

THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SAI BABA

MOVEMENT AND ITS VARIOUS INTERPRETATIONS

(In Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya)

matrik No. : 33532

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Universiti Malaya

Kuala Lumpur

Sesi 1980/81

SUMMARY

Acknowledgements

Due to a personal interest in religion, this topic was chosen for study. However, this work would never have been completed without the considerable patience, advice and assistance given by my supervisor, Dr. Raymond Lee. I wish to state that my indebtedness to him are beyond words.

In the preparation of this work, I also received assistance from various people who provided information and books as well as introduced devotees from various parts of the research area.

Last but not least, I wish to thank my husband, Mr. Vijayakumar for his help in the photography and Miss Mallika for typing this work.

SATHIAVANY

SINOPSIS

Karjian ini menganalisisakan satu gerakan ugama kecil yang berasalny dari satu negeri asing. Oleh kerana ciri-ciri kebudayaan yang sama atau lebih kurang sama, gerakan ugama ini dapat mengatasi halangan pertama iaitu sempadan nasional. Manakala Bab I membincangkan methodologi dan masaaalah-masaalah yang dihadapi, Ban II pula membincangkan perkembangan gerakan Sai Baba di India dan di kawasan kajian, iaitu Kuala Lumpur dan Petaling Jaya. Di Malaysia, gerakan ini mengubahsuai kan cara perkembangannya supaya dapat menarik perhatian daripada orang ramai yang berbilang kaum. Bab III membincangkan struktur kelas dalam gerakan Sai Baba di kawasan kajian dilakukan. Penganut-penganut dari kelas bawahan tidak ramai dalam gerakan ini, kerana ia dimulakan dan diteruskan oleh kelas tengah atau atasan. Walaupun kelas bawahan digalakkan supaya menjadi anggota-anggota dalam gerakan ini, mereka mengasingkan diri oleh kerana masalah integrasi. Bab IV dan V pula menerangkan upacara-upacara yang diamalkan dan juga memberi beberapa kes-kes individu yang menganut ajaran-ajaran Sai Baba. Intepretasi upacara-upacara dilakukan sejajar dengan pemikiran individu yang cuba mengimbangkan keadaan emosinya. Kesemua penganut-penganut mencari pengertian dalam kehidupan iaitu tidak mahu percaya bahawa pemikiran manusia akan lenyap dengan kematian. Bolehlah dikatakan bahawa mereka mencari 'immortality'. Bab akhir membincangkan kepentingan gerakan ini dalam konteks masyarakat India dan masyarakat Cina dan juga mengenai masa hadapannya.

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INTRODUCTION

Many scholars have noted the emergence of numerous new religious movements throughout history (e.g. Lanternari 1963, Barham 1974). Some sociologists, have analysed new religions as responses to particular problems faced by particular people in specific situations. If the adherents are all from the same social or economic stratum or from the same ethnic or national group, the sociologist may relate the formation of the new movement to some problems faced by members of the same social category. The peculiar quality of some movements, however is their ability to transcend such boundaries and still capture a substantial following encompassing supporters and sympathisers from various economic, social, ethnic and national lines. One such movement which has begun to attract a large following in Malaysia is the Sai Baba movement which has its origins in India.

The Sai Baba movement is led by Sathya Sai Baba who is fifty five years old and residing at Puttaparthi in the State of Andhra Pradesh in India.¹ He is referred to as a saint, guru, an avatar or reincarnation and as god by various people according to their respective inclinations. His followers come from all groups of people regardless of economic, social ethnic and national boundaries. The distribution however, is not the same for all the sections of society.

A problem of definition arises here as to whether this

¹Sai Baba who has born in 1926 is fifty-six years old according to Hindu custom whereby the year of birth is included as one year. Thus, Sathya Sai Baba celebrated his 55th birthday on 23 Nov 1981.

movement is to be classified as a cult or a sect. According to Charles Y Glock (1973: 209) cults are religious movements which draw their inspiration from other than the primary religion of the culture. Unlike sects whose concern is with preserving a purer form of the traditional faith, they are not schismatic movements. Sects have been characterised as being in tension with the world, as having a concerted rather than an inherited membership and as being highly emotional in character. (Glock 1973: 208). Sects provide a channel through which their members come to suppress and ultimately overcome feelings of deprivation ~~overcome feelings of deprivation~~ by injecting into them feelings of religious privilege. Thus, sect members no longer compare themselves in terms of their economic position, but in terms of their superior religious status. Cults could develop around a charismatic person who claims to possess supernatural powers or they may arise from an informal gathering of people with similar experiences, ideas and interests.

How can we then define the Sai Baba movement? Complexities arise in classifying the movement in absolute terms. The Sai Baba movement centres around Sathya Sai Baba, a charismatic individual who possess supernatural powers. However, it cannot be classified as a cult because the movement also draws inspiration from religions other than the primary religion which in this case is Hinduism. Furthermore, membership in the movement is largely a converted rather than an inherited membership which is a characteristic of a sect. On the other hand, it cannot be classified as a sect as the movement does not emphasize the preserving of a purer form of the traditional faith as defined by

Glock. Generally, the movement has lesser characteristics of a sect than a cult.

Religious activities and beliefs of people take different forms and are of different intensities though they might all belong to one particular religious group. How is the variety to be understood? An individual's position, attitudes and behaviour can be said to be the product of certain sociological and psychological processes. These processes involve his personal experiences, his group experiences and situational factors. What leads to religious commitment among some? There is a need to conceptualise religion in multi-dimensional terms; that is, to take into account differences in religious expression as well as the degree to which they are practised. Thus, there is also a need to define the term 'devotee' in the context of this study of the Sai Baba movement. There are different types of devotees, ranging from those who regard Sai Baba as god and attend bhajans (devotional group singing) regularly to those who pray to him for favours and regard him only as white magician. Also included are individuals who are not totally convinced of Sai Baba's powers, but are willing to pray to him for favours.

One of the aims of this study is to examine the development of the movement. The second aim is to study the interpretations of the rituals conducted in relation to the primary religion which is Hinduism. In addition, I will also examine how the Sai Baba devotees perceive the movement and the meanings they attach to the movement. Thirdly, we will study the backgrounds of some Sai Baba devotees. I will use the concept of 'deprivation' to analyse how an individual rationalises and integrates

CHAPTER I

1.1. DEPRIVATION AND RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS

Glock a prominent contemporary sociologist has said - '... a necessary pre-condition for the rise of any organized social movement, whether it be religious or secular, is a situation of felt deprivation. However, while a necessary condition, deprivation is not in itself a sufficient condition.' (Glock, 1973: 212). Bryan Wilson's study of sectarian organisations in contemporary Britain support the above statement as he found that it was the poor, socially neglected and culturally deprived who were drawn into these movements in the early days (Wilson 1957: 317). According to the 'sect-church' theory, new sects recruit their membership primarily from the economically deprived or as Niebuhr calls them, "the disinherited" classes of society. Sect-church theory conceives of deprivation almost entirely in economic terms. But there are forms of deprivation other than economic ones which also influence the development of religions and secular movements.

Glock defines deprivation as '... any and all of the ways that an individual or group may be, or feel disadvantaged in comparison either to other, individuals or groups or to an internalized set of standards.' (Glock 1973: 210). He has categorized deprivation into five types namely economic, social, organismic, ethical and psychic. An individual or group however, may experience one or more of these deprivations.

Organizational efforts to overcome deprivation may be religious or it may be secular. Religious resolutions are more likely to occur where the nature of deprivation is perceived in religious

terms of where those experiencing the deprivation are not in a position to work directly at eliminating the causes. On the other hand where the nature of the deprivation is perceived, secular resolutions are more likely to arise (e.g. Alcoholics Anonymous; Transcendental Meditation). In other words secular resolutions are causes of deprivation, whilst religious resolutions tend to compensate for feelings of deprivation rather than eliminate it.

Religious resolutions to economic deprivation tend to be symbolically revolutionary. For instance, a religious ideology which expresses the 'richness' of a man as the character of the man and not his wealth usually also propagates the idea that God will help the weak and the poor). Economic deprivation arises either due to differential income distribution or the limited access of some individuals to the necessities of life. It is of a subjective nature as a person who appears to others as economically privileged might perceive himself as economically deprived. The latent resentment against society tends to be expressed in ideology which rejects and radically devalues the society. Religious movements which grow out of economic deprivation need not have its theological base in the traditional religion of the society. (e.g. Black Muslim movement).

Social deprivation arises out of differential distribution of highly regarded attributes and rewards such as prestige, power, status and opportunity for social participation. Social deprivation does not require a complete transformation of society either literally or symbolically as the fault of the society is not basic but rather one or several parts of society. The organizational form of religious groups

that emerge out of social deprivation tends to be church-like rather than sect-like. This is because the basic interest of the socially deprived is to accommodate themselves to the large society rather than to escape from it. Attitudes towards youth and age, man and women; white and black; crippled and non-cripples all work to produce a feeling of social deprivation. Thus the socially deprived usually only seek to accommodate themselves to the larger society. Religious resolutions to organismic deprivation normally emerges in the form of healing cults. (e.g. Father Divine; Christian Science). Organismic deprivation refers to persons suffering from health problems such as neuroses, psychoses, paralyses, the blind, the deaf, the crippled and the chronically ill.

The three deprivations discussed i.e. economic, social and organismic deprivations are considered as deprivations by both society and the individual himself. Therefore the individual in these cases does not measure up to society's standards. The fourth and fifth deprivation i.e. ethical and psychic deprivations differ from the above as it is the individual himself who feels that he is not living up to his own standards. Ethical deprivation is a philosophical one where the individual comes to feel that the dominant values of society no longer provide him with a meaningful way of organizing his life. It usually occurs among those satiated with economic and social rewards of life and with the efforts necessary to obtain them. Organizational responses towards ethical deprivation appear to be more like societies and associations which represent an alienation from the dominant religious system. (e.g. Ethical Culture Union; Unitarianism). They also tend to be subject to fads. Solutions to psychic deprivation is sought for its

own sake and not at a source of ethical prescriptions on how one ought to manage his life. Movements stimulated by psychic deprivation involve some form of transcendental authority which may or may not be derived from the predominant religion. They also tend to draw their membership from the severely socially deprived middle class as they require a certain amount of intellectual facility on the part of their adherents. They usually stimulate an attitude of mind over matter.

Deprivations are important as not only do they play an important part in the formation of movements but they also determine the path of their development and their potentiality for survival. As stated earlier, one of the aims of this study is to look into the concept of deprivation and its effects on Sai Baba devotees which we shall see in a later chapter.

1.2 METHODOLOGY

Since this study of the Sai Baba movement focusses on the interpretive processes in the movement, the methods used in the fieldwork were participant - observation and interviewing.

The study was carried out at two levels, namely the general and the individual level. At the general level, attempts were made to investigate the membership of the organisation, the number of bhajan centres in Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya, the general attendance at the weekly bhajans and special bhajans, financial contributions and participation and also publication of articles concerning the movement. These information were obtained mostly from organizers and senior devotees.

At the individual level, interview questionnaires with open-ended questions were used after some rapport had been established with the subjects. The initial sample of respondents was selected from people whom the researcher knew personally and those who were introduced to her. More respondents were included in the sample during the fieldwork conducted between March, 1980 to November 1980 when the researcher met and established rapport with other devotees during bhajans and other functions. During these bhajans appointments were made with the respondents who were informed that a study on religious movements was being conducted for academic purposes. Interviews were conducted in their homes. The sample of respondents included in the sample during the fieldwork included eight organizers and fourteen ordinary members of the movement. The comprised both sexes, different ethnic and age (ranging from 18-70 yrs.)

groups and educational levels).

The interviews-questionnaire was divided into four sections. Section A consisted of questions designed to elicit biographical data. Section B dealt with questions on interpretations of Sai Baba and the movement while Section C concentrated on personality characteristics. Section D was concerned with organizational structure, (See Appendix A for further details). The interviews were conducted in English all cases except two. One was carried out in Tamil and another in Cantonese with a third person (the respondent's son) acting as the translator.

Notes from a days observation and conversation were written from memory at the end of the day. Only in a few instances where the respondent had abundant information, were notes taken at the moment of interview with the permission of the subject.

Participant observation was the Chief method used in the study of this movement. By regular attendance of bhajans, it was assumed by many that the researcher was a Sai Baba devotee. Because the researcher is of Indian origin and has a name with religious significance, she found it easy to become assimilated into the Sai Baba groups in the Kuala Lumpur - Petaling Jaya area. At one centre the researcher had the opportunity of conducting a bhajan whereby she paid the necessary funds and carried out the ritual procedures of offering sacrifices of flowers and waving of the flame before the pictographs of Sai Baba and other deities at the altar. The researcher was also involved in other activities of the movement such as visiting hospitals, prisons, estates, Hindu temples and attending bhajans held in different homes. These

activities sustained and developed the movement. The researcher attended not only the regular bhajans, but also those held on special occasions, such as on festivals and memorial services.

1.3 PROBLEMS AND LIMITATIONS

A number of problems arose in the course of the fieldwork. Although interviews were carried out in the homes of the devotees, the researcher found it difficult to complete the interviews with specific respondents because family members continually interrupted by voicing their viewpoints. Time factor had limiting effects on interviews conducted. Interviews were mostly held in the evenings after six as the respondents chose, as most of them were working people. The amount of information and their experiences were so abundant that even three hours proved insufficient. Furthermore, as the area of study (ie. Kuala Lumpur - Petaling Jaya) is quite large, distance posed another problems and much of the time taken up for travelling purposes. The same applied to bhajans which either began at 7.00 p.m. if held in public places or at 7.30 p.m. if held in homes. They normally ended at about 8.30 p.m. or 9.00 p.m. in public places, but in homes they often carried on till about 10.00 p.m.

As for the respondents they were very co-operative with the exception of a few. A few refused to talk about their income, whilst one person refused to talk about her personal experiences. One respondent misunderstood the researcher's intentions and desiring publicity for herself in whatever work the researcher produced, chose to help the researcher by taking her to homes of other devotees. All the information given by devotees is assumed to be accurate other than in cases where

counter-checking was possible. Counter-checking was most useful in matters regarding information on the development of the movement. Members of the movement from different areas and centres were asked the same questions on the beginning, progress and organisation of the movement, and their answers are compared. The sample of respondents interviewed is not representative of the movement in Kuala Lumpur - Petaling Jaya, as the study is concerned mainly with two Sai Baba groups. On the whole there are about seven main centres. The sample size is small and comprises of those who attend bhajans though not necessarily on a regular basis. There are others who do not attend bhajans but who have some form of belief in Sathya Sai Baba. However, the researcher has been able to meet devotees from all over Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya.

The earliest movement which has some similarities to the Sai Baba movement is that of the Harekrishna under Chaitanya (between 1500 A.D. and 1500 A.D.). The Harekrishna had some connection with Islamic mysticism which was possibly an effort to dispel some possible suspicion of Muslim influence in some regions. Muslim forms were large in number in many areas such as Afghanistan and Western Punjab. Although not necessarily Hindu in origin, a principal factor of community and religious life in a Harekrishna house in the month of Shravan where a fire is kept perpetually burning.

The next saint associated with the Sai Baba movement is Rishabhdeva who is said to have miraculous powers though always in ecstasy, surrounded by women, drinking wine and indulging in sex. Geographically, he is shown surrounded by animals, including dogs, that appear in the symbolism of the Sai Baba saints.

CHAPTER III

THE ORIGINS AND ORGANISATION OF THE SAI BABA MOVEMENT.

2.1 Beginnings Of The Sai Baba Movement In India.

Dr. Charles S J White in his article - "The Sai Baba Movement - Approaches to the Study of Indian Saints" (1977) has succeeded in showing a relationship between some living saints in the Poona and Bangalore regions who constitute a homogenous group which he calls the Sai Baba Movement. He has also been able to relate some saints of the past who have contributed independently to the thematic content of the present Sai Baba movement.

The earliest movement which has some similarities to the Sai Baba movement is that of the Nathpanthis under Gorakhnath (between 1000 A.D. and 1200 A.D.) The Nathpanthis had some connection with Islamic asceticism which was possibly an effort at disguise from possible harassment of Muslim forces in some regions. Muslim forces were large in number in nearby areas such as Afghanistan and Western Punjab. Although not necessarily Muslim in origin, a principal focus of community and religious life in a Nathpanthi house is the hearth or diyani where a fire is kept perpetually burning.

The next saint associated with the Sai Baba movement is Dattatreya who is said to have miraculous powers though always in ecstasy, surrounded by women, drinking wine and indulging in sex. Iconographically, he is shown surrounded by animals, including dogs, that appear in the symbolism of the Sai Baba saints.

Kabir, born in the fifteenth century is counted among the most thorough going of the reformist ascetics in Hinduism and one who made major contributions in creating links between Muslims and Hindus. Kabir's humble origins, his love for all mankind whether Hindu, Muslim or otherwise, his reputed love of animals, his yogic connections (with the Nathpanthi order) and the uniquely synthetic character of his religious position point the direction towards the founder of the Sai Baba movement.

The next saint in the line who is also one of the most important among the masses of Central India was Shirdi Sai Baba, (1855-1918). He was regarded as a major incarnation of God of that age. Although his appeal was to the masses, he nevertheless had a large middle class following. Sai Baba appeared in 1872 in a town in central Maharashtra known as Shirdi from where he gets the name Shirdi Sai Baba. Hindus usually assert that he was of Brahmin origin and an orphan who was taken as a disciple by a Muslim ascetic. Shirdi Sai Baba's religious practices blended Hindu and Muslim elements. He performed a kind of Hindu ritual with lights and incense and kept a fire burning perpetually in a dhuni in the manner of a Nathpanthi pir. His ritual practices included both Muslim Namaz (Arabic Salat) and Hindu prayers and offerings. Devotees were Hindus, Muslims, Parsees and Christians. Shirdi Sai Baba established himself as a saint through the performance of miracles. He utilised the ash from the dhuni as a sacramental substance for the working of his miracles. This uddi can be rubbed into the forehead or throat, swallowed, cast into a wound or used in various ways to effect changes. In addition Shirdi Sai Baba often exercised direct means such as multi-

location, warnings, appearance in dreams and other devices to aid his followers.

At this point we can examine some of the parallels between Shirdi Sai Baba and the earlier traditions of Indian religious life that have been mentioned and thus show briefly how the saints who succeeded the former followed his pattern in their teachings and practices, not to mention, the innovation of special teachings and practices in accordance to their own. Kabir's reference to the Guru and Shirdi Sai Baba's reference to the Fakir is similar. Devotees include both Muslims and Hindus. Moreover, Sai Baba was a celibate remaining in one place, performing miracles and admonishing his disciples and keeping a fire perpetually burning in a diya. It would not be unreasonable therefore to assume that he was following customs already sanctified in the Nathpanthic tradition with its own degree of Muslim-Hindu assimilation. Dogs which iconographically accompany Datatreya or in the legends of Kabir find their counterparts in the iconograph of Shirdi Sai Baba. In addition to his stature as guru, ascetic and saint, Shirdi Sai Baba was also considered as an avatar, by many of his followers.

The next saint in this series was Upasani Baba (1870) who came from a Brahmin family but without wealth. As a young man he faced failures in school, in marriages and even in investments. He met Shirdi Sai Baba in 1911 and became his disciple. He left Shirdi Sai Baba, gathered his own disciples and began an ashram of his own as an extreme ascetic. In 1924, a young girl - Mata Godavari became his principle disciple after which an order of nuns was established in the ashram. Upasani Baba departed radically from the course taken by Sai Baba.

There is no suggestion of Muslim influence in the purely Hindu atmosphere of the ashram at Sakuri. Sacred ash previously used as a medium for miracles and even the concern for miracles were absent. There is no mention of his ability to perform miracles implying that he was not able to. Mention, however, is made of an act of tapas (a kind of atonement) whereby he locked himself in a wooden cage for fifteen months for the welfare of his disciples and well-being of the world. The main temple for worship is dedicated to Datlatreya and in 'holy pictures' relationships between Sai Baba, Upasani Baba and Mata Godavari are explicitly stated. There was also a kindly attitude towards animals, and stray dogs were given sanctuary at the ashram in Sakuri.

Finally comes the saint of the present age in this line-
Sathya Sai Baba.

2.2 Biographical Sketch of Sathya Sai Baba

The subject of this study is Sathya Sai Baba who has been acclaimed as the greatest living saint and the full incarnation of God by his followers. Shri Sathya Sai Baba was born on 23 November 1926 in an isolated village called Puttaparthi in the Anantapur District of Andhra Pradesh State in India. He comes from a lower-middle class family of farmers belonging to a pious family of the Raju lineage of the Kshatriyas. His parents, Shri Pedda Venkappa Raju and Shrimati Ewaremma, had two sons and two daughters of which the fourth child was Sathya Narayan Raju, now known as Shri Sathya Sai Baba.

Months before his birth, miracles such as musical instruments emitting melodious sounds at night by themselves are said to have taken

place. (Murphet: 1975: p.51) As a baby, he is said to have covered his face with vibhuti which appeared in his tiny hands mysteriously. At the age of fourteen (1940) he announced himself as the incarnation of Shirdi Sai Baba. The word 'Sai' means Holy Father. Shirdi Sai Baba who had laid the foundation of Hindu-Muslim unity as stated earlier had prophesised before his death that he would be reborn eight years later. Shri Sathya Narayan Raju or Sathya Sai Baba was born in 1926 that is exactly eight years after the death of Shirdi Sai Baba in 1918.

1968, Sathya Sai Baba announced during a discourse in Goa that he belonged to the clan of the Bhandurj Rishis who had secured the great boon from Lord Shiva that, he, Lord Shiva and his consort Shakti, would be born thrice in the Kali Age.²

The first birth as an incarnation of Lord Shiva was Shirdi Sai Baba (i.e. the male element); the second birth as the combined incarnation of Shiva and Shakti (i.e. the male and female element) is the present Shri Sai Baba who is also called Ardhnariswar or a half-man and half-woman God; the third and final birth is to be that of Shakti (i.e. the female element) in the form of a woman by the name of Prem Sai Baba in Madaya district of Karnatak State. It is foretold that Satya Sai Baba will pass away at the age of ninety-five i.e. in 2021 and Prem Sai Baba be born one year later i.e. in 2022.

The child Sai Baba taught the people his first bhajan at the

² Hindus believe in the three ages namely Threthayuga, Dwaparayuga and Kali Yuga. Kali Yuga is the age of destruction which is at the end of the time scale for the world.

age of fourteen. The first bhajan was:

'Namas Bhaj Re Guru Charanam,
Dustar Bhawanagar Tamam'

This means - 'Meditate in thy mind on the feet of the Guru, for it alone can take you across the difficult sea of existence in birth after birth.' His task he says is the spiritual regeneration of humanity through truth and love and to achieve the supreme task of uniting as one family the entire mankind. One major facet in Sai Baba's activities is the performance of miracles especially materializing medicinal Holy Ash and other objects such as Jap Mala (rosary); lockets; rings; necklaces, chains of gold, silver, panch dhatu (five metals rolled into one) carrying the embossed or enamelled pictures of Shirdi Sai Baba, Shri Sathya Sai Baba, Lord Krishna, Lord Shiva etc., crosses for Christians; fragrant vibhuti, kunkum (vermillion); amrita (nectar); honey; fruits; watches; medicines; and religious scriptures like the Gita etc. Many of his devotees have claimed to have been dispensed of incurable ailments and mental disorders by being given personally or being sent miraculous vibhuti on the pictographs of gods and goddesses in their shrines to be used by the sick. Sai baba also organizes many festivals in his ashram, most important of which are Guru Poornima (a special day for gurus), Baba's Birthday, Dasara, Diwali, Onam, New Year's Day, Ram Navami and Shiva Ratri. He feeds hundreds of beggars and distributes clothes to them, gives divine discourses, personal interviews to the devotees, distributes vibhuti to devotees personally and allows devotees to do Padangmaskaram (worship of the feet).

This brief outline of Sathya Sai Baba's background, however, does not provide a complete picture of the movement in India. The movement is a highly organised one whereby a Central Sri Sathya Sai Trust³ has been set up; official journals such as 'Samathan Sarathi', published by the Sri Sathya Sai Education and Publication Foundation; a Post Graduate Girls' College set up at Anantapur; two girls' colleges at Jaipur and Bhopal; a boys college in 's Bridavanan ashram and many other institutions. There are also plans to start at least one Sai Baba college in each state of India.

2.3 The Teachings of Sathya Sai Baba

In his teachings Sathya Sai Baba emphasizes the essential unity of all religions of the world. He wishes to subordinate the superficial layers of differences and to unify all creeds into one supreme religion, the religion of love and brotherhood. He seeks to build a Sai Community, a community based upon the principles of truth, right conduct, peace and love and striving for the goals of spiritual consciousness. He says that man shall love God, love himself, love his brothers and sisters and love all life on earth. Secondly he says that love for one's fellow humans is expressed in terms of caring for, compassion, kindness, service and sharing.

The emphasis is on bhakti or devotional worship. Hinduism

³ Voluntary donors can deposit donations in the Central Shri Sathya Sai Trust account with any branch of Canara Bank and obtain a receipt from the bank in case they wish to show it to the Income Tax authorities.

propagates three ways of attaining Truth that is through Bhaktiyoga, Karmayoga, and Jnanayoga. In Bhaktiyoga, recitation of the Name, prayer and practice of silence is given importance. Bhajanas according to Sai Baba removes egoism as one is not afraid of laughter nor ashamed to call out the Name. One gets inspired by the devotion of others too. From the Sai Baba devotees, it is gathered that Sathya Sai Baba grants them visions of Rama, Krishna, Subramaniam and other gods whom they believe in. To the devotees he is the universal God and he has come to dispel ego, pride, selfishness and fanaticism. The Christians visualise him as Christ reborn in India whilst Buddhist, Hindus, Jains and Taoists see him as God.

In brief, his teachings emphasize Satryam, Prema, Dharma, and Santhi which mean Truthfulness, Love, Righteousness and Peace respectively. This is also embedded in the Sai Baba emblem (see Chapter 4). He shows universality in saying:

There is only one god and he is omnipresent;
There is only one religion which is the religion of love;
There is only one caste which is the case of humanity;
There is only one law which is the law of work (duty)
And there is only one language - the language of the heart.

2.4. The Development of the Sai Baba Movement In Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya.

Knowledge about Sai Baba as a miracle-man had existed among a few Indians in Kuala Lumpur - Petaling Jaya in the late 1960's. Prior to 1969 bhajanas were carried out on a small scale in the homes of a small group of devotees. In 1968/1969 however, the first public bhajan was

carried out on a small scale in the homes of a small group of devotees. In 1968/1969 however, the first public bhajan was held in Vivikenanda Ashram in Brickfields, Kuala Lumpur. Due to problems of registration of the movement and internal conflicts over leadership between organising devotees - a split came about and bhajans by two groups were held in the ashram. One group used the outer hall while the other occupied the inner hall. Later this second splinter group broke away and formed a new centre at Petaling Jaya. At the Petaling Jaya centre internal problems over leaderships broke again and another division was formed at Kepong where the devotees were predominantly Chinese. This also solved problems of transport for devotees living around Kepong. Despite these divisions, the members or the number of devotees grew greatly in number in Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya.

At the time of research, there were seven main centres in the area encompassing Kuala Lumpur and Petaling Jaya. All these centres have regular bhajans every week. Thursday is the most popular day for bhajans, as it is considered to be the day for gurus. Sathya Sai Baba is also said to have given his first bhajan on a Thursday. Three centres however, seem to be the more important decision makers for the movement as a whole. One main centre seems to be a predominantly Mahila Vibhag group i.e. a centre for women though it caters for all devotees. Another sub-centre is primarily for the teenagers who call themselves the Sdya-Bal group and carry out many activities in the form of services. They also place a great deal of importance for the Bal Vikas or the children.

Other than the public bhajan centres, a great number of bhajans

are held regularly in some homes and some take turns to have the bhajans held in their homes. Irregular home bhajans are conducted on occasions such as birthdays, funerals, memorial services etc. Devotees and non-devotees attend these bhajans. There are also the regular bhajan attenders and those who attend occasionally. A great number of the devotees were introduced into the movement as a result of attending those bhajans.

The centre also carries out many services through which new followers to the movement are found. These in summary are hospital visits, prison bhajans and Satsangs, bhajans in temples, Bal Vika classes in estates and squatter areas, assistance in Old Folks Homes, Boys Remand Homes, Orphanages and Blind Homes and assistance to disaster-struck families such as during floods and fires. During hospital visits for instance, warded patients who are non-Muslims are approached and a short conversation struck up on the problem the patient is suffering from, his name and place of residence. Details as to which god he or she prays to are inquired and then a packet of vibhuti or holy ash given to the person or rubbed on the head if permitted. The patient is then told to continue worshipping his chosen god and also told in brief about the miraculous powers of the ash from Sathya Sai Baba. Curious patients receive more information and are invited to attend bhajans. Prison visits are also conducted in the same manner with the addition of bhajan sung in the prisons by a few volunteers from the movement who are also registered so as to enter the premises. One centre has a very active Seva - Bal group which travels extensively to initiate small bhajan groups and thus future Sai centres.

At present an attempt is being made to co-ordinate all the

sub-centres under one large centre and to have it registered. From the attendance of bhajans, it can be said that there are about 1,000 to 1,500 devotees in the region of Kuala Lumpur - Petaling Jaya. To date there are more than 40 Sai Centres in Malaysia, some fully active with bhajans, Sai Vikas and service activities and others with regular bhajans but with service programmes only during special occasions. The newest Sai centres, set up in 1980 are those at Kota Bahru and Kota Kinabalu and also a tiny Sai group composing mainly of Chinese has emerged on Labuan Island.

In an attempt to co-ordinate all the Sai Centres in Malaysia, the first Pan-Malaysian Sathya Sai Sadhana Camp was held in Port Dickson, Negeri Sembilan from the 27th - 29th July 1979. The 2nd Pan-Malaysian Sathya Sai Sadhana Camp was also held in Port Dickson from the 7th - 10th August 1980. It has been decided that a Sathya Sai Council should be formed bearing one fundamental principle in mind, i.e. the legally incorporated Pan-Malaysian Sathya Sai Council should provide a legal umbrella for all centres in Malaysia (registered or unregistered under the Societies Act) to carry on with their Sai activities. Any 'Council' formed should not require every centre to seek separate legal registration with the Governments. As this may not be possible under the Societies Act 1966, it was thus unanimously agreed that the pro-tem committee should look into the feasibility of forming a 'Company Limited by Guarantee' under the Companies Act 1965, and to draft a Constitution acceptable to all centres in Malaysia. This is an advantage as the movement can function and develop without any legal problems, so that Sai centres in any part of the country need not go through separate legal proceedings

to get registered but will be automatically incorporated as registered under the 'Council' set up. This Pan-Malaysian Sathya Sai Council is yet to be registered.

2.5 Conclusion

The Sai Baba movement has been easily assimilated into Malaysian culture. There are a number of reasons for this. Firstly, Hinduism is a syncretistic religion and it develops by a process of assimilation and digestion rather than exclusion and destruction (Chaudhuri 1979:521). The teachings of Sai Baba does not discredit any facet of other religions. This eliminates the possibilities of cultural or personal conflicts of giving up one's chosen religion or beliefs. The people of South East Asia, have for ages practised and believed in the supernatural. Anyone and anything which exhibits supernatural powers awes them. It is often said that religion begins where reason ends. Thus any phenomena for which a scientific explanation cannot be provided is usually worshipped or at least viewed with fear and respect.

The institution of gurus is another factor which has existed among Hindus for ages. Hindus believe that a guru will come to a person who seeks enlightenment when he is ready for it. Children are taught that one has to revere one's mother first, then father, thirdly the guru and finally god. It is considered impossible to achieve enlightenment without revering the first three. Thus, Hindus seek to be accepted as students or aspirants by gurus who are well-accepted by society.

Malaysia with her people of multiple races and religion and

miracles had received the movement fairly well especially among the middle class urban people. The movement was progressing but the end of 1980 witnessed a notable wave of protest led by a former devotee and influential person in the Kuala Lumpur - Petaling Jaya region.

Progress of the movement seems to depend on the continuation of miracles and faith - healing among present and future devotees.

Basically religious status can be assigned in two ways namely by birth and by merit. The caste system as practised in India is a clear example of religious status being transferred by birth rights. Seeking religious status by merit usually arises due to the urge in an individual to elevate himself and to attain higher self-esteem. Religious actions such as the consumption of only vegetarian food, fasting on chosen days, regular prayers and pujas, service to others which can take various forms are generally the cultural measures of religious status. Personality traits such as kindness, patience, serenity, generosity are also associated with higher religious status.

3.1. Religious Status in the Sai Baba Movement

In the Sai Baba movement, religious status can be observed at different levels. Sai Baba is considered to be at a higher spiritual level than a devotee. Sai Baba followers believe that he chooses his devotees according to their merits and karma. Some devotees mention that the 'guru' will find the 'student' when the student is ready. This idea is derived from the Shaktismite. A Sai Baba devotee is thus not affected if a non-devotee criticises any aspect of the movement as they are thought of as spreading false knowledge. When the researcher informed some informants about the study she was conducting, they expressed their belief that Sai Baba had chosen her to conduct the study.

The next step toward a greater religious status is determined

CHAPTER 111

RELIGIOUS STATUS AND CLASS

Religious Status

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3.1. Religious Status in the Sai Baba Movement

In the Sai Baba movement, religious status can be observed at different levels. An aspirant is considered to be at a higher spiritual level than a non-aspirant. Sai Baba followers believe that he chooses his devotees according to their merits and karmas. Some devotees mention that the 'guru' will find the 'student' when the aspirant is ready. This idea is derived from the Bhagavadgita. A Sai Baba devotee is thus not affected if a non-devotee criticizes any aspect of the movement as they are thought of as speaking from ignorance. When the researcher informed some informants about the study she was conducting, they expressed their belief that Sai Baba had chosen her to conduct the study.

The next step toward a greater religious status is determined

by the degree of participation in the bhajans and service activities carried out by the organisation. Those who conduct bhajans frequently in their homes are believed to be staunch devotees of Sai Baba. Attendance at public bhajans are noticed by all present especially of those who are involved in the organising or those having responsibilities. These responsibilities include the playing of musical instruments, leading in the singing of bhajans or chanting of mantras and also the bringing of flowers to be offered at the altar. Many devotees also participate in various service activities. These include hospital visits (twice a week); prison visits (once a fortnight); visits to the orphanages, old folks' homes and the handicapped people. The devotee responsible for founding a new Sai Baba centre gets recognition as a hard-working member. Service activities are important yardsticks of measuring religious status. The 'Seva-Sai' Group' which carries out the movements service activities wear special clothes on functions. The manner of dressing plays a significant part as they dress in white with saffron coloured scarfs worn around their necks. In one centre run by Chinese devotees, white clothes are worn by the majority. This group, however, has deviated from the actual teachings of Sai Baba, as non-vegetarian food is served for lunch after every weekly bhajan.

Fasting and consuming vegetarian food is taken as a sign of developing spirituality or as having developed to a stage when one can abstain from anything. Sai Baba provides the model as one who only consumes vegetarian food. As he is thought to be god in human form or at times as a 'guru', his actions are interpreted as the correct path.

When bhajans are being sung individuals seek religious status by exhibiting greater involvement as by singing with expressive voices or by crying softly to themselves. Crying is usually due to either some suffering the devotee is undergoing or tears of joy for having seen 'god'.

Miracles and other experiences such as dreams are given a great deal of importance among Sai Baba devotees. A devotee who is only able to get 'darshan' seems to feel that he has done some evil which resulted in not being given an interview by Sai Baba. Those who receive lockets, pictographs, rings or vibhuti from Sai Baba narrate these incidences to others. These individuals feel that they are on a higher spiritual plane to have received these things from Sai Baba. Sometimes devotees like to feel that they have been specially noticed by Sai Baba. A female devotee once narrated an incident at a bhajan during which a small white flower fell and blew over to where she sat. She interpreted it as a personal Sai Baba blessing on her. A reasonable number of devotees also have dreams during which Sai Baba appeared and blessed them. The formation of spots of 'vibhuti' on framed pictographs of Sai Baba, Shridi Baba, Hindu and Chinese deities is a very common happening among Sai Baba devotees. These households thus hold the view that they have attained a recognized level of religiosity. Other devotees also hold the same views about these appearances of vibhuti. Those who have seen Sai Baba performing miracles personally usually become more committed to the movement and participate in its activities.

Age, which denotes maturity, is also considered religious status. Thus an elderly man who leads bhajan songs is considered as of

a higher religious status than a teenage boy who also sings. However, there are instances when age is not the decisive factor. In one case, a boy of eight who was suffering from ^{asthma} ~~diabetes~~ is said to have received a locket from which honey seeps out when squeezed and also received a translucent lime which has the form of the 'linga' within. Sai Baba is said to have appeared in the boy's home (in the area of research) when no one was in. This boy is looked upon as someone special, thus, attributing a higher religious status.

3.2 Social Class

Class in society basically refers to social status attributed to members of society by society itself. Three variables which are given importance among advanced societies are economic status, occupational status and academic status. Generally higher economic status is related to both occupational and academic status but people who enjoy a high standard living with a high income though with a relatively low level of academic status do exist. The word 'class' is used in the study solely to describe income differentiation which generally covers differences in educational backgrounds.

3.3 The Upper Class

The upper class do not consist of more than ten percent of the devotees who attend bhajans in the three main centres where the study was conducted. Though this appears to be a minority within the Sai Baba movement, in actual fact this is a fairly large number of the upper class Indians found in Malaysian society as a whole. This raises a question on the popular approach to the origins and existence of religion

that views religion as a problem-solving device (e.g. Glock, Niebuhr). This approach assumes that the upper classes rely on religion less as compared to other classes due to their economic well-being. If this theory is true there should be some other explanation for the fairly large number of upper class devotees in the Sai Baba movement.

A possible explanation is that tension due to both economic and non-economic reasons, play a vital part. Most of the upper class devotees turn to Sai Baba because of problems related to incurable diseases. The common diseases are leukaemia, cancer, paralysis and polio. Some become devotees when faced with acute tension such as the possibility of bankruptcy in business, possibility of being humiliated by society for a wrong done when having acquired a high social status or other kinds of tension in the political field. Some do not become devotees but show a certain amount of belief as they personally go to India to see Sai Baba and seek advice on personal and non-personal matters.

On the other hand, there is also a significant number of upper-class Indians who are orthodox Hindus and Brahmans who perceive Sai Baba as a 'cheap' guru. They believe that 'true gurus' do not exhibit their abilities in the supernatural. According to the scriptures there are ten incarnations of God in human form. Nine of them have taken place without a human mother. This is another reason why the learned Brahmins do not believe in Sai Baba. It would also be interesting to note here that Sai Baba belongs to a very ordinary lower middle-class Telugu family involved in farming. The upper-class devotees in this movement however comprise mainly Tamils from Ceylon, Malayalees, Northern Indians and Chinese.

3.4 The Middle Classes

The Sai Baba movement is primarily a middle-class movement. Sai Baba belongs to a lower middle-class family and most of his devotees in the research area are also from the middle-class. This includes the upper-middle class comprising doctors, lawyers, high ranking government officials, engineers, businessmen, professionals and also the lower-middle class consisting of nurses, teachers, lesser officials and petty business men. The middle-class devotees are fairly well educated, and many of them are members of various committees in the movement. The majority of the women devotees interviewed were not involved in activities other than those in the Sai Baba movement.

The recruitment network is one factor which causes this movement to be a primarily middle-class movement. The Sai Baba movement started off from upper-middle class homes in the area of study. Those were people who had witnessed the miracles of Sai Baba personally, having gone to Puttaparthi in India for mostly health reasons. Bhajans in homes as well as those held in public centre were situated in middle-class residential areas. This facilitated movement among middle-class devotees. The movement which grew mainly through association also resulted in more devotees being from the middle-class. Middle class devotees recruit their relatives, friends and employers or patients (as in the case of doctors) into the movement. Sai Baba devotees prefer to deal with their own people in business matters hoping for favours and indirectly boosting business. Recruitment also includes teenagers and young children of devotees who are encouraged to increase their personal involvement in the movement by being given responsibilities.

Middle-class devotees comprise mainly Ceylonese Tamils, Malayalees, Northern Indians and Chinese. Though there is a fairly large number of South Indian Tamils as compared to those found among upper class devotees, they still do not play any major part in the organisation. This is because the organization is mostly carried out by Ceylonese Tamils, Malayalees and Northern Indians who either have a sound knowledge of Sanskrit and Hindu scriptures or knowledge of Indian classical music. The Chinese in these group initially do not pray to Sai Baba as they believe that one should not pray to a man who is still alive. However, by experiencing miracles or knowing of people who had experienced these miracles they have changed their ideas and pray to Sai Baba as 'god' and 'master'.

In short, many middle-class people are attracted to Sai Baba while seeing him as a white-magician. With knowledge of his teachings and the scientifically unexplainable qualities of omnipotence and omnipresence which he has exhibited they become converted and call themselves his devotees. The Chinese in most case pray to him as 'God' though many hesitate to reveal this for fear of being ridiculed. The Indians either pray to him as 'God' who has come in the form of a human or as a 'guru'.

3.5 The Lower Class

The lower class Hindus in Malaysia normally live in rural areas, squatter areas, estates, low-cost housing estates and low-cost flats which are very distinct and set far apart from residential areas of upper and middle class people. The Tamils from South India comprise

the greater portion of the low-class Hindus in Malaysia. The lower class devotees also consists of Chinese and Indians who are either Christians or Buddhists.

The recruitment factor as mentioned earlier affects the movements by limiting its scope of expansion within the middle class. This factor may not be true in years to come as certain centres are taking measures to increase its coverage. One common method used is by establishing the necessary contacts in a new area through a Sai Baba devotee whose origin is from this area. The inaugural bhajan or a few successive bhajans are conducted by the established centre after which a Sai Baba devotee residing around the new area is chosen to develop the movement there. The Sai Baba devotee chosen is usually a doctor, a teacher or a Hindu temple committee member who has gained status among the community in question. Another method used is by visiting patients in third class wards in hospitals. Patients in other words are not approached as they have been found to be comparatively less receptive when approached in hospitals. Patients are told to pray to their own chosen god and given a packet of vibhuti with the picture of Sai Baba on it. When questioned on the picture, details are given on his teachings and miracles and invitations are also extended to join bhajans. Visits to prisons fortnightly are also conducted where bhajan songs are sung. Some of these prisoners who wish to reform are provided with jobs and kept involved in the movement when they are released.

Another major attempt at attracting lower class individuals is by conducting weekly bhajans in temples and in the homes of individuals belonging to the lower-class. The temples chosen are usually of

small size with no proper organisation or authority. The larger popular temples in the city do not allow bhajans with the name 'Sai Baba' to be sung in temple premises. Some temples however allow this in the temple halls which are separate sections where there is no altar. Holding Sai Baba bhajans in temples gives it credibility among lower class Hindus. Bhajans held in homes of low class devotees encourages the attendance of those living in this area as they are usually held back by inhabitants in attending those held in middle-class or upper-class areas. Any help needed to manage these bhajans are provided by the centre which initiate these new centres. Framed pictographs of Sai Baba and other deities which have formations of 'vibhuti' are frequently used in weekly bhajans. This is easily taken as proof that Sai Baba has supernatural powers. Projectors are also used in screening pictures of Sai Baba performing miracles during festivals. To the lower-class devotees only god-men can perform miracles and miracles are proof enough to start praying to Sai Baba. His teachings are also being accepted as they do not contradict with popular Hinduism. The only factor slowing down the process of becoming a devotee is doubt on the validity of the miracles performed by Sai Baba.

Other reasons such as lack of leisure time, distance problems in travelling to a centre, inferior complexes in dressing and language barriers also play a part. Most of the bhajans are held in English as the majority are English speaking devotees. Sanskrit which is a foreign and alien language is also used in songs and reciting mantras. Language barriers play a major part in alienating the lower classes from the upper classes and to overcome this, bhajans are conducted in Chinese where

devotees are largely from this group and in Tamil where the devotees are mainly Tamils. A great many lower class people who are not familiar with the movement consider Sai Baba as a rich man's God due to the fact that only well-to-do people attend bhajans at public centres.

of reality at a certain level of reference by a corresponding reality at another. The life itself does not explain what it stands for and how there are genuine possibilities, therefore of differing interpretations of the text. Mrs. Ghandi (Waggoner 1956: 21) says - "This personal intellectual character in so far as they are looked upon as a mystical and sensible expression of the doctrine and a social character which considered as practices requiring the participation of all members of the religious community in a manner that can be more or less binding." In the Sai Baba movement rituals are not understood by most of the followers as being symbolic. Their thought is not given to the meaning they carry or the processes they represent. "The social character of this movement is more pronounced than its intellectual character is, the understanding of the rituals.

4.1 Bhajans and Bhajans

Bhajans or Bhajans are a form of congregational devotional worship which is becoming popular and which seems to be developing into a common Hindu practice. These Bhajans like the cult of temple and domestic worship. The Bhakti form Bhakti Bhakti cult who are Hindu devotees, the Bhakti group who are Hindu devotees and many other groups with a particular deity or a particular 'guru' or 'guru' in similar ways. Bhakti devotion is devotion to divine power and

CHAPTER IV

RITUALS AND INTERPRETATIONS

The description which answers the nature of ritual best is the one which regards it as symbolic action. A symbol is a representation of reality at a certain level of reference by a corresponding reality at another. The rite itself does not explain what it stands for and how. There are genuine possibilities, therefore of differing interpretations of the term. Rene Guenon (Nagendra 1964: 21) says -- 'Rites possess an intellectual character in so far as they are looked upon as a symbolic and sensible expression of the doctrine and a social character when considered as practices requiring the participation of all members of the religious community in a manner that can be more or less binding.' In the Sai Baba movement rituals are not understood by most of the followers as being symbolic. Much thought is not given^{to} the meaning they carry or the processes they represent. The social character of this movement is more pronounced than its intellectual character i.e. the understanding of the rituals.

4.1 Sai Baba Bhajans

Bhajanas or Bhajans are a form of congregational devotional worship which is becoming popular and which seems to be developing into a common Hindu practice. These bhajans link the cults of temple and domestic worship. The Hari Rama Hari Krishna cult who are Krishna devotees, the Shivananda group who are Siva devotees and many other groups with a particular deity or a particular 'guru' also carry out bhajans in similar ways. Bhajans emphasize recitation of divine names and

worship of personal deities with the invoking of a guru's or gurus names in some or most of the bhajan songs. There are four distinctive types of Sai Baba bhajans. They are the weekly, monthly, annual and occasional bhajans.

The weekly bhajan is held at a public place and is usually on Thursday though at some sub-centres, groups meet on Tuesdays, Wednesdays Saturdays and Sundays. A few devotees declared that it was on a Thursday that Sai Baba gave his first bhajan and so this has been chosen as the special day for Sai bhajans. Some others who generally belonged to the highly educated group comprising professionals felt that Thursday was chosen so that devotees from other religions such as Christians, Muslims and Hindus too can attend them as these groups had their own special day for prayers. Weekly bhajans are held in private homes too but care is taken to ensure that these do not clash with the public bhajans held on Thursdays.

Monthly bhajans are held by the three main centres in the research area. They are held on the last Sunday of each month. In certain areas devotees also conduct monthly bhajans in their homes. These houses are usually of some distance from the main bhajan centres. Thus the audience comprises devotees and non-devotees of the neighbouring area. Non-devotees are coaxed by relatives and friends to attend these bhajans. These people generally hold the view that all religious activities aim to do good.

Bhajans which are held annually are those which fall on festival days such as the Tamil New Year, Easter, Christmas, the birthday of Kuan Yin and Sai Baba. Many minor festivals of the Hindu calendar are

also celebrated by conducting bhajans. The fourth type of bhajan conducted occasionally are those such as on the birthday of a devotee or a child; for a deceased devotee; to celebrate the success of a child in her examinations or thanking Sai Baba for the curing of certain ailments. Occasionally, these bhajan groups are invited to sing at some Hindu or Sikh temples but by having to omit the name of Sai Baba from the songs. The main deity of the temple is the focus for bhajans held though some lesser deities are also mentioned. Temple authorities and organisation such as the 'Malaysian Hindu Sangam' do not agree unanimously to Sai Baba as a reincarnation of God. (e.g. Krishna and Rama are recognised as reincarnations of God).

We shall next look into the procedure followed in bhajans. The rituals observed at home bhajans are very much the same as those in public bhajans. Guidelines for bhajan activity and bhajan schedule has been given by Sai Baba in a book - 'Guidelines for Activities of Sri Satya Sai Seva Organisations' which was published in 1978 by the World Council Office of the Sri Satya Sai Seva Organisations based in Bombay India. These guidelines are followed in varying degrees by the main bhajan centres, the sub-centres and those individuals who have bhajans in their homes.

4.2 Bhajan Procedure

The bhajan can be briefly subdivided into three major portions, the first being the preparation of the individual for the bhajan songs and prayers. The second is the bhajan proper where about twelve to fourteen songs are sung and the third is the 'pooja' (religious offering)

to Sai Baba and other deities.

Devotees remove their shoes or slippers before entering the room where the bhajan is to be held. This is as a mark of respect which also is probably aimed to keep the area clean for sitting and praying purposes. Long mats are normally placed on the ground as devotees are required to sit on the floor in Indian style. Chairs are provided at the sides and the last row for those unable to sit on the ground due to old age or physical ailments. The women and men are always seated separately and a path is left in the middle. The women sit on the left side whilst the men on the right. The bhajan leaders by which is meant those who are leading the songs will sit nearest the altar. With them will be the musicians who play the cymbals, chipras (a kind of castanet), a drum and a harmonium.

The altar is the centre of concentration whereby all the devotees sit facing it. The normal arrangement at the altar is a picture of Sai Baba (full-length), another picture of Sai Baba which gives a closer view of his face and a picture of his feet or 'pathan' which is placed at the lowest level that is on the ground. A picture of Shridi Sai Baba seated with animals around him is also popular. In addition a picture of Vinayagar is often placed on the left with the other Hindu deity - Marugan on the right. Images or pictures of other deities such as Saraswathi - the goddess of education; Lakshmi - the goddess of wealth; Kuan Yin - the goddess of mercy; Siva - the destroyer; Vishnu - the preserver; Buddha; Zoroaster; Christ; Krishna; Rama and Hamman are also placed at the altar. The Sarva-Dharma Emblem is always found at any bhajan. This emblem shows the unity in the major five religions in

the world. The emblem (fig. 1) has five big petals and five small petals. On the large petals, symbols representing the different religions are seen ie. the Sanskrit word for 'Aum' which stands for Hinduism; the wheel for Buddhism; the torch for Xoroastrianism; the crescent with the star for Islam and the cross for Christianity. The five small petals have the words Satya, Dharma, Shanthi, Prema and Ahimsa on them which stand for Truth, Righteousness, Peace, Love and Non-violence, respectively. In the centre is the oil lamp or 'kuttuvilaka' which stands for enlightenment. This emblem is significant as it means that whatever the religion embraced, truth, righteousness, peace, love and non-violence will give enlightenment to the seeker who follows these golden rules.

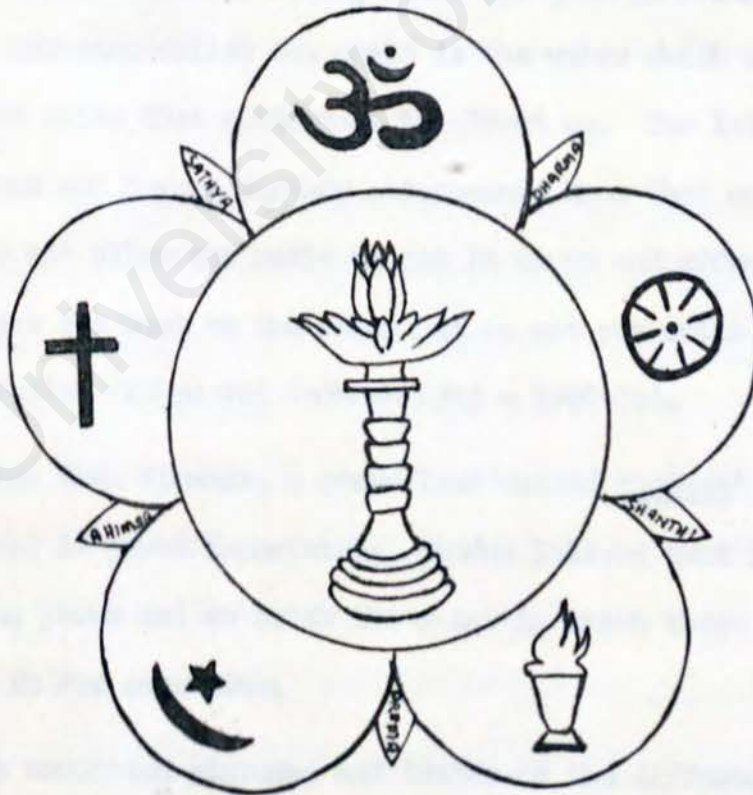


Figure 1

The images on the altar are made of various materials that is metal, stone, clay or marble. These images and pictures are decorated with flowers such as the hibiscus, the 'anaga' which is a white flower, 'kanagampuram' which is orange in colour, roses, chrysanthemums, bougainville and the lotus. The flowers used are normally white, yellow, orange, red or purple in colour. These colours are considered as auspicious. The white stands for purity. The lotus flower is very important as it represents the flower of the heart. Offering the lotus symbolises the offering of the heart as a flower to God. "The lotus is the symbol of how man should strive, for the lotus is unattached to the slush where it is born and the water in which it is bred; the merits and demerits earned in past births is the slush, where the jiva is born. Maya or the enticing illusion called the world is the water which sustains; but one should not allow that enticement to affect us. The lotus teaches man to be above and beyond earthly attachments know that we may be in it, but we should not allow the world to get in to us and affect our sense of values - put the boat on the water but do not put water in the boat." (2nd Pan Malaysian Sathya Sai Sadhana Camp - 1980:20).

Other than flowers, a green leaf called 'tulasi' or 'tulsi' (*ocimum sanctum*) is given importance. Hindus believe that these leaves have a healing power and so drink the water in which these leaves have been immersed in for some time.

The decorated pictures and images of the different deities are normally placed on a wooden structure with three tiers covered with material of an auspicious colour intertwined with gold and silver threads. Coloured bulbs are also used for decorations. For annual functions and

bhajans whereby celebrations are on a grand scale the decorations are very elaborate but always using the same materials but with life size pictures of Sai Baba. A red carpet leading to the altar is used and on the right side of the altar - a chair covered with red or purple material embroidered with silver and golden threads is placed. Flowers are scattered on the seat and a few arranged on the armholds of the chair. A few are scattered on the carpet leading to the altar. This addition to the altar is also done in the monthly home bhajans. When a bhajan ends, devotees normally look for signs which show that Sai Baba had been present personally and blessed them. These signs are usually in the form of crushed or smothered flowers on the chair or the carpet and also creases on the material used to cover the chairs. Flowers from the altar are taken home by devotees who treasure them at their altars till they wither and die.

The other articles of importance which are placed at the altar, include silverware containers holding the holy ash or 'vibhuti', holy water, 'amrittha' (nectar), milk, the red powder - 'kankuman' (vermillion). Silver plates with the 'prasad' for the day and the flowers for offerings are also placed there. 'Prasad' is the special food of the day, already offered to the deity in the pooja which is distributed to all as a 'favour'. The sharing of the prasada represents a symbolic communion just as group singing in a bhajan. The popular food offered to the guru, avatar or any deity is sweet which include 'pongal sathan' (sweetened rice); 'kalkanda' (sugar pieces), 'panchamirthan' (a mixture of five sweet fruits with honey) or sweet delicacies such as ladoo. Sweets too are given. Sai Baba in his guidelines for bhajans activities, says that there should not

be distribution of Prasad at public bhajan centres except the holy ash or vibhuti. This need not be kept to on festival days. The researcher had not attended a single bhajan where only vibhuti is given as prasad. As a matter of fact, at some monthly bhajans in a few homes dinner is provided which includes Chinese noodles, dessert or Indian food. But they are strictly vegetarian food.

Two brass lamps about two feet high which are known as 'kuttuvilaka' to the Tamils hold prominent places on both sides of the altar placed about a yard away from the pictures. These are lit with coconut oil and rolled lengths of white cotton material used as wicks. One or two small brass lamps with holders and three or five spouts for the camphor to be burnt is also found. These lamps are used for the final ritual in the 'puja' where camphor is lighted and the lamps waved in front of the pictures and images. Camphor is burnt to denote that the illusion or ego is burnt with the fire of true knowledge and thus leave no residue so that the devotees can merge with God. (2nd. Pan Malaysian Sathya Sai Sadhana Camp. 1980: 13). Incense is also used as in the Hindu rituals. A few devotees felt that incense was used in rituals so as to give a fragrant smell thus eliminating unpleasant smells around. This provides the proper atmosphere for concentration and devotion. One devotee felt that the fragrant smell which diffuses everywhere symbolises that god is omnipresent. Most of the devotees, however, did not know if there was any particular reason for the use of incense. It was accepted as part of any religious ritual.

At the public bhajan centres, bhajans are carried on with the lights on as many devotees sing songs from either bhajan books or song

sheets which are provided at each bhajan. At one centre, a standard book is used where the songs are numbered. The numbers of the songs to be sung for that particular bhajan were put up in sequence on a board at the far end of the hall where everyone could see. Before each song, the number was also read out aloud. At one sub-centre where weekly bhajans were conducted in a home, neither song sheets or books were used. The bhajans were conducted in the dark with candlelights.

4.3 Bajan Procedure and Interpretations of Sai Baba Rituals With Reference to Hinduism.

The Sai Baba movement is basically a Hindu movement as its teachings and practices are largely based on the Hindu scriptures :

(1) As mentioned earlier, these bhajans can be subdivided into three. The first stage is a preparation so that the right atmosphere is created for further activities. The two 'kuttuvilakas' are lit usually by a woman and a middle-aged man rings a bell. He then says in a loud and clear tone the word - 'MOUNAM' which in the Tamil language means silence. He then waits until the restlessness in the crowd dies down. Next, he says 'THILANAM' which means concentration or meditation. Absolute silence is observed here. After a lapse of about half minute the word 'PRANAVAM' is heard. Then the word 'AUM' is chanted thrice, each time the sound being prolonged as long as possible, ^{thus} also acting as a breath exercise. Other than converts who are very new to the movement, the devotees know what these words meant. However, observations during bhajans suggest that the second word which calls for concentration or meditation is seldom effective. A few long-standing devotees close

their eyes to concentrate or meditate and the rest seem to follow what the others do. If some of the audience do not close their eyes, others follow suit. In some centres, the majority appears to concentrate or meditate by closing their eyes, whilst at other centres the majority does not do this. From casual conversations, the researcher gathers that the majority concentrates either on an image of Sai Baba in their mind or on the picture at the altar. Some Christians said that at times they concentrate on the image of Christ. The devotees are encouraged to concentrate on their personal deity or god from their chosen belief. Some admitted that they think of their problems and ask for help and not concentrate or meditate at this time. Meditation according to Hindu philosophers is to stabilise the mind whereby an advanced person in this field is able to leave the physical or material world and merge with the spiritual world. This also means that devotees should leave their troubles behind and forget them through devotion to god. During PRANAVAM or the chanting of the word 'AUM', the majority chants it as they have been told that it is a holy word. The educated members add that it is considered holy as it is the basic sound for all sounds and that it is the universal sound. A few other educated devotees especially professionals gave scientific explanations whereby the pronouncing of the word 'AUM' produces certain vibrations which have positive effects on the individual. This is on the assumption that everything in the universe is basically different due to different frequency of vibrations. The 'vibration principle' also assumes that the vibrations can be improved or worsened. Some devotees also interpret it as breath exercise which is vital to the human physical self-which they relate to yoga. According

to Hinduism, the sound - SUM is a mantra or thought form. It is a symbol of divinity and is recognised as an instrument of realization. In Sanskrit it means 'I bow' or 'agree' or 'I accept'. The purpose of repeating this sound is to attain liberation from bondage and for attaining supreme reality. None of the devotees were able to give the meaning of this word. Why is it chanted thrice? Hindus generally consider the number three as a complete number. Thus Hindu rituals normally begin and end with mantras which are chanted thrice. In Sai Baba bhajans the words 'OM SHANTI, SHANTI, SHANTI' are repeated to signify that a particular phase of the ritual is over. The word 'SHANTI' means peace. The first phase that is MOUNAN, THIANAN and PRANAVAN sets the stage for the next ritual that is the recitation of the 'NAIDHAN VALIS'.

The NAIDHAN VALIS are recited in unison by the audience, led by an elderly man who is familiar with Sanskrit words. These 108 salutations are started off with 'OM SRI BHAGAVAN SATHYA SAI BAABAAYA NAMAH' and ends with 'OM SRI SRI SRI BHAGAVAN SATHYA SAI BAABAAYA NAMAH' after which OM SHANTI SHANTI SHANTI is chanted. Each salutation contains the words 'OM', 'SRI' and 'NAMAH'. 'OM' is an invocatory word and represents the highest reality or absolute which the Hindus call Brahma. 'SRI' stands for auspiciousness and the last word 'NAMAH' means salutation or I worship. These 108 salutations embody Sai Baba's teaching as well as the properties attributed to God. For instance - 'OM SRI SAI SARANAGATHA THIRANAYANA NAMAH' means salutation to the protector of those who surrender to him. This salutation calls for subservience and obedience to the teachings. Some salutations carry references to

morality too. The basic teachings such as love, truth, righteousness, peace and non-violence are mentioned. Sai Baba is referred to as Siva, Shakti, Mother-Dewarika, Brahma, Vishnu and Maheswara in a few salutations. Other names such as Christ, Buddha or Zoroaster does not appear here. The NAIMANVALIS again induce an atmosphere of seriousness and sacredness especially when said in Sanskrit with specific rhythms and pitches. Sanskrit is a language unknown to many but the organization has printed books with the NAIMANVALIS, bhajan songs and mantras together with translations in English. The recitation of these 108 salutations have been omitted in the bhajan schedule of the sub-centre which holds weekly bhajans in a home. This however, has been replaced by a song - 'HARI OM HARI OM' which calls upon the names of the various gods from the different religions such as Christ, Buddha, Allah, Zoroaster, Kuan Yin and other deities.

As the NAIMANVALIS are chanted, one or two devotees take their places near the altar and scatter or place flowers on the framed pictures and images of Baba and the other deities as the word 'Namah' is uttered. These two devotees would usually be the people who are conducting that 'pooja' or 'puja' (i.e. paid for the expenses) for a particular reason such as asking for help to heal a sick devotee or to thank Sai Baba for some aid already granted. There are occasions too where no one comes forward to conduct a pooja whereby ardent or committed devotees offer to conduct it. Most of the devotees interpret the NAIMANVALIS as a mode of greeting or calling for him and as a sign of respect. A few who believe in the vibration principle feel that recited in the proper manner - they bring about positive effects on

the individual. These vibrations are more effective on an individual in a group than on an individual who recites it alone. These devotees give importance to the Sanskrit language and do not favour a change - that is using other languages. A psychologist would agree that the contents of the NAIMAHVALLIS increases awareness of an individual's weaknesses and the gap between the ideal self which he seeks and the true self which he sees in himself. Continued reference to spiritual perfection in the NAIMAHVALLIS leads to this. To a certain extent the NAIMAHVALLIS make an individual feel more conscious. He becomes humble, vulnerable and receptive. This however, only applies to the educated and those who recite them after understanding them. A great number recite them as a matter of procedure and do not understand the contents.

A question arises as to why specifically 108 salutations are recited. There is also a book published by the organisation which consists 1008 bhajans. The reason given by some devotees who seem to have a better religious status and religious knowledge than others was that these numbers add up to 9 i.e. $1+0+8 = 9$ or $1+0+0+8 = 9$. The number nine is considered sacred, as in Hindu astrology there are nine major planets. Hindus believe that these nine planets affect the lives and destinies of humans.

Why are flowers scattered around the pictures and deities as the NAIMAHVALIS are chanted. Alan Danielson (1964:375) says that flowers in Hindu rituals stand for the perception of consciousness pervading the element ether. The scattering of flowers is actually an offering made to god. A great deal of emphasis is placed on the purity of the flowers. Flowers must be freshly plucked and never picked from

the ground. As stated earlier, flowers are normally chosen for their auspicious colours. Hibiscus are used frequently as they are easily obtainable in Malaysia. Most of the devotees do not view the scattering or placing of flowers around the pictures and images at the altar as an offering. It is just part of the procedure. A few who did consider it as an offering considered flowers as one of the few pure materials available which could be offered to God. Flowers symbolise beauty and purity. Some ladies who are very devoted bring flowers from their homes. Thus, a generalization among the devotees is that ladies who bring flowers often are staunch believers. This is, however, questionable as religious commitments seem to play a part here. The researcher noticed that devotees who are deeply involved in the movement, especially those holding positions, were the ones who frequently brought flowers. They are also highly concerned with religious status.

(ii) The second stage in a bhajan is the singing of the bhajan songs. In the public bhajan centres, song sheets are provided or a song book is used. Leaders of bhajan songs are those who know the songs best or have a reputation for devotion. At certain public centres bhajan leaders attend classes held by a devotee who is a classical musician or one who is noted to have a good voice with singing talents. A large number of musicians and singers become more involved than others in organising the classes. At these public bhajan centres the songs and their respective leaders are pre-planned and fixed so as to smoothen and to avoid gaps of silence and noise from the audience. Here, the disadvantage is that devotees who wish to sing are unable to

sing at any time but with prior notice and consent from certain parties concerned. At the sub-centres and the home bhajans in a few places, impromptu singers are encouraged but trained or experienced bhajan leaders are always at hand should a situation arise where there is no one to lead. The bhajans are sung simultaneously without any breaks so as to increase concentration and to avoid unnecessary disturbances. According to Sai Baba the duration of a bhajan should not exceed one hour that is excluding 'ARATHI'. Exceptions are allowed on special occasions but even then the bhajan should not go beyond one and half hours. He also says that bhajans should start and end at scheduled times. In practice only the three main centres of the movement follow this regulation strictly. The other sub-centres and home bhajans often go on for more than one and a half hours thus not ending at the scheduled time.

The first bhajan song is normally dedicated to the Hindu elephant-headed deity - Ganesha who is known as the obstacle remover in Hindu tradition. The second bhajan song is then dedicated to Sai Baba. These are then followed by bhajans to various other deities and gods. At the sub-centre which holds weekly bhajans in a home, the first song is the NAHMANVALI - 'DEVA SRI DEVA' as mentioned earlier. The second song is then sung for the deity Ganesha. Bhajan songs are mostly in Sanskrit but at present there are certain groups which sing them in local languages such as Tamil, English, Mandarin, Hokkien and Cantonese. Bhajans in Hindi too are sung at times. The standard pattern is for the leader of that particular song to recite or sing a phrase and for the audience to respond and participate by

repeating the line. They are sung at two speeds that is the first one slow and the second at a fast speed. Sai Baba does not encourage songs which are too long and he says that each line must be repeated twice and no more. These short bhajan songs are sung glorifying the different forms or attributes of God. Devotees usually sway with the rhythm, clap their hands, bring their palms down on to the thigh as Indian musicians do and shake their head. Bhajans are more elevating due to the use of cymbals, drum, harmonium and chiples as well as the effect of the loudspeakers.

The songs sung are religious in content as the name of Sai Baba, names of the various Hindu deities names of Chinese deities and gods from other religions are repeated as often as possible. Certain words such as 'satya' and 'prema' are also emphasized. The first two songs as mentioned earlier are for the Hindu deity - Ganasha and the guru or avatar - Sai Baba, respectively. The songs following these can be in praise of any deity which include Siva, Naraya, Krishna, Gopala, Madhava, Saraswathi, Lakshmi, Ambal, Rama, Govinda or Ayyappa, Buddha, Kuan Yin (the goddess of mercy), Chee Tien Da Shang (The Monkey God), Kuan Ti (the deity for righteousness) Christ, Guru Nanak and sometimes 'Allah' are also often used signifying the Sarvadharm concept of the organisation.

Reasons given by devotees as to why these songs are sung vary. Some feel that by this they can express their love and devotion and in the process forget the self and the ego which is happening enlightenment. Concentration is on the 'guru' 'avatar' or god which

they believe in and this activity accompanied by music is said to relax the mind - they forget their problems and worldly matters. The believers of the vibration principle explain the songs in these terms. A few devotees who are involved in the organization feel that these songs and music is a way of attracting devotees. Youngsters are also attracted by these. One person compared it with the way a child is given medicine coated with sugar or honey. The very old do not participate in the singing but they too show their appreciation by clapping their hands. With the end of the bhajan singing which is marked by the chanting of OM SHANTI SHANTI SHANTI, five minutes of silence for meditation is observed. This is spontaneous and no announcements are made. The researcher feels that very few devotees really meditated as observations and questions regarding this matter in most cases brought negative results. Very few knew exactly what one has to do to meditate. This silence would seem more appropriate as a preparation for the chanting of mantras which come next.

(iii) The 'PUJA' or religious offering is considered the most important part. Following meditation for five minutes, mantras are chanted in unison. The mantras are the same wherever the centre is and they are similar to those used by other Hindu cults such as the Shiva family. The four major mantras which are always chanted are: (1) Santhi Mantra (2) The Gayatri Mantra (3) Maha Mrithyunjay Mantra and (4) Universal Prayer.

Mantras are identical to deities and represent nature of deities at times. They are the key to all rituals especially in religion and in most forms of magic. Seed-mantras are monosyllabic whilst some mantras are in the form of sentences. Their structure is ruled by the symbolism of numbers, hence the main Siva mantra, has five syllables, the main Vishnu mantra eight and the Solar mantra - twelve. The mantras chanted are always in Sanskrit which hampers understanding. Thus translations in English have been provided in the book which contains 1008 bhajans and mantras. The non-English speaking members and the uneducated have a problem of understanding. At one sub-centre where a few changes have been brought about, recitation of the English translation after the chanting in Sanskrit is observed. Each mantra is ended with the words. OM SHANTI SHANTI SHANTI.

The first mantra is the Santhi Mantra in which the individual calls to be lead from the unreal to the real, darkness to light and from death to immortality. These are all verbal symbolisms referring to the physical world as non-existent. The words unreal, darkness and death stand for ignorance whilst the words real, light and immortality represent knowledge.

According to orthodox Hindus, the Gayatri Mantra is the most important and should be meditated on by twice-born (Brahmin) thrice a day. It should not be uttered by common^{men} nor by men of low birth. This mantra has twelve syllables, hence it is a solar mantra. An English translation would appear as - 'We meditate on that Supreme effulgence of the Radiant One, the Indwelling Omniscient Controller of all action

May he stimulate our intellect to attain 'Truth'. The message in this mantra is very similar to the Santhi Mantra as the word truth refers to knowledge. When an individual realises that the physical self is not important as it is non-existent or temporary -- anger, jealousy, greed and other negative aspects of morality will be reduced.

The third mantra which is the Mrithyunjaya- Mantra calls for the Supreme omnipresent, omnipotent and omniscient Lord Siva to guide and liberate the devotees from the cycle of life and death and to grant immortality.

The Universal Prayer is very popular and is different from the earlier three mantras. It says - 'May the Lord Bless the whole-world with eternal peace and goodwill.' This is the only mantra among the four which talks of the present world. It gives the individual an inner satisfaction and joy as he is not being selfish and praying for himself but others.

Devotees give different attributes to the chanting of mantras. They include -- to attain liberation; to worship the manifest forms of divinity, to communicate with deities, to ward off evil influences, to influence thoughts and actions of others and the purification of the human body.

The next ritual which is the most important is the 'ARATI'. This ritual is found in all forms of Hindu worship which is the waving of a camphor light. The devotees who had been seated all this while stand up as soon as the last mantra is brought to an end by chanting OM SHANTI SHANTI SHANTI. They sing in unison a song which is special

for 'ARATHI' the title of which is 'OM JAI JAGADESHA NAREH, HARE H.' Meanwhile two or three people who are conducting the 'pooja' will be waving camphor lamps around the pictures and images at the altar. It is taken for granted that waving these camphor lights should be done by holding the lamp with the right hand and at the same time having the left hand on the elbow or wrist of the right hand. This is accepted as a mark of respect. The lamp is always moved in a clockwise direction but no one knows why. The last part of the 'ARATHI' song contain the words 'Narayanan, Narayanan'. At this juncture the 'ARATHI' - or holy flame is waved at the audience by facing them.

This symbolizes that not only those represented by pictures and images at the altar are sacred but the people too are sacred as ever one is god. Each person has a soul - a spark of divinity which submerge into the Supreme Reality. The devotees pray in the Hindu and Buddhist style that is by bringing the palms together about the level of the heart. In Hinduism this means the emerging of all the energy and life force in an individual to humble oneself before god. The Sai Baba devotees were mostly unable to give any reasons or purposes for this form of praying. At the sub-centre where weekly bhajans are held - another song 'Deva Sri Deva' in Tamil and composed by the devotee living here is sung before the actual 'ARATHI' song. This song include names of all the different forms from different faiths.

When the 'ARATHI' ends - the 'Vibhoothi Manthram' is chanted by all in a low tone and repeated endlessly till the holy ash or 'vibhu' milk and 'prasad' has been received by all. The 'ARATHI' is also baken around and the devotees bring their palms together once or thrice near

the flame and then touch their faces and finally pray to it. Many interpretations are given here as to why this is done. A large number say that they do this to get the blessings of Sai Baba. Those who believe in the vibration principles believe that all the articles at the altar and especially so the 'ARATHI' is charged with extra positive vibrations which can be transmitted to the individual devotee when he attempts to almost touch it. In other words there is a transfer of power. A few say that fire is the purest element on earth and so they touch or almost touch the flames to symbolise the throwing of their sins into the fire to be destroyed. Yet a few others say that the fire produces light which symbolises enlightenment. The researcher did not find any devotee who had no interpretation of this.

The 'holy ash' or 'vibhuti' is grey ash which symbolises that everything in this world will one day turn to ash. This is the "truth" which once an individual realises and keeps it always in mind will help him from vices as this world is only temporary or an illusion.

The milk seem to replace 'holy water' given in Hindu rituals in temples. This 'holy water' is the water used to wash the idols in temples. Milk which is a liquid is a symbol of pervasiveness as water pervades all life. The flame or 'ARATHI'; holy ash or 'VIBHUTI' and milk which is white and fresh from a cow are all symbols of purity - polluted by none. 'PRASAD' which is the remains of the food offered at the 'puja' is distributed. All the four different things distributed are believed to be blessed by Sai Baba himself.

A gentleman, usually a man noted for religious status calls

the devotees to be seated. An abstract about Sai Baba, his teachings or miracles experienced personally would be narrated. The gentleman need not be the same for all the bhajans conducted in a particular centre. This is referred to as 'MESSAGE FROM BABA' . At some centres this is narrated just before ARATHI. At the public bhajans announcements are made regarding the availability of conducting a 'puja' the following weeks or any special announcements such as the birth of a child to a well known devotee; deaths; functions whereby home bhajans are being held etc.

The bhajan is brought to an end with the normal Sai greeting for both coming together or departure of people i.e. SAI RAM with the bringing together of the palms as in praying. This is to show one's respect for the divinity in the other.

4.4 CONCLUSION

The researcher has discussed only rituals which she has been able to observe personally. The rituals practised in homes for their deity worship is very simple. A few pictures of Sai Baba and the deity they believe in or picture of Christ and Shirdi Baba are normally found. A number of those who had been devotees for some time do say that they meditate or say 'japas' that is using a chain of beads (rosary) to repeat a certain mantra or the name of a personal deity. A few homes though rare, have one room allotted for prayers, meditation and japan - where the altar consists of a great number of pictures, images or idols of gurus, avatars, and deities of a few religions. Describing all aspects of rituals observed in everyday life and giving details

of the meanings and interpretation of each deity and the articles found on or with him is beyond the scope of this study.

The bhajans play an important role from the sociological point of view on class structure and religious status. modes of deprivation existing prior to conversion. Pictitious names have been used.

3.1 Brief Histories of Six Devotees

(1) Senthi, 19 (17 years at conversion) is the second in a family of six children. She had a schooling in her hometown in a rural area and is at present working as a production operator in a firm in the research area. Her father, a clerk, is more pious than her mother and was also a temple committee member. Everyone in her family attended weekly bhavens classes held in this temple and prayed there on Fridays. Senthi did not get through her exams at the age of 17 after which she chose to work due to her family's unstable financial situation. Three of her younger sisters were still schooling and her only brother was studying away from home i.e., staying with his eldest sister and her husband came to reduce the financial burden on his parents. She was a dropout from school when Senthi first came to know about Sai Baba through an inaugural bhajan held at the same temple, led by a Sai Baba devotee who was a dental doctor. The family attended this bhajan as her father was approached for help in the organising of the bhajan at the temple. The family became devotees later when Senthi's only brother (mentioned above) who was 18 years old fell sick and was found to be in a serious condition. The dental doctor suggested that framed pictures

CHAPTER V

CASE STUDIES OF SIX DEVOTEES

This chapter briefly attempts to analyse the background of six Sai Baba devotees. The focuss is on the concept of deprivation i.e. modes of deprivation existing prior to conversion. Fictitious names have been used.

5.1 Brief Histories of Six Devotees

(i) Santhi, 19 (17 years at conversion) is the second in a family of six children. She had a schooling in her hometown in a rural area and is at present working as a production operator in a firm in the research area. Her father, a clerk was more pious than her mother and was also a temple committee member. Everyone in her family attended weekly thevaram classes held in this temple and prayed there on Fridays. Santhi did not get through her exams at the age of 17 after which she chose to work due to her family's unstable financial situation. Three of her younger sisters were still schooling and her only brother was studying away from home i.e. staying with his eldest sister and her husband so as to reduce the financial burden on his parents. She was a dropout from school when Santhi first came to know about Sai Baba through an inaugural bhajan held at the same temple, led by a Sai Baba devotee who was a dental doctor. The family attended this bhajan as her father was approached for help in the organising of the bhajan at the temple. The family became devotees later when Santhi's only brother (mentioned above) who was 13 years old fell sick and was found to be in a serious condition. The dental doctor suggested that framed picture

of Sai Baba be placed near the patient and vibhuti was given to be consumed by the patient. Santhi's brother had a dream after this in which Sai Baba blessed him following which his health improved. It was only after this incident that everyone in Santhi's family became Sai Baba devotees. Prior to this however, there was an uncle who used to bring books and magazines with articles on Sai Baba. He was an ardent devotee. At present, Santhi resides with this uncle's family and is not involved in any other organisations. She is however, a very active member in one centre devotees a great deal of her time travelling and singing bhajans.

(ii) Mrs. Rathika, 33 (31 at conversion) is from a family of nine children and daughter of a health inspector. Both her parents were Sai Baba devotees but she does not remember how they became devotees. With the exception of one brother who is a psychologist residing in Australia, the rest are all Sai Baba devotees too. Mrs. Rathika however only became a devotee recently. Prior to her conversion she was pro-Christianity and a regular church attender though from a Hindu family. Mrs. Rathika married at the age of 19 to an engineer. She worked for ten years as a nurse and resigned in 1977 due to pressure from her husband and in-laws. At about the same time, Mrs. Rathika's sister had told her of a miracle she had experienced. Mrs. Rathika's sister who was a staunch Christian had refused to accept some vibhuti (from India) when offered by a devotee. When she finally took it after some persuasion she found a cross, a miniature pictograph of Christ and a pendant enclosing a pictograph of Christ in the vibhuti packet. She

became a Sai Baba devotee after this. Mrs. Rathika's own conversion came about when her sister took her along to a public bhajan on Sai Baba's birthday celebration i.e. Nov. 23, 1978. She began crying for no reason when all of a sudden a flower fell from his portrait at the altar. She had felt Sai Baba's presence and had become a devotee since then. Mrs. Rathika interpretes almost every happening from a religious viewpoint. She has had many dreams and experienced a few miracles like the quivering of garlands at the altar in her home. Both Mrs. Rathika and her husband also attended transcendental meditation classes, paying a high fee but she feels that it has done both of them good. Mrs. Rathika is a housewife at present and is not involved in any other organization.

(iii) Mrs. Catherine Lam 41 (38 at conversion) is the third in a family of six. She stopped her studies at the age of fifteen. Though born in a Taoist cum Buddhist family she was attracted to Christianity. Though she has faith in Chinese deities she does not go to Chinese temples now. When she was with her parents she frequented temples. Catherine who lives in a very large double-storey bungalow house which is luxuriously furnished spends every afternoon gambling with her friends in a middle-class residential. She goes to movies weekly too. Her husband is a businessman involved in the stockmarket and also acts as a broker. Catherine first heard about Sai Baba through her mother who had in turn heard about his miracles from a Chinese Sai Baba devotee. Catherine considered Sai Baba as a magician until her husband showed interest in Sai Baba. Her husband had gone through periods of atheism and moments of theism. His friends had advised him to pay to Sai Baba.

as he was suffering from a pain in his left leg (for 2 yrs.) which made sitting painful. Doctors had been unable to help. Reading some books on Sai Baba and his teaching, he began to practice meditation daily in the mornings lasting for about half an hour. The pain left and Catherine's husband is now able to sit on the floor during bhajans. Catherine's knowledge on Sai Baba is all through her husband and friends as she does not read much. Her husband also had dreams in which Sai Baba blessed him. Catherine believes that Sai Baba is God (one of the many in heaven) as he brought a dead man to life in India. Catherine believes in the existence of ghosts, spirits and bad-luck. She also believes that kavadis carried during Thaipusam is a miracle. Catherine who is a housewife with two children is not involved in other organisations.

(iv) Mr. Chan 40, (36 at conversion) is from a family of nine children. His father was a businessman who never prayed whilst his mother he says 'believes in all'. As children, he and his brother and sisters had prayed at the altar daily where Kuan Yin held the central place. They prayed to the Chinese deities as well as Buddha. Vegetarian fasts were also observed on the first and fifteenth of every Chinese month. Mrs. Chan who owned and managed a hairdressing saloon, till 1979 has stopped now due to family pressure. They have two children who are undergoing education in a Chinese school just as their parents. Mr. Chan himself is a very busy contractor with about nine years of schooling. Knowledge about Sai Baba came through his working colleagues who invited him to bhajans. After four weeks of consequent attendance he was invited to join a trip organised by a doctor friend

to Puttaparthi. Mr. Chan says that he went on this trip because he wanted to see Sai Baba himself. During this trip a 6 yr. old polio victim who was in a critical condition improved. Mr. Chan also saw vibhuti and pendants being materialised. After this trip, Mrs. Chan who had not followed him to India showed great interest and began to attend bhajans weekly. She was told by other devotees that Sai Baba appears and has appeared in the form of an immense light before devotees. Her faith in Sai Baba grew after an incident in which her husband who had consumed excessive liquor remained unconscious and cold on a night their phone was out of order. Shaken, she had tried praying when she saw the immense light at the window near the altar. Later when she went to the bedroom, she found thrown-out waste on the floor but her husband had not shifted his position on the couch. His body was warm too. The following day, on consulting a doctor Mr. Chan was told that he had been in a critical condition and could have died. Mr. Chan and his wife believe that he died and was brought to life again by Sai Baba. Mr. Chan has now reduced his drinking habits due to a weak heart. Mr. Chan also has a very close friend who acts as a medium and converses with the spirits of dead people. This friend who began a spiritual school advised him to buy land round this spiritual school. Thus, Mr. Chan goes weekly to the Sunday bhajans held at this spiritual school after which he and his family work on their land nearby. Mr. Chan who is not involved in other organisations does not go to the bhajans held at other centres as he did before. This he says is due to the fact that he had neglected his work which began to affect him and he realised that Sai Baba says that duty comes first. Both

Mr. Chan and Mrs. Chan see Sai Baba as a very important god among all the gods in heaven.

((v) Mr. Gopal 42, (37 at conversion) is the eldest in a family of six. His mother was a pious woman while his father went to temples on occasions. He started to work after six years of education in a Tamil school to assist his family in financial matters. His brothers are now teachers and technicians in the government sector while his sisters have been married into 'average' families. As a Hindu and being educated in Tamil he had knowledge of 'thevaram' songs which he taught to teenagers and children at a temple near his home. His wife who is a housewife and five children also attended these classes and other functions at the temple. A few Sai Baba devotees who had heard him singing approached Mr. Gopal and told him about Sai Baba. They also requested him to lead the singing of bhajans at a nearby bhajan centre. He obliged them as all arrangements including transport was arranged for him. Two years after this when he was having a desire to see Sai Baba himself, he told himself that he would never be able to as he was just a lorry driver and earning very little. However, a group of devotees came to his house and offered him a two-way flight ticket to Madras ^{an} donated by/anonymous person. Sai Baba is said to be the doer of this action. He saw Sai Baba materializing vibhuti, pendants, and rings. In his altar at his home, most of the framed pictographs of Sai Baba, Shirdi Baba and other deities are covered with vibhuti spots. He now has weekly bhajans at his home for the people living in the squatter area where he lives. He is also busy almost everynight singing at

other bhajan centres - public and home bhajans. Mr. Gopal says that he does not have any health problems. The only problem was financial but he added that he is determined to give his children the most he can in education. His eldest son has been promised sponsorship by rich devotees when he furthers his studies. This boy is now 17 yrs. old. Another son who receives music lessons is also being sponsored by a devotee.

(vi) Mr. Ram, 57 (52 at conversion) is a mechanic and comes from a middle class family. Both he and his wife are from Bangladesh and their children (a son and a daughter) are studying in India too. Mr. Ram went to Hindu temples on occasions but read many books on gurus such as Swami Parmahansa, Yogananda, Ramakrishna and Vivekananda. His wife comes from a very religious family and is well-versed in Hindu religious texts such as the Mahabharata, Ramayana and Bhagavidgita. Mr. Ram was having problems due to heart problems and diabetes when his working colleagues told him about Baba and gave him some books to read in 1976. Mrs. Ram was converted first as she believed in all that she read. Mr. Ram however wished to see Sai Baba personally but was unable to do so until 1977 when he received some backdated pay which he attributes as the work of Sai Baba. He was hesitant however, as the money was only enough for one person and his health was too poor to travel alone. At a bhajan he attended he had asked help from Sai Baba to assist him in making the decision and to indicate his answer if it is positive by a flower falling from the framed picture of Sai Baba. The hibiscus flower Mr. Ram says fell during the performance of arathi - at the end of the bhajan. Mr. Ram believes that Sai Baba helped him

throughout his trip to India right from the beginning when a neighbour gave him a lift to the local airport (his car broke down at the last minute) and later where an American devotee carried both Mr. Ram's and his own luggage to Puttaparthi. Mr. Ram also did not face accommodation problems as is usually the case. Mr. Ram was lucky as he felt Sai Baba's touch on his head and a current passed through his whole body. He also found an old statue of Vinayagar/^{the} elephant-god by accident at a beach later which he now prays to at the altar in his home. Mr. Ram interprets every situation as the work of Sai Baba and believes firmly in the principle of karma. As his health has improved but not completely cured of all ailments, both he and his wife feel that it is due to their past karmas. Mr. Ram and his wife visited Sai Baba in India again in 1980 while visiting their son and daughter who are studying there. Mr. Ram who is retired now spends a great deal of time attending bhajans. He does not get involved too much in organising and in serious responsibilities as he says that his health does not permit.

5.2 Deprivation

From the case studies, it is clear that any one individual or group may experience more than one kind of deprivation at any given time. We shall have a brief look at the different deprivations experienced knowingly or unknowingly by respondents.

Among the six cases given, three appear to have experienced social deprivation to a great extent. Mrs. Rathika for instance, was forced to resign from nursing which she had enjoyed and worked at for ten years. Pressure from her husband and her in-laws requesting her to

resign and to settle down to look after her children appears to be an indirect causative factor. Thus here she is viewed as a female whose responsibilities hinders Mrs. Rathika from her own wants and desires. Mrs. Catherine Lam who is aware of her limited education and inability to be gainfully employed also faces social deprivation. With the abundance of leisure time and her role as a woman, she settles for the activities her husband involves himself in. Mr. Gopal faced both economic deprivation and social deprivation stemming from economic and educational factors. Due to his lower economic level, he was not able to have all his needs fulfilled especially where his children's education was concerned. He was upgraded in his society and in his village by being wanted by middle-class people and professionals who provided financial help and other help for his services. Mr. Ram who comes from a lower-middle-class family faced financial problems which ultimately led to a feeling of social deprivation. He compensated this feelings by getting to know important professionals and politicians in the movement. The amount of importance he placed on their friendship and the numerous references he made concerning them shows that he did experience a feeling of low social standing. Santhi could have felt socially deprived whilst looking for employment after her failure in the examinations. Economic deprivation in her family virtually forced her to neglect a brighter future for herself and instead work to provide for immediate benefits. Mr. Chan did not appear to have experienced any social deprivation though he mentioned of being forced out of his house and land due to fear of problems arising out of the privileged people of the country namely the bamipturas.

Organismic deprivation can also lead to social deprivation or psychological deprivation. In the first, the individual may feel that he does not measure up to society's standards and in the second, he could feel that he is not living up to his own standards. Among the six cases studies, organismic deprivation played a part in four of them. Santhi's thirteen year old brother had fallen seriously ill and even doctors had doubts on his chances of recuperating. Mrs. Catherine Lam's husband had been suffering from a pain in his left leg for two years which doctors were unable to help get rid off. Mr. Ram had been ill and still is a very sick man suffering from diabetes and a weak heart. Mrs. Chan almost died after excessive alcohol intake and heart problems. Mr. Gopal and Mrs. Rathika however, did not have any physical ailments.

Ethical deprivation in which ethical prescriptions on how one ought to manage his life is very clearly seen in Mr. Chan. He had been a drunkard and his wife had been worried about him prior to conversion. After his experience of 'rebirth', he was convinced of Sai Baba's powers and fully immersed himself in the movement's activities. He has reduced his drinking habits to the minimum and allocates a great deal of his time to religious activities in the Sai Baba movement. Mrs. Catherine Lam's husband also attempted to overcome ethical deprivation by daily meditation in the early hours of the morning and attending bhajans. Mr. Ram and his wife read books on religion, meditation, yoga and in daily life practice fasting and having vegetarian diets on certain days.

Mrs. Rathika and her husband appear to have experienced psychic

deprivation more than ethical deprivation. Not only did they participate in bhajans and believe in the teachings but they also went for transcendental meditation classes. Mrs. Rathika's husband appears to be seeking a philosophical explanation without being involved in the organization itself. As meditation is a practice and a method suggested by the movement to lead their lives, it is in part a means of compensating ethical deprivation. Psychic deprivation where a philosophy is sought for its own sake and not as a source of ethical prescriptions is difficult to identify. But devotees in the movement do seek a philosophy for its own sake but still experience other forms of deprivation to varying degrees.

5.3 Conclusion

It is believed that one or more types of deprivation is likely to be dominant for particular individuals and groups in particular situations. In the Sai Baba movement, social deprivation and ethical deprivation play important roles. Organismic deprivation unaccompanied by either social or ethical deprivation is not seen in this study. This supports Glock's suggestion that a necessary precondition for any organised movement is a situation of self-deprivation.

But this would not mean that non-members of this movement are not experiencing any kind of deprivation. The question therefore arises as to why only certain people choose to compensate their feelings of deprivation by joining the Sai Baba movement. What do other people do to eliminate or compensate similar deprivations? To answer this question, we will have to look at both secular and religious institutions

Where the nature of deprivation is inaccurately perceived or where those experiencing the deprivation are unable to eliminate the causes religious institutions and religious resolutions are more likely to arise. Secular resolutions and institutions such as Alcoholics Anonymous and other clubs are more likely to arise where the nature of the deprivation is correctly perceived and assessed. These will act as the push factors.

Another dominant push factor seen prior to the conversion of the individual is the incapability of the existing religious structure to meet the religious, social and psychological needs of the group. This is especially true in the Malaysian context where religious - cultural diffusion and the expectation of religious tolerance has resulted in vague and easily manipulated values in society. Rigidity of religious organisations (e.g. Islam) minimizes conversion into other movements in contrast to the non-rigidity of Hinduism, Buddhism and to a lesser extent Christianity with its large number of churches.

The pull factors are seen in the ideology of the movement and in the mode of transmission. Man strives for equilibrium in everything and the ideology of the Sai Baba movement provides for this. It includes all and excludes none. The teachings of the movement attempts to subordinate the differences and to unify all creeds into one supreme religion, the religion of love and brotherhood. Another factor - alienation is seen to be very much reduced as compared to the primary religions i.e. Hinduism, Buddhism and Christianity. The devotees in the Sai Baba Movement, especially the regular bhajan attenders, are like those in a large family with personal interactions. The movement also has spread

in the initial stages mainly through personal relations of the would be devotee and devotees. One might ask as to why these people did not join other similar movements e.g. Divine Light Society or the Krishna Consciousness Movement. Here, the main factor is the mode of transmission. As compared to these other movements, the Sai Baba movement has a better system of developing its branches and increasing recruits into the movements. From this aspect, the Divine Light Society works at a much more personal level whilst the Krishna Consciousness movement is viewed by Sai Baba devotees as more of a fanatical movement.

From India to Malaysia was still in progress. The educated and upper middle class Indians stood aloof from popular forms of worship. This was especially true of the second generation of the Indian immigrant population which shied away from open adherence to Hindu practices. (Arumugam 1970: 187). Hinduism is of two varieties, that is popular Hinduism and sanctified Hinduism. In popular Hinduism, there is little knowledge of Hindu scriptures. Practices such as animal sacrifices, image worship, ancestor worship and temple offerings are an integral part of worship. Practices of self-mortification e.g. fire-walking and 'Devoti' (i.e. piercing skewers into the body) are also carried out. The Sanctified form of Hinduism in contrast to popular Hinduism is based mostly on sacred Hindu scriptures and emphasises on devotional faith with the idea of salvation through service to God. This division between popular Hinduism and sanctified Hinduism not only means a gulf in religious practices but also implies differences in religious status and social status.

Concomitants of religious status existed even among the middle

CHAPTER VI

6.1 Significance of the Sai Baba Movement among Malaysian Indians

The significance of this movement among Malaysian Indians is most notable from three aspects namely - prestige, identity and acceptance. All three are interrelated to some extent as can be seen when one traces the history of Hinduism among Malaysian Indians from 1875 onwards.

In the early days prior to the 2nd World War when migration from India to Malaysia was still in progress, the educated and affluent middle class Indians stood aloof from parochial forms of worship. This was especially true of the second generation of the Indian immigrant population which shied away from open adherence to Hindu practices. (Arasaratnam: 1970: 162). Hinduism is of two variations, that is popular Hinduism and sanskritized Hinduism. In popular Hinduism, there is little knowledge of Hindu scriptures. Practices such as animal sacrifices, image worship, ancestor worship and temple offerings are an integral part of worship. Practices of self-mortification e.g. fire-walking and 'kavadi' (i.e. piercing skewers into the body) are also carried out. The Sanskritized form of Hinduism in contrast to popular Hinduism is based mostly on sacred Hindu scriptures and emphasizes on devotional faith with the idea of salvation through service to God. This division between popular Hinduism and sanskritized Hinduism not only means a gulf in religious practices but also implies differences in religious status and social status.

Consciousness of religious status existed more among the middle

al

and upper classes due to education/access to religious literature and contacts with other forms of worship (e.g. meditation). These people regarded symbols to be necessary for people of a lower religious status due to their inability to grasp or understand God directly. In other words people of a lower religious status need images and other religious objects as a medium to give them a better understanding of God. The middle and upper classes therefore considered popular Hinduism as less prestigious and more associated with primitive modes of worship. These people generally adhered to sanskritized Hinduism and held themselves as a distinct religious group different from the masses. This state of affairs has persisted till recent times in Malaysia but a change is seen as efforts are undertaken to reduce the gulf between the two variations of Hinduism practised. This became a matter of prestige to the Indian community in Malaysia as they came into contact, with the different ethnic groups and the various religious practices.

Arasaratnam noted - 'a characteristic notable of reform movements among Indians in Malaya has been their concern with the image of the Indian in the eyes of other Malayan ethnic groups. (Arasaratnam: 1970: 173). Efforts in reducing the gap between popular Hinduism and sanskritized Hinduism are seen to have taken place in India which were then imported into Malaysia. One of the first significant movement of such a nature is the Vivekananda Mission which established its centre in Kuala Lumpur (1929) and in Muar (1929). Later it opened a branch in Seremban (1930) and Teluk Anson (1932). Next came the Ramakrishna Mission which is similar to the Vivekananda Mission. (Penang-1939). Both these movements were humanistic and non-sectarian seeking to be

a medium of contact between all sects of Hinduism and even with the adherents of other faiths. They taught about dedication to pursuit of knowledge and belief in renunciation. In Malaya, this other worldly asceticism was transferred into a concern with the current social situation. Social welfare activities were diligently pursued and public talks on Hinduism and sessions of devotional singing also was a popular feature of their activities. New avenues of leadership was opened up and the encroachment of the middle class into social welfare activities helped to validate their rise in status and to assume leadership of the community. (e.g. Swami Adyanand, Swami Satyananda, Swami Saraswathi).

Other movements which arose was the Krishna Consciousness Movement, The Divine Light Mission with Guru Maharaji as its saviour and the Bahai movement which seeks to unite all creeds under one identity. The Bahai movement did not attract many Hindus as Hindus in general are not willing to give up Hinduism totally and become a Bahai with different beliefs and practices. Bahaiism calls for total conversion. The Divine Light Mission is more flexible as it does not require total conversion but it does require total devotion to its teacher - Guru Maharaji. There is not much emphasis on scriptures but greater emphasis on personal experience and meditation. As this movement grows at a very personal level, it is still a relatively small movement as compared to the Sai Baba Movement. The Krishna Consciousness Movement is thought of as a cult of an extreme nature with emphasis on ecstasy. This movement too remains small and of little significance to overall Hindu population in Malaysia.

The Sai Baba movement differs in various aspects from the

above movements. Similar to both the Vivekananda and Ramakrishna Missions, it attempts to reduce the gulf between popular Hinduism and sanskritized Hinduism. Sai Baba's teachings are mostly from the Hindu scriptures with a great amount of sanskrit verses and translations of these. They contain acceptance of practices of popular Hinduism (e.g. the different deities) and Sai Baba himself performs miracles which are acceptable in popular Hinduism. To both the lower and upper classes, the Sai Baba movement is prestigious as compared to popular Hinduism. This movement is not of an extreme nature demanding total conversion or total devotion and commitment to a particular person. It is thus more acceptable to Hindus in general.

Identity is another major concept in understanding the significance of the Sai Baba Movement among Malaysian Indians. One significant characteristic that emerged in the 1950's is the distinct commitment of the educated classes to their Hindu tradition. This is due to two reasons. The first, is the disintegration of Hindu values in their society and the increasing acceptance of Western values and values of other ethnic groups in the country. This is clearly seen in the social stigma attached to inter-marriages between different castes or ethnic groups and also in the conversion of a Hindu into a Muslim, Christian etc. The second reason is the realization that integration in Malaysian will not be to its full extent. This was seen from the loss of opportunities which were given to the natives of the country. The group that was most severely affected among Indians were the middle-class as they had held significant positions in the government sector prior to independence. Privileges given to the Malays or Bumiputras

excluded these middle class Indians from the same benefits and hindered them in their economic and social fields. For example, government service opportunities were drastically curtailed and those already in employment showed frustration at the delay in advancement. With this realization that there will never be a fully-integrated Malaysian society, the felt need to have a segregated, united group of Indians with their own identity was increased. This would then benefit the Indians economically politically and socially.

The Sai Baba Movement is but one movement which gives an Indian identity to its followers without differentiating Christians, Buddhists, Jains and Hindus who favour sanskritized Hinduism or those who practise popular Hinduism. In earlier times, the middle and upper class Indians dissociated themselves from parochial forms of popular Hinduism although there was a relative absence of sanskritized religion. But they could not adopt this indifference for long as they began to feel that their identity as a race was being threatened by various political and social forces. Christianity and its various sects which were highly organised threatened Hinduism and Islam which is the official religion of Malaysia provided incentives for conversion.

The question arises as to why the lower-class Indians are not attracted to Sai Baba. Were they not aware of an identity crisis? In the initial stage of the Sai Baba Movement, they i.e. the lower-class Indians were guarding popular Hinduism from such movements as they considered him a magician. Now however, they are less rigid as they have a greater understanding of Sai Baba's teachings as teaching in

Hinduism. This is due to the well-developed network and expansion of the movement. As these teachings do not in anyway conflict with their beliefs, there is growing acceptance of Sai Baba among the lower-class Indians. Difference is however seen on the importance given to Sai Baba himself. The lower class do not place as much importance on Sai Baba as do the middle class who appear to like immediate benefits. It is the middle class who take efforts to travel to India to see Sai Baba for various purposes.

The need for acceptance among middle-class into upper class is also seen in the Sai Baba movement. As the teachings of the movement place emphasis on the acceptance of all religious groups, classes, castes and races it could be argued that Sai Baba devotees seek acceptance by other religious groups, ethnic groups and the different classes. Although there seems to be a need to accept other beliefs and a need for their own beliefs to be accepted by others, this appears to be of secondary importance. The need of the middle class to be accepted as upper class seems to be greater as seen by the attempts of achieving closer relationships with important persons from the upper classes. Not only do they need to be seen as being upper class by the upper classes themselves but by society in general. In daily life they seem to adopt the ways of the upper class and also distinguish themselves from the lower class. This not only pervades their political, economical and social lives but also their religious life.

The lower class of Indians do not seek the recognition of being in upper or middle class as much as the middle class. This is probably due to the vast differences existing between these classes.

There are however a few individuals who try to identify themselves with the middle class.

From the political point of view the Sai Baba movement is of little significance. It plays a greater part from the economical point of view as it aids in the vertical mobility of individuals through increased business contacts and in isolated cases of accumulation of wealth and land. Its greatest significance is in the social aspect in contributing to the integration of society and the emphasis on the spirituality of man. But this is also confined to a small number as compared to the total Malaysian Indian population.

6.2. Significance of the Sai Baba Movement among Malaysian Chinese.

Although there is relatively a smaller number of Chinese devotees in this movement, they comprise a noticeable group. The Chinese have lesser opportunities as compared to Indians in having contacts with their motherland. Thus, the Chinese do not follow the teachings of any particular person or persons residing in China. There are however some Chinese who assume roles of teacher or religious specialist in Malaysia. These are, however, very few in number.

Chinese culture and Indian culture have many similarities which eases the assimilation of Indian cultural practices and beliefs into the Chinese way of life. Prior to worshipping Sai Baba, many Chinese have beliefs in Hindu gods but few went to pray in Hindu temples. For instance, it is common among Chinese contractors and construction workers to leave religious sites undisturbed however insignificant it is. The Chinese also do not remove any pictographs of Hindu deities

found when moving into a new house. This syncretic nature of Chinese beliefs provided the base for the acceptance of Sai Baba teachings. Sai Baba was just another aspect of popular Hinduism which they believed in. Most of the Chinese perceive Sai Baba as one of the many gods in heaven and pray to him alongside with Buddha, Kuan Yin, Kuan Ti and Christ. It was even easier for the Chinese to accommodate Sai Baba's teachings as prayer meetings or bhajans were not held in Hindu temples (i.e. the temple proper). The Sai Baba movement which is a movement dominated by Indians accommodated Chinese believers. Recent developments, however, show a few Chinese groups breaking away from the main group and forming new centres where bhajans are conducted in Chinese. Chinese bronze containers, incense or joss sticks and other Chinese modes of praying are used. In one centre, a Chinese spiritual leader who was also referred to as 'guru' was associated with Sai Baba and both were prayed to. However, the emphasis was still on Sai Baba as most of the songs were devoted to him.

To the Chinese, the Sai Baba movement is more significant from the economic point of view as compared to the social and political aspects. There are close ties among businessmen, between professionals and customers as well as with potential customers. Joint ventures in business and in buying land in certain areas are also undertaken. For instance, Mr. Chan (fictitious name) has bought some land in the same area as his Sai Baba friends near a Sai Baba centre. This centre has been jointly established and these people hope to make it into a popular spiritual school.

Politically and socially, the Sai Baba movements is of little significance to the Chinese as they comprise only a small number of their total population.

6.3 Future of the Sai Baba Movement in Malaysia.

It is very doubtful as to whether this movement will acquire a church-form even though it is going through its expansionist phase. There are various reasons for this.

Anti Sai Baba feelings are on the increase. The Tamil national daily of Malaysia -- Tamil Nesan for instance highlighted instances showing that Sai Baba is a fake. They ridiculed Sai Baba when thousands died in floods in his homeland i.e. Andhra Pradesh, India as Sai Baba is said to have attributed it to their karma. A learned doctor in India who was also able to materialise vibhuti in his hands from nothing challenged Sai Baba and requested to examine him. Sai Baba's refusal to be examined is taken as a sign of dishonesty. Many non-devotees who read this in the papers remain non-believers and are sceptical. Believers of black magic feel that Sai Baba is in control of evil powers through which he is able to exhibit power and the materialising of vibhuti from framed pictographs in various places. A number of non-devotees also had relatives or friends who had sought Sai Baba's help for organic reasons which did not help. Though these are not highlighted, an anti-Sai Baba movement among ex-devotees has risen which openly expresses their disbelief and even claiming to have evidence to show that Sai Baba is a fake and a homosexual. Most of the non-devotees view the Sai Baba movement as primarily a rich man's movement consisting of sinners who seek

redemption for their sins and not the seekers of enlightenment or liberation. The status of the Sai Baba Movement among non-devotees is still a controversy as it appears to be connected more with miracles than holiness.

This movement in its beginning stages was value-oriented whereby an united effort was made to propagate Sai Baba's teachings by both Indians and Chinese comprising various religions. During the later stages however, several groups broke away to form their own centres in different areas with a majority of Indian or a majority of Chinese. These new centres use different language and also different modes of conducting bhajans. The English educated group is now disintegrating into Chinese and Indian groups. Another factor which threatens the English educated devotees is the increased importance of Bahasa Malaysia as a national language and the increasing number of people who feel more at ease with Bahasa Malaysia than English.

Due to these various reasons, the development of the Sai Baba movement into a church organisation is not possible. It would remain as a movement along side with other such cult and sect movements.



A decorated altar for a special public bhajan.



A decorated altar for the bhajan held on Sai Baba's birthday.



An altar at a home bhajan



A simple altar in an Indian house.



The original altar at a Chinese centre in Bangi



The altar at a later period with the pictograph of the Chinese spiritual master removed and the non-existent 'patham' of Sai Baba which is said to have faded due to the disapproval of Sai Baba.



The Sai Baba Temple in Bangi



The commune styled spiritual school at Bangi.



The children play-acting in a drama.



Young devotees praying whilst others are conversing with each other.

Appendix A

INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

Section A

Section A

Why did you become a Sai Baba devotee? Have you seen him personally?

Particulars	Respondent	Respondent's Father	Respondent's Mother	Respondent's sisters/ brothers.	Respondent's wife/ husband
Respondent and peer group					
1. Age 2. Sex 3. Race 4. Religion 5. Marital status 6. Highest level of education received. 7. Occupation 8. Income per month 9. Age at which subject became a devotee and year. 10. Post held in movement.					

Christianity, Buddhism, Islam and such others.

Section B INTERPRETATIONS OF SAI BABA AND THE MOVEMENT

11. How did you come to know about Sai Baba and when and why did you become a Sai Baba devotee? Have you seen him personally?
12. Who is Sai Baba (Is he god?) What are his teachings?
13. To which god or gods do you pray to? How are the prayers conducted, what are the necessary items and what meanings do they hold?
14. How are group prayers in the centres conducted? What are their functions and meanings?
15. How many Sai Baba centres are there in KL/PJ? To which centre do you belong to? Do you attend prayers or bhajans held at other centres.

Section C PERSONALITY FORMATION

16. As a child were you given any religious education? If so by whom and what were you taught?
17. Did you visit places of worship (i.e. churches, temples etc.) often when you were a child? Do you go to these places now? If so, how frequently?
18. To what extent do you know about other religions like Islam, Christianity, Buddhism, Bahaiism and such others.

19. Have you carried kavadis for Thaipusam? If so for what reason and will you do so in future? Do you practice fasting of any form and if so how do you fast and how frequently?
20. Do you practice meditation or yoga? And do you believe in astrology, palmistry, luck, ghosts, spirits and mediums? If so, why? When did you start believing in all of these?
21. Do you believe in life after death and the soul? Does hell and heaven exists? Why do you think some people become atheists. When did you start believing in these?
22. Do you agree that the world is coming to an end. Why?
23. Did anyone disagree with you or try to stop you from becoming a Sai Baba devotee. If so, who and for what reasons. Do you feel happier after becoming a Sai Baba devotee.

Section D ORGANISATIONAL STRUCTURE

24. For how long have you been one of the organizers of this movement and what particular aspect are you in-charge of.
25. How are organizers chosen and how long do they hold office? How and why were you chosen to be one of the organisers? How is work distributed?
26. Do you spend much time in this movement? Are you involved in any other group/social activities, that is are you a member of any other club or organisation?

27. Do you know when the movement was first begun, where and by whom? How did it expand its activities?
28. Do you (and the others) have future plans about expanding the movement? How do you all intend to do it?
29. Where do you all get the necessary funds? How are the funds used?
30. Do you face any difficulties in getting members to cooperate?
31. Are there any aspects in the Sai Baba movement which puzzle you?
32. At present, are most of your friends and relatives followers of Sai Baba? Do you tell others about Sai Baba to help them if they are in difficulties?
33. Do you know of anyone who deviated from the movement after some time? Why did they leave the movement?

GLOSSARY

ahimsa	- non-violence
ahmbal	- Mariamman; a female deity; symbol for mother.
amrita	- nectar
arathi	- the final ritual in Hindu worship; waving of a camphor light.
ascetic	- hermit, one who practices self-denial,
ashram	- Hindu or Buddhist religious centre.
avatar	- divine incarnation; the descent of god to earth.
Ayyapa	- a male deity usually prayed to by Malayalees.
Aum, Om	- the divine sound or name of God; Pravara.
bal-vikas	- children between 6-13 years of age in the Sai Baba movement.
Bhagavidgita	- holy book of the Hindus (a part of the Mahabharata).
bhajan	- congregational devotional worship by singing.
bhaktiyoga	- spiritual discipline through devotion to God.
Brahma	- the first aspect of the Hindu Trinity - the Creator.
darshan	- having the holy sight of a god or saint.
dharma	- duty;
dhuni	- hearth where a fire is kept perpetually burning.

Diwali	- a festival celebrated by all Hindu ; symbolises good over evil.
Dwaraka	- Ahmbai; a female deity in Hinduism.
fakir	- mendicant (usually refers to Muslims).
Ganesha	- the elephant-headed Hindu deity; Vinayagar.
Gopala	- Krishna; Madhava; Govinda; a Hindu deity.
Govinda	- Krishna; Madhava; Gopala; a Hindu deity.
guru	- a Hindu spiritual teacher.
Guru Poornima	- a special day for all gurus.
Hariman	- a monkey-god; a character depicted in the epic Ramayana.
japan	- meditation by repetition of a word or mantras.
jap mala	- rosary used for japan.
jnanayoga	- spiritual discipline through correct knowledge.
kalkanda	- solidified sugar.
kanagampuram	- an orange flower frequently used by Hindus.
karma	- actions; fate due to action in the past or past lives.
karma yoga	- spiritual discipline through duty or correct action.
Krishna	- the 8th incarnation of Lord Vishnu on earth.
Krishna Jayanti	- this festival marks the descent of Sri Krishna on earth.

kunkum	-	vermillion of five sweet fruits with honey.
kuttuvilaku	-	oil lamp made of bronze or silver with five spouts.
ladoo	-	a sweet Indian delicacy.
Lakshmi	-	the Hindu goddess of wealth.
linga	-	the male organ symbolising procreation;
	-	also symbolises Lord Shiva - the male element.
Madhavan	-	Krishna; Gopala; Govinda; a Hindu deity
Mahabharata	-	a famous Hindu epic depicting war between the Kauravas and Pandavas.
Maheswara	-	God, the lord, Iswara.
Mahila vibhag	-	the women in Sai Baba movement.
mantra	-	a word or sentence in Sanskrit; a thought-form.
Mother Dwaraka	-	Ambal; Shakti; Pervati.
mounam	-	silence.
Murugan	-	a popular Hindu deity; son of Lord Shiva and Shakti.
Muslim Namaz	-	Arabic Salat.
Namnahvali	-	Salutations.
Narayan	-	God.
Onam	-	a festival celebrated by Malayalees of Kerala, India.
padanamaskaram	-	salutation by touching the feet of a divine person.

panchaamirtham	- a mixture of five sweet fruits with honey.
panch dhatu	- a compound of five metals.
patham	- feet, point of view, middle, last, etc.
pir	- Muslim saints; sufis.
pongal satham	- sweetened milk rice.
pooja	- puja, religious offering.
pranavam	- chanting of the word 'om' or 'Aum'.
prasad; prasada	- the offerings given to devotees after being placed at the altar.
prema	- love.
puja	- pooja; religious offering.
Rama	- the 7th incarnation of Vishnu on earth; the hero in the Hindu epic Ramayana.
Ramayana	- a famous Hindu epic.
Rama Navami	- this festival marks the descent of Lord Rama on earth.
Sai Baba	- a greeting used by Sai Baba devotees.
Sanathan Sarathi	- the official monthly journal of the Sai Baba movement published in India.
Santhi	- peace.
Saraswathi	- Hindu deity for education.
Sarva Dharma concept	- unity in the five major religions of the world. See page
Sarva Dharma emblem	- truth.
seva-dal	- those involved in service activities in the Sai Baba movement.

- Shakti - the female element; the consort of Lord Shiva; power.
- Shivananda - a Hindu sect emphasising Lord Shiva.
- Shiva Ratri - a night vigil in honour of Lord Shiva.
- Siva - Lord Shiva; the 3rd aspect the Hindu Trinity - the Destroyer.
- tapas - penance; meditation.
- thianam - meditation.
- tulasi, tulsi - ocimum sanctum, a green leaf.
- udi - vibhuti; holy ash.
- vibhuti - holy ash; udi.
- Vinayagar - the elephant-headed deity; son of Siva and Shakti.
- Vishnu - the 2nd. element in the Hindu Trinity; the Preserver.

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