this change in attitude.

---



---

12. How often do you attend Sai congregations?

Every Week	1
Fortnightly	2
Monthly	3
Only on special occasions	4
Never	5

13. In which of the following Sai activities do you participate?

Weekly congregational singing	1
Bhajan practice	2
Study circle	3
Sports day	4
Spiritual talks	5
Other (specify below)	6

14. Do you sing Sai Bhajans regularly?

Yes	1	No	2
-----	---	----	---

15. If you answered "yes" in Question 14 above, are you a soloist or do you sing only in the chorus?

Soloist	1	Chorister	2	Both	3
---------	---	-----------	---	------	---

16. Where do you usually sing Sai Bhajans?

Only at public gatherings	1
Only at home	2
Both at home and public gatherings	3
Other (specify)	4

17. How would you rate your understanding of Sai Bhajans?

Good	1	Fair	2	Poor	3
------	---	------	---	------	---

18. Have you had any musical training?

Yes	1	No	2
-----	---	----	---

If "Yes", please specify \_\_\_\_\_

19. Do Sai Bhajans affect your mental state?

Yes	1	No	2
-----	---	----	---

If "Yes", please explain \_\_\_\_\_

20. Do you practice meditation?

Yes	1	No	2
-----	---	----	---

If "Yes", how often and for how long do you meditate?

21. Which would you consider to be the most enjoyable Sai activity?

Singing Bhajans	1
Spiritual talks	2
Study circle	3
Sport	4
Other (specify below)	5

## GLOSSARY

<i>Ahimsa</i>	Non-violence
<i>Allah</i>	Islamic name for God
<i>Amrit</i>	Divine nectar that gives immortality
<i>Ananda</i>	Bliss, joy, happiness of lasting nature
<i>Anduko</i>	Telegu word meaning, "to accept"
<i>Arathi</i>	A Sanskrit word meaning, "the close". Refers to the waving of camphor flame at the close of a <i>bhajan</i> or worship service. While the flame is being waved Sai Baba says one should pray: O Lord! Make the allotted span of my life as pure, as fragrant and as transparent as camphor. Let it consume itself in the fire, scattering light and the warmth of love all around me.
<i>Avatar</i>	An incarnation of God in some form or the other
<i>Baba</i>	Father
<i>Bal Vikas</i>	Child blossoming/development
<i>Bhagavan</i>	God. He who possesses the six divine qualities in full: greatness, might, omnipotence, omnipresence and omniscience; virtue, righteousness, equity, impartiality and propriety; fame, reputation, splendour; prosperity, plenty, majesty, dignity, grace and lustre; wisdom and intelligence; detachment, tranquility and balance.
<i>Bhajan</i>	Spiritual song
<i>Bhakti</i>	Devotion to God
<i>Bhava</i>	Feelings
<i>Brahma</i>	The creator in the Hindu trinity
<i>Damaru</i>	The drum played by Lord Shiva at the time of his cosmic dance
<i>Darshan</i>	To see the form of the Lord and receive his

	blessings
<i>Devi</i>	The divine mother
<i>Dharma</i>	Righteousness
<i>Easwaramma</i>	The name of Sai Baba's mother
<i>Ganesha</i>	The elephant-faced God who removes all obstacles, son of Lord Shiva. He is the leader of the followers of Shiva.
<i>Garuda</i>	The name of the celestial bird, a white-chested eagle, that is the vehicle of Lord Vishnu.
<i>Guru</i>	The teacher, one who removes ignorance.
<i>Japa</i>	Incantation
<i>Jaya (Jai)</i>	Victory; Hail, hail the glory
<i>Jyoti</i>	Light or radiance; flame.
<i>Krishna</i>	Incarnation of Lord Vishnu
<i>Lakshmi</i>	Goddess of fortune, prosperity and beauty, consort of Lord Vishnu.
<i>Moksha</i>	Liberation
<i>Namah</i>	Bowing, adoring, reverential salutation.
<i>Om</i>	A sacred word
<i>Parvati</i>	Consort of Lord Shiva, mother of the universe.
<i>Prasad</i>	Consecrated food, blessed by God.
<i>Prema</i>	Divine love
<i>Sadguru</i>	The supreme teacher
<i>Sadhana</i>	Spiritual practice
<i>Sai</i>	The supreme mother of all
<i>Sai Ram</i>	The name for Sai Baba. The <i>Sai avatar</i> is also the <i>Rama avatar</i> . This particular name is used as a greeting by devotees.

<i>Sarva</i>	Whole, entire
<i>Sathya</i>	Truth
<i>Satsang</i>	Association with the wise and the good
<i>Sathyantarayana</i>	Sathya Sai Baba's given name at birth.
<i>Shakthi</i>	The great universal power of energy. The great mother, consort of Shiva. Mother nature. Shiva and Shakti are inseparable parts of the one entity.
<i>Shiva</i>	Name of the third God of the sacred Hindu trinity - known as the destroyer.
<i>Sri</i>	A prefix term of respect
<i>Sukha</i>	Happiness
<i>Vibuthi</i>	Sacred ash. It is symbolic of the ultimate reality which remains when the ego is burnt away by the fire of illumination.
<i>Vinayaka</i>	Epithet of Ganesha. It means he who leads.
<i>Vishnu</i>	The third God in the Hindu trinity - the protector and preserver of all creation.
<i>Yuga</i>	Age
<i>Yugaavatar</i>	Avatar of the age

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