



## A Brief Introduction to Sathya Sai Baba

### Who was Sathya Sai Baba?

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Sathyanarayana Raju was born to a Kshatriya Telegu-speaking family in a small village within the South Indian state of Andhra Pradesh in 1926 (however this date has been questioned). At the age of fourteen, he announced himself to be a reincarnation of the saint, Sai Baba of Shirdi (c.1838-1918). In 1963, he claimed to be an avatar (divine incarnation) of Shiva and Shakti. To distinguish him from his older namesake, he is often referred to as Sathya Sai Baba, but to many devotees, he is simply called Sai Baba.

Sathya Sai Baba died on 24 April 2011 and, after two days of lying in state, was buried on the 27 April 2011. Sathya Sai Baba had long claimed that he would return in a third and final incarnation, that of Prema Sai, and he made different suggestions as to when this might be; eight years after the passing of Sathya Sai Baba is an often quoted time frame. However the group's website advises against attempts to predict when Prema Sai will incarnate. The group does not seem to have significantly altered its beliefs and practices since Sai Baba's death.

Sathya Sai Baba was based in India (having left the country only once to visit followers in Uganda and Kenya) and visitors flocked to see him and be in his presence. He was famous for 'materialising' a variety of objects, including *vibhuti* (sacred ash), saris and anything from sweets to gold watches. Other reported miracles include teleportation, healing the sick, and resurrecting the dead.

### What are Sathya Sai Baba's Teachings?

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Sathya Sai Baba's core principles were *sathya* (truth), *dharma* (right conduct), *prema* (love), *shanthi* (peace), and *ahimsa* (non-violence). His best-known aphorisms were: 'love all, serve all' and 'help ever, hurt never.' Although rooted in the Hindu tradition, he emphasised the unity of religions, and discouraged followers from abandoning their own religions. Rather, he pointed to the immanence of God, the realisation of

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which will enable devotees to become better members of their own traditions. Sathya Sai Baba himself claimed to be an incarnation of the divine and many of his followers believe that he is such. However, despite Sathya Sai Baba's opinion, mainstream religions themselves have been reluctant to accept that his assertion of being a living incarnation is compatible with their beliefs. For example, Mario Mazzoleni, a Catholic priest who wrote a book that accepted Sathya Sai Baba as the living Christ, was excommunicated in 1992.

### **Who are Sathya Sai Baba's Followers?**

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A definitive sociological survey of Sathya Sai Baba devotees worldwide would be difficult to undertake, as many of his followers worship him in private as just one saint among many. It is generally estimated by both devotees and academics that, at the time of his death, Sathya Sai Baba had an international following of up to thirty million. Hindus form a large proportion of this following, but there are Western devotees who have been attracted by the eclectic spirituality of the teachings rather than the specifically Hindu beliefs. However, it is not known what proportion of these are actually affiliates of the Sathya Sai Organisation and what proportion are merely Sathya Sai Baba sympathisers. According to the Organisation's Charter, any spiritual aspirant who has faith in Sathya Sai Baba's teachings and who is willing to abide by the regulations of the Organisation and the nine-point code of conduct qualifies as a Member. Devotees who can spend at least four hours a week on activities for the Organisation are known as Active Workers.

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

### **What do members practice?**

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Devotees are encouraged to conduct daily prayer and meditation, regularly study Sathya Sai Baba literature, and live a life emphasising love and service. Devotees are encouraged to participate in family and group devotional exercises as well as participate in the educational and community service programmes at official Sathya Sai Baba Centres where available. Sathya Sai Baba always emphasised 'personal, "heart-to-heart" communication' and advised his devotees 'to ignore or disregard claims by individuals that they have messages from Sathya Sai Baba or special "inner" guidance for the benefit of others.' Therefore for many individual devotees, their relationship with Sathya Sai Baba is primarily personal; many of those who might pray to an image of Sathya Sai Baba will have only a minimal affiliation with official Sai Centres.

However, the International Sathya Sai organization hold that Centres are the ‘principal instrument through which the goals of the Organization are achieved’ and groups of devotees are encouraged to hold regular 90 minute meetings as well as ‘study groups’ for the study of Sathya Sai Baba literature. Centres are encouraged to hold their meetings at public venues not associated with any particular religion, but are also conducted in private homes when there are small numbers of devotees. Particularly for Indian families, much worship takes place in private homes, centring around family shrines where images of Sathya Sai Baba might be prominent. Indeed, Sai Baba placed great emphasis on family values and the householder’s life, and celibacy was usually encouraged only for people over fifty years old.

Main weekly meetings usually include group recitation of prayers, a short period of meditation, group devotional singing, study circle, and announcements. Worship usually takes a Hindu form, with *puja* (ritual offering to God) and *bhajans* (devotional hymns). However, Centres and groups are also encouraged to use other religious texts in order to emphasise that ‘the teachings of Sathya Sai Baba are universal in nature and emphasise the basic oneness of all religions.’ Members celebrate many of the traditional Indian festivals throughout the year, as well as Sai Baba's birthday and day of *mahasamadhi* (when he left his body through death), ‘Ladies Day’ and Christmas.

Ashrams are traditional Hindu religious communities. Three such residential communities formed around Sathya Sai Baba in India, but there are not any ashrams in Britain. Vegetarianism is generally encouraged, and there is no meat served at Sathya Sai Baba’s centres and ashrams, nor are alcohol or cigarettes available. The central event on the ashrams was *darshan*, in which Sathya Sai Baba walked among his devotees in the main temple, offering them blessings and accepting their letters. Members reported a profound feeling of 'spiritual energy' in his presence. Devotees now visit his final resting place, known as *mahasamadhi*. This is located underneath the location where devotees used to view his living incarnation, on the veranda of the temple in Prasanthi Nilayam in Puttaparthi, Andhra Pradesh, India, where Sathya Sai Baba lived and the main ashram is located. At the ashrams, sexes are segregated during worship, and there are separate living quarters for men and women.

### **How is the movement organised?**

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There are Sai Baba Centres in around 120 countries, organised administratively into geographical regions. The Sri Sathya Sai World Foundation is now chaired by an American devotee, Mr. Gary Belz who, working closely with Dr. Narendranath Reddy (Director of the Sri Sathya Sai World Foundation and chair of the Prasanthi Council), organise the Sathya Sai Baba movement worldwide and co-ordinate the centres’ activities. Estimates of the number of centres vary from 1,200 to 30,000 globally.

Sathya Sai Centres are directed to focus their activities in three main areas, or “Wings”:

1. Devotion, i.e. spiritual activities (with a focus on devotional singing and meditation).

2. Education (with a focus on teaching children Sathya Sai Baba's core principles).

3. Service (which involves volunteers in the local community, providing meals for the homeless, for example).

The Sri Sathya Sai Central Trust runs several schools in India, the Sri Sathya Sai University (which has separate campuses for men and women in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka), the Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Music in Puttaparthi and also the Sri Sathya Sai Vidya Vahini project, which is aimed at integrating values in innovative ways into the school curriculum in India. National Sri Sathya Organizations in over 40 countries run educational initiatives.

The movement's centre is Prasanthi Nilayam, in the Indian state of Andhra Pradesh. The Central Office, based in Prasanthi Nilayam, is responsible for the major policy and decision-making, administration, and organisation, and also for the resolution of internal disputes that are not covered by the Organisation's Charter. The Charters for Indian and Overseas members are not identical, and in India there is a separate Women's Section (*Mahila Vibhag*) that deals mainly with educational activities. In Prasanthi Nilayam, a section of devotees act as uniformed 'Seva Dal' volunteers, helping to manage the crowds and provide other services. There are also four Sri Sathya Sai 'Medical Institutions' including a general hospital and a second hospital for more specialist treatment in Prasanthi Nilayam and a number of other provisions for medical care, and for providing medical relief in emergency situations, which are run free of charge to the beneficiaries.

The Prasanthi Nilayam Ashram accepts residential visitors and accommodation is available for both Indians and foreign visitors within the ashram's extensive infrastructure, although pre-bookings are not generally taken. In the ashram, men and women are not expected to mix (except for families travelling together) and gates to the ashram close and lights go out at 9.30pm. There are arrangements for medical care at Sai Baba specialty hospitals and several canteens on site. When Sai Baba was alive, there were two daily *darshan* times; now there are two periods of worship (*puja*) and Vedic recitations, followed by *bhajans*. The morning devotions begin at 5.10am, with devotees entering from 6.25 and the afternoon from 4.30pm. After each session, devotees can view the shrine at Sai Baba's final resting place (*mahasamadhi*).

### **Sathya Sai Baba in Britain**

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The Sathya Sai Organisation has been active in the UK since the 1960s and in 2020 goes by the name Sathya Sai International Organisation (UK). As of 2020 there are 79 Sai Centres or Groups regularly meeting throughout Britain, with a concentration in London. There are a roughly equal number of Centres (which have a minimum of nine devotees and are recognised by a central council) and Groups, which are less formal meetings of devotees.

Academics have estimated numbers of UK devotees as between four to ten thousand. However, Sai Baba in Britain has no official membership lists. The majority of those interested in Sai Baba are of South Asian origin, but he also appeals to some Westerners, predominately of the middle classes.

Sri Sathya Sai Charitable Trust UK was registered as a charity in 1979 (charity number 278481). The Trust describes itself as 'a grant making body supporting the advancement of education and relief of poverty and sickness.' Another charity, called BISSE (charity number 1118625), exists to 'advance the education of the public in the matters relating to the Sathya Sai Education in Human Values Programme (SSEHV).' There were three schools that embraced Sathya Sai Education in the UK: Sathya Sai School Leicester (UK) was owned by the registered charity Sathya Sai School Leicester Limited (charity number 1107643). It was an Independent, fee-paying nursery, primary and secondary school which taught Sathya Sai Education in Human Values (SSEHV). It was founded in 2001, registered as a charity in 2005 and ceased to exist in 2015. Abbey Primary School in Leicester began running a SSEHV-inspired extra-curricular club in 2006 and became an SSEHV partner school in 2009. It is not clear whether this club and partnership are still running. Sai School of Harrow (charity number 1089487) is a free Saturday school for children aged 5-15 teaching SSEHV.

## Controversies

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The Indian Rationalist Association was at the forefront of a campaign to expose Sai Baba's reported miracles as mere trickery. However, Sai Baba had been unwilling to submit himself to testing under the scrutiny of laboratory conditions. Dale Beyerstein's 1994, *Sai Baba's Miracles*, challenged Sai Baba with specific examples of his claims for omniscience, healings, materialisations and other 'miracles'.

There are also allegations that money which was meant to be spent on charitable projects for the local poor had been siphoned off by those at the head of the organisation. Some critics claim to have been subject to violent harassment by Sai Baba followers, and there have even been allegations of murder, which remain unsubstantiated. Indeed, an attempt on Sai Baba's life in 1993 that left six dead is still treated with suspicion by some critics, who believe that Sai Baba's powerful Indian supporters prevented a full investigation into the incident.

Criticisms of Sai Baba gained force in the 2000's, since the 2000 online publication of a report entitled *The Findings* by disillusioned followers, David and Faye Bailey. These accusations concern Sai Baba's sexual conduct, and have provoked heated debates on the Internet. A number of male devotees, including minors, claim that the guru made sexual advances towards them during private meetings. The sexual advances are said to have included the touching of genital areas and oral sex. Although many followers have straightforwardly refused to believe these allegations, other devotees have justified them with the claim that they may have a deeper spiritual significance beyond the reckoning of mere mortals. Some have argued these allegations were a misunderstanding of a technique for awakening *kundalini* energy, which is more of a

spiritual than a sexual phenomenon; other apologists claim that they were tests of faith.

A lack of institutional transparency and accountability has prevented any of these former-member allegations from being independently investigated. Outside India, Sai Baba's centres and devotees have declined somewhat in popularity with the negative publicity. It remains to be seen how the movement will be affected in the long term given Sai Baba's death in 2011.

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International Sai Organization: <http://www.sathyasai.org/>

Sri Sathya Sai Service Organization UK: <http://www.srisathyasai.org.uk/>

Site that specifically refutes some of the critical allegations:

<http://www.saisathyasai.com/>

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Critical former-member Sathya Sai Baba sites include:

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*New Religious Movements: A Practical Introduction* (London: HMSO, revised 1995) has been written by Professor Eileen Barker to provide practical suggestions as well as general background information. It can be brought second hand from retailers including [amazon.co.uk](http://amazon.co.uk) and [abebooks.co.uk](http://abebooks.co.uk)

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