

The Life and Death of 'Living God' Sathya Sai Baba

Sathya Sai Baba, a living god for nearly forty million people, died in April. He had a nine-billion-dollar organization and religious centers throughout the world. Who was Baba? Why was he thought to be a god?

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Sathya Sai Baba died in April 2011 after illness due to respiratory and kidney problems. He was a “living god” for nearly forty million people worldwide, and his believers have credited him with resurrecting the dead and healing the sick. To his Hindu followers, Baba was an avatar, or an incarnation, of a god who performed miracles, including materializing jewelry and *vibuthi* (holy ash) out of thin air. With schools in more than thirty-three countries and educational programs in 166 countries, Baba became a global figure despite having left India only once

(to visit Uganda in 1968). His supporters, including high-profile Indian politicians and American businessmen, proudly celebrated his mystical feats and humanitarian efforts. But his critics denounced him as a fraud for decades, claiming his feats were common magic tricks. Later, former followers accused him of child molestation, after which the U.S. government issued travel warnings to its citizens about the allegations.

Sathya Sai Baba was born in 1926 in Puttaparthi, India. At fourteen, he declared he was the reincarnation of Sai Baba of Shirdi (1835–1918), an Indian guru who remains a popular Hindu figure and was rumored to levitate, read minds, and even heal the sick. In the 1940s, Baba began attracting attention

when he started “materializing” items out of thin air. He then began traveling throughout South India building a following (Babb 1991). His celebrity was cemented when Americans traveled to India on spiritual voyages in the 1960s. In the past several years, Baba established many centers in the United States. For example, the USA Sai Organization lists eight locations in New York and twenty locations in Southern California.

Besides being a spiritual guru, Baba was well-connected politically in India, with high-profile believers in the two major parties: the right-leaning Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the left-leaning Indian National Congress (INC). These included former Prime Ministers A.B. Vajpayee and P.V. Narasimha Rao (Goldberg 2005). Journalist Khushwant Singh explained Baba’s ties to politicians in the 1995 documentary *Guru Busters*: “At many times some decisions and particularly the [political] appointments are made in consultation with him . . . people like Sai Baba have a national influence.” In the documentary, T.N. Seshan, then chief election commissioner of India, held up a ring Baba gave him and said, “He gave this ring out of nowhere, which is set with nine gems; there is a ruby in it, a pearl in it, sapphire in it,



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Indian police officials spread the national flag on the transparent casket containing the body of Hindu guru Sathya Sai Baba.

there is an emerald in it, there is a diamond in it . . . he realized this for me out of nowhere.” Seshan later explained, “I am not a jumbly person. I’ve got a master’s degree in physics; I have a master’s degree in administration economics from Harvard. I find nothing contradictory between the physics and the fact that I believe this [ring] came out of the blue.”

By 2011 the state’s tax department estimated the worth of Baba’s Sathya Sai Central Trust at about nine billion dollars. One of the Trust’s most notable projects was the building of the Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Medical Sciences in Puttaparthi with donations, including a twenty-million-dollar contribution from Hard Rock Café and House of Blues cofounder Isaac Tigrett. In mid-June, nearly two months after Baba’s death, 216 lbs. (98 kg) of gold, 676.8 lbs. (307 kg) of silver, and about \$2.5 million in cash were discovered in Baba’s personal chamber after it was opened for the Trust to inventory items (“98 kg Gold Found . . .” 2011).

Baba’s critics and former followers accused him of serious crimes. P.C. Sorcar Jr., a well-known Indian magician, has been a Baba critic for several years.

In 2000, Sorcar explained that Baba’s miracles, such as making *vibhuti* (holy ash) appear, are “common tricks” using sleight of hand (“P.C. Sorcar: Baba’s a Bad Trickster” 2000). In that example, he says, the holy ash is from a capsule hidden in the palm of Baba’s hand, which is then crushed with his thumb to make the ash appear. Likewise, Basava Premanand (1930–2009), one of the most respected Indian rationalists, started investigating Baba in 1968. Premanand, who was the head of Indian Skeptics and wrote thirty-five books (five in English), devoted years to examining Baba (Polidoro 2003). He released his findings about the sleight-of-hand techniques used in Baba’s “miracles” to the public as early as 1976.

Perhaps more damaging was Tal Brooke’s 1970 book *Lord of the Air* (later called *Avatar of Night*), which recounted the author’s doubts about Baba upon learning of his sexual activities with young boys. The allegations did not go away. In 2004, stories of sexual abuse and child molestation surfaced in the BBC2 documentary *The Secret Swami*, in which journalist Tanya Datta interviewed former Baba devotees in the United States who said they had

been sexually abused by him. The documentary featured interviews with government leaders who called the claims “baseless.” On the other hand, the U.S. State Department issued a travel warning in 2001 about “inappropriate sexual behavior by a prominent local religious leader” and later confirmed it was referring to Baba (Lewis 2006).

Datta’s report also explored a strange and still unexplained event in 1993. On June 6, 1993, four boys supposedly entered Baba’s bedroom with knives and were shot to death by local police. The police claimed they had to fatally shoot the boys after the boys attacked them with knives. A report from the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI), India’s organization to investigate corruption and special crimes, discovered flaws and contradictions in the police reports, and it was rumored that police killed the four boys in cold blood. Datta said, “Some police officers were arrested but never charged. The case was eventually dropped.” She further reported, “Critics say police connections ensured that Sai Baba wasn’t even interviewed, despite being one of the witnesses to the events of that night.” Attempts by the former Home Secretary to reopen the case were unsuccessful, and the reasons behind the killings as well as the boys’ motives for entering Baba’s bedroom remain unknown. Premanand later published a book titled *Murders in Sai Baba’s Bedroom* that discussed the CBI’s description of the police cover-up and destruction of evidence.

On April 24, 2011, Baba died at the age of eighty-five. His death was likewise full of controversy. For one, Baba’s death contradicts his prediction posted on his website: “He is expected to leave His body [in] 2019” (International Sai Organization 2011a). After he was put on life support, medical specialists from the United States, Britain, and Australia traveled to Puttaparthi to help Baba. On April 5, as rumors of his illness spread, hundreds of devotees attempted to break into the hospital and attacked officials “for not allowing them to have a glimpse of the ailing Baba” (Das 2011). The next day, doctors

reported progress when Baba's alertness improved, but the state government worried about the impact of the organization becoming leaderless. Knowing the region was dependent on Baba, it sent a five-member team "to find out whether there is any system in place for running the scores of charitable schemes" created by Baba under the trust ("Andhra Govt Team..." 2011).

While Baba remained in the hospital, a miracle was proclaimed with followers and reporters flocking to see a four-foot wax figure of Baba "oozing perfumed oils from its feet" (Kumar 2011). The *Times of India* noted, "Devotees refused to consider that the wax idol could be melting in the sweltering heat and the oil was a resultant residue" (Kumar 2011). The same day, the *Deccan Herald* noted that the "idol stopped releasing the liquid after it was shifted to the ground floor of the residential complex" ("Axe Effect of Baba Wax Statue" 2011).

The next day, Baba's liver stopped responding to treatment and he was pronounced dead due to multiple organ failure. The faithful flocked to Puttaparthi, paying their respects in prayer, and a memorial service was held with full state honors. In attendance were governors from two Indian states, four former or current chief ministers, and two Andhra Pradesh ministers (Krishnamoorthy 2011).

Baba's death likely won't bring an end to any controversy about his activities or supposed "miracles." Many people are dependent on Baba's humanitarian organization for free medical care and drinking water. With his unexpected death, it remains unclear what will happen to his organization and those who rely on it. One prediction is that there will be at least one person who will claim to be the third incarnation of Sai Baba. How that person will be received by Sathya Sai Baba's followers is anyone's guess. But an important lesson about supernatural claims can be learned from this case. During my 2010 visit to India, I was told a story by Lalitha Rajaram, who attended a Baba

event in Delhi as a young girl decades ago. At the event, she was told by her friend to watch Baba carefully so as not to miss anything he did. She concentrated on Baba, closely following his movements with her eyes. Her concentration was abruptly shattered when Baba, through his handlers, told her to leave. Rajaram surmised that Baba saw her in the audience and, being wary of skeptics, did not want her there. Why would a god not want someone to

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watch him closely? More than likely because he was not a god but rather a human who lived within the laws of physics like the rest of us. ■

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