

News Watch Article: DS489

## SAI BABA: NOT WHAT HE CLAIMS?

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“And to think this is the man we used to think was God,” said a former follower of Hindu guru Sai Baba in the wake of renewed charges and evidence that his miracles are staged magician’s sleight-of-hand tricks and that over several decades he has sexually abused many young men among his followers.

Sai Baba is the 76-year-old founder of the Sathya Sai Baba Society. His followers are estimated at between 20 and 50 million people internationally, and some consider him to be the dominant guru in India. He presides over the largest ashram (spiritual retreat) in the world in the otherwise destitute Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. In 1990, Sai Baba founded the ashram Prasanthi Nilayam, “Abode of Peace,” in his home village. An entire community dependent on the ashram has grown up around it, including hotels, two hospitals, primary and secondary schools, a college, a university, luxury apartment buildings, and a civic arts complex. One of the newest assets is an airport, which welcomes followers from around the world. The ashram itself boasts 10,000 beds for weary followers.

Sai Baba holds *darshan*, or “a visit with God,” twice a day at the ashram. Devoted followers wait for hours, sitting lotus-style on the floor, until a change in the music heralds the appearance of the diminutive man with an outrageous halo of frizzed black hair. For 10 to 15 minutes he passes through the room, which is strictly segregated by gender — men on one side, women on the other. Most don’t receive so much as a glance. The specially blessed ones receive a glance, a smile, perhaps a word or two, or maybe a quick “materialization” of a trinket or toy they can take for a souvenir. He also may materialize *vibhuti*, or “holy ash.” This “god” favors an exceptional few who receive an invitation to a private audience with him. It is during these private audiences that the sexual abuse is said to take place.

The Hindu holy man says “all faiths are facets of the same truth.” For nearly 50 years he has been known as an avatar, an incarnation of God. He declares himself to be the Second Coming of Christ. His faithful call him “The Protector,” “The Infinite,” and “The Creator.” He is said to be “an instrument of the divine” and omniscient: capable of perfectly knowing the past, present, and future of any individual. He is also said, like Christ, to have created food to feed crowds, healed the sick, raised the dead, and “appeared” to disciples in special need at any time in any place. According to his official biography, a four-volume collection written by his late secretary, disciple Professor N. Kasturi, Sai Baba was born in 1926 and at age 13 declared himself the reincarnation of the South Indian saint Shirdi Sai Baba, who had died in 1918. Kasturi recounted that when Baba was challenged to prove his claim, the child threw a fistful of jasmine flowers on the floor, and they landed miraculously arranged to spell “Sai Baba” in the local dialect.

Sai Baba is known worldwide for the “miracles” he performs before his public audiences, such as pouring copious quantities of ash from an empty urn and materializing trinkets and small valuables from thin air to give to his disciples. There are nearly 7,000 Sai Baba temples worldwide, and 500 centers are in the United States alone. Large contingents of his followers are found in North America, Australia, Europe, Asia, South America, and especially India. Prominent followers include Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee, Prince Andrew’s former wife Sarah Ferguson, and entrepreneur Isaac Tigrett, founder of the international Hard Rock Cafés and the House of Blues restaurant chain. Another follower is a former Vatican priest, Don Mario Mazzoleni, author of *A Catholic Priest Meets Sai Baba*, in which he declares that Sai Baba and Christ are both the manifestation of God on earth. (Mazzoleni was excommunicated for his beliefs in 1992.)

Part of Sai Baba's attraction to well-educated Westerners is his blend of Eastern thought with Western vocabulary. His teachings attempt to synthesize the "truth" from all of the great faiths, with a special emphasis on Christian charity. His most famous saying is, "Love All, Serve All."

A plethora of disaffected members has spurred the current media attention. Some of them call him a fraud, a sexual abuser, and a pedophile. Prominent among the detractors is the English former follower David Bailey, a concert pianist, who began to follow Sai Baba in 1994 at the age of 40. Bailey's investigative document, *The Findings*, has been widely circulated on the Internet and has raised media attention worldwide. Bailey claims that he conducted more than 100 interviews with Sai Baba. As Bailey drew closer to Baba's inner circle, including marrying a devotee picked by the holy man, he began to have doubts. He finally concluded, "The miracles were B-grade conjuring tricks, the healings a myth," and the guru's alleged ability to see into people's minds and give them special messages "merely a clever use of information gleaned from others."

*The Findings'* major claims, based on interviews with devotees worldwide, include allegations of sham miracles, financial irregularities, and sexual predation on young, impressionable male members. These findings have been substantiated by skeptic societies and secular news media. In Bailey's opinion, "Sai Baba is a simple sex maniac who's on an ego trip, after money, after power. He is a sheer con-man."

Neither class of accusations (fraudulent "miracles" and sexual abuse of male followers) is new. Although Sai Baba has never been criminally charged, for decades various ex-members, skeptics, and critics have publicly challenged the claims and practices of the guru. The Indian Science and Rationalists' Association and various international documentaries have exposed his "miracles" as magicians' tricks and used slow motion photography to expose his materialization tricks. The U.S. Department of Justice and government officials in France and Germany are quietly conducting their investigations into Baba's activities. Other media exposés have come from the Australian publication *NEXUS* and the Canadian *Daily Telegraph* newspaper.

It is alleged that Baba sexually molests young men during his private audiences at his huge ashram in India, which is visited weekly by thousands. One of the most convincing stories comes from Dr. D. Bhatia, former head of the blood bank at Sai Baba's hospital, who said that he had sexual relations with the guru for "15 or 16 years" and that he was also aware of sexual relations between the guru and "many, many" students and devotees. Bhatia never questioned Sai Baba's actions, however. He explained, "Devotion doesn't need any justification. In my philosophy of life, everything good and everything bad belongs to God. That is my belief and that is why whatever he does, does not affect me in that way." He still believes that Sai Baba is God manifest on earth.

One young devotee, whose parents raised him to believe Sai Baba was God, claims Baba sexually abused him. He said in a written public statement, "Sai Baba was my God — who dares to refuse God? He was free to do whatever he wanted to do with me; he had my trust, my faith, my love and my friendship; he had me in totality." According to several critics, at least one young man had numerous sexual encounters with Sai Baba and in return received watches, jewelry, and cash, valued at around \$10,000. Another former devotee, Swedish film star Conny Larson, claims he was molested as well. Some current followers acknowledge they are aware of his intimacies, but they say such activities are "sexual healing" or "genital oiling" exercises.

In addition to media and government investigators, mental health professionals have checked into the stories as well. One therapist, Elena A. Hartgering, who was once a follower of Sai Baba, lost her reverence for the guru when she investigated the charges and discovered they were valid. She said, "I recognized immediately the consistent theme in the stories told by young men from around the world who have come forward to describe their victimization by this man masquerading as God." This therapist sacrificed her stellar professional reputation among devotees when she publicly released the charges.

Hartgering was especially concerned that neither Sai Baba nor his administration would even acknowledge the charges. She expressed her concern in a 2001 Internet posting:

It is troubling that neither Sai Baba himself nor the officials who head up the organization are willing to confront the accusations. If he and the organization have nothing to hide, then the accusations should be confronted directly, rather than with rehashed accounts of Sai's miracles and divinity, and being told to rely only on one's own experience...saying Sai predicted this in advance — "soon many devotees will fall away" — is irrelevant. This prediction resulted from his realization that the information on the Internet would be disseminated widely. It appears to be a lame attempt to save face....The problem is Sai Baba's behavior. No one is denying he touches male genitals. Knowledge about this is so widespread that it cannot be denied without the organization losing total credibility. People delude themselves with comments like, "He is God, he has no sexual intent," or "boys need to be tamed in that regard," or "it is a therapeutic touch, like a doctor." How can a rational human being believe this? Obviously the boys who have come forward with their tragic stories aren't accepting these explanations. How can we?

In his refusal to respond to the charges, Sai Baba says that he wants people to realize that God lives within them and that he remains silent so that followers don't become too attached to him. One of his favorite aphorisms encourages followers to avoid any criticism: "When doubt walks in the front door, faith walks out the back door. Keep your doors closed." His principal English translator, Anil Kumar, affirmed that every great religious teacher faced criticism during his lifetime, as with Sai Baba, but "with every criticism he becomes more and more triumphant...[This] is all part of his divine plan. It's a paddy field with husks around the rice. Eventually all the unwanted parts will go to leave the true substance behind."

One die-hard follower commented, "I feel that what we should do is this: Realize the God within us. If swami is a fraud, we must do this. If he is who he says he is, then we must do this." Other loyal followers blame the charges on a mysterious, untraceable international oil, lumber, pharmaceutical, and mining cartel. Credulity persists, and those followers who fall away are quickly replaced. Said one stubborn follower, "Sai Baba is faultless. He just opened the largest hospital in India. He's done incredible service to the world. His accusers are wrong. And we're no gullible believers." One supportive Internet posting declared that because "Sai Baba is a divine incarnation, one cannot attribute human sexual motives to him, nor interpret him in the light of human sexual experience."

Some followers try to straddle the divide between the charlatan and the god. Hard Rock Café chain co-founder Isaac Tigrett was such a strong supporter of Sai Baba that he donated \$20 million to build the Sathya Sai Super Specialty Hospital in the community around the ashram in India. He first encountered Sai Baba in 1974. Prompted by a premonition, he attended darshan at the ashram, and Sai Baba "blessed" him with a materialization of holy ash. For the next 15 years, although he had no personal contact with Sai Baba, he attributed many experiences to the miraculous power of Baba. Unlike many devotees, however, Tigrett doesn't believe Sai Baba is God, but he explained, "Whatever it was I experienced, it changed my life....And I will never be able to deny that experience; nothing he could do could change that." So how does Tigrett explain the accusations? He doesn't. He concludes, "For me the only meaningful relationship with him is the personal one, and everyone has to make a personal decision based on that....I know that he materializes things, because I've seen him do that. And I know he fakes materializations, because I've seen him do that too. I don't know why. Maybe it's just a game...[He is] a total and complete enigma."

The father of a young man allegedly molested by Sai Baba echoed Tigrett's observations, but with less credulity. After his final break with the movement over his son's experiences, he says he was finally able to realize he had been denying what he saw for some time: "I knew the materializations were fake. I'd sit there and watch him pulling things from under a pillow. It was totally obvious. And he'd see that we saw and he'd kind of laugh. But I just thought, he's testing me to see if I'm focused on the love or on the external. Because Baba says, love my uncertainty [sic]. You'll never be able to understand the avatar."

After his son's disclosure and his family's disassociation with Sai Baba, he was able to express how such discordance could exist in the mind of a devotee:

I realized, I'd really known this for a long time but didn't really know it. It goes so far into your mind. You ask yourself, how could millions of people be wrong? How could millions of people be tricked? I think a lot of people deny these things are happening because they're afraid of being embarrassed. I felt that myself. We'd spent 23 years raising our family to believe in him, going upstream against a river. You think, how could I have been so wrong?

Despite the die-hard devotees who continue to sing his praises, this round of accusations seems to have hurt the movement more than any other. There have been defections from among the top leadership as well as among the rank-and-file. Hundreds of former followers have bravely made public statements, many available on the Internet, about their personal experiences. The central group in Sweden has completely shut down, and some events and businesses in the community around the ashram have been cancelled and shut down.

*-- Gretchen Passantino*