CHAPTER TWO

THE ARRIVAL OF THE AVATAR

*The Public Self of Sai*

Many photographs of Sathya Sai Baba show him seated on a chair, his feet resting on a cushion or a footstool, his hands half-raised with palms slightly turned upward as if in inquiry or with his right palm facing the viewer in blessing (see Figure 1). In Sai Centers where regular devotional activities are carried out, his presence might be invoked by placing a stuffed chair in the altar area, sometimes with a photograph of his face or full figure on it and another of his feet at the base. The chair is not simply an ordinary seat but regarded as a sacred throne, one fit for a royal being. The idea of the divine kingship of Sathya Sai Baba is made explicit during his birthday celebrations when he is seated in a golden motorized chariot—the rays of the sun emanating from behind him as part of his backrest and crowned by an umbrella—and taken out in a procession for his devotees to have *darshan*. The iconographic density surrounding Sathya Sai Baba is also evident in his official biography, *Sathyam Sivam Sundaram*, written by N. Kasturi (1897–1987), a devotee and associate of Baba for several decades, who came into contact with Sathya Sai Baba in 1948. *Sathyam Sivam Sundaram* runs into four volumes or parts, updating the career of Sathya Sai Baba from his birth and early years up until 1980. It is rich in historical detail but shares the assumption of traditional hagiography in India that, for the most part, establishes a holy person’s life and identity as more than human. Thus, for example, Kasturi’s narrative begins by reminding us that Sathya Sai Baba’s native village was once called Gollapalli, or the village of cowherds, and that a cobra was found near the newborn baby—obvious references to the deities Krishna and Shiva. Most biographical or devotees’ accounts rely heavily on Kasturi’s narrative, which was translated

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1 This chapter substantially revises two previously published articles (Srinivas 1999b and Srinivas 2001b).
into English and several Indian languages. From such narratives that “emphasize their subject’s reflection of the universal, grace-bestowing power of the absolute” (Hallstrom 1999: 22), Sathya Sai Baba emerges as a divine figure. Although he has “human” aspects—a wry sense of humor, observations about national or U.S. politics, a sense of style and color, or fondness for dogs and other animals—he is considered omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent, a font of grace, or a divine and compassionate parent.

In the case of a figure like the Buddha, the benefit of historical hindsight allows us to trace the development of his iconography over several centuries from, for example, his footprints to a figurative image, and the concomitant process of deification. This process is harder to conceptualize in the case of a “living deity,” as gurus such as Sathya Sai Baba are regarded, in part because the transformations are still relatively recent and shifting. While individual devotees who have spent a lifetime with Sathya Sai Baba may recognize the man behind the icon or others in private interviews may obtain glimpses of his personality, for any sociology/anthropology of the Sathya Sai Baba movement, it is necessary to recognize that the “real” personhood of Sathya Sai Baba or who he is as a private individual cannot be the focus of analysis nor can the issue of the truth or falsity of his divinity. Babb (1986a) makes the trenchant observation that the details of Sathya Sai Baba’s life are

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2 Kasturi’s account has the most authoritative status in the movement as the earliest sanctioned biography of Sathya Sai Baba (Kasturi 1962, 1968, 1972, 1980). A more recent biography is Love is My Form (Padmanaban 2000) that deals with the years 1926–1950. It is meant to be a documentary history and is based on detailed interviews and other field research while retaining a strong devotional sentiment. The same year, Thapovanam was published in English, Telugu, Hindi, and several other languages: it is meant to be a devotional text to be read in seven consecutive days (Venkateswara Sastry 2000). The earliest biography, however, might have been in Telugu (Sri Sayeeswani Charitra). This was written by V.C. Kondappa, Sathya Sai Baba’s teacher in a school in Bukkapatnam, in the form of a poem and is said to have been first published in 1944; it appeared recently as an English translation (Kondappa 2004). Bill Aitken’s Sri Sathya Sai Baba: A Life (Aitken 2004) is perhaps the most readable general account yet and one that can easily speak to a non-devotee. A few scholar-devotees have tried to understand Sathya Sai Baba, his philosophy, and the movement based on philosophical and social criteria: VK. Gokak, once a devotee of the spiritual teacher Aurobindo and later of Sathya Sai Baba, was a well-known literary figure and educationist in India. His book, Bhagwan Sri Sathya Sai Baba (Gokak 1983), is an exploration of the personality and philosophy of his guru, the work of the Sai Organization, sayings and writings of Sathya Sai Baba, and his impact worldwide.

3 See also Ruhela and Robinson (1976), who explore the challenge of Sathya Sai Baba and his message for the social/behavioural sciences.