CHAPTER FOUR

HEALING, SERVICE, AND CHARACTER

Bio-Civic Ethics

For devotees, Sathya Sai Baba is perceived as providing a framework for a new social order in the contemporary world, one created through concrete programs and institutions in society and through the physical, mental, and spiritual labor of devotees. For this project to be persuasive or effective, the problems of suffering, ignorance, or injustice—the stuff of the human condition—must be addressed. Every devotee has a story of struggling with a life-crisis or challenge. Accounts testify that although the spiritual journey is a joyful process of discovery, growth can also be experienced as painful.

N. Sai Kishore, who joined one of Sathya Sai Baba’s colleges as a commerce student in 1993, says that although he had long cherished the desire of being Baba’s student and was at first very happy in the college, some difficult lessons were in store for him. He developed eczema in his second year and there were rashes all over his body, oozing, bleeding, itching and burning. People tended to avoid him and he suffered a great deal. However, Baba talked to him almost daily, counseled him, and finally gave him some ash to take for three days. This led to the disease receding. Sai Kishore says that the suffering he experienced taught him several lessons:

Firstly… I found someone who loved me more than anyone else in the world. Secondly, it taught me the value of patience. Any joy or sorrow, however overwhelming or overpowering it may seem to be at present, has to pass… Thirdly, it increased my faith in Swami and my love for Him. Last… Life is too precious to waste worrying and brooding over petty things. (Trayee Saptamayee no date: 48)

Stories of Baba’s miracles, healing touch, or words of advice abound in devotees’ accounts, as they wrestle with modes of putting into practice their understanding of his message:

I wanted to do something for Baba and the ashram. It has always been my way to “take on projects.” On the way home [to the U.S.] in the
plane, I fantasized about how I could volunteer to do something in India. I wanted to be important in Baba’s eyes. I feel deeply asleep on the plane and had a dream: The roof of the temple at the ashram was leaking. Everyone was running over with ladders to try and fix it. I ran over with a ladder too. Baba stopped me and said, “No, you go home and fix your own roof first.” I woke up embarrassed at my need for self-importance. But I got the message. I went home to study Sai Baba’s message and to work on my own life. (Shander 2000: 155–156)

Some of these accounts may seem familiar and reflect experiences that can be shared by non-devotees. At the same time, like other religious subjects, devotees must make sense of their place in the world and the modalities in which they do so reflects the sensibility of the movement. Their meaning-making is not a static enterprise but a process that lends itself to growing refinement or shifts over time. There is always a realm of play: it is accepted that Baba is divine and omniscient and his unexpected grace, compassion, or presence is available. The message imbibed is deeply personal and embodied but also located in shared institutional frameworks, providing what I shall call “bio-civic ethics”—a sensory moral praxis that establishes a meaningful and transformative relationship between the body-self and civic space—a sphere of embodied citizenship.

Within the Sathya Sai Baba movement, the individual (seen as a composite of body, mind, and soul) and the civic are ineluctably intertwined, the transformation of the one engendering the transformation of the other. In this sense, the Sathya Sai Baba movement has striking parallels with several other contemporary religious movements. Sarvodaya in Sri Lanka, for example, led by A.T. Ariyaratne and inspired by Buddhism and Gandhi, is based on the idea that the awakening and liberation of the self and the world are interrelated. The Noble Truths—about suffering and the end of suffering—are given both a mundane and extramundane meaning (Bond 1996, 2004). Similarly, Soka Gakkai has become a global force through Daisaku Ikeda’s Buddhist Humanism (with its pillars of peace, education, and culture) that teaches the empowerment of the self and other to attain happiness and create value (Seager 2006). Or, as Giri (2002: 23) reminds us in the case of Habitat for Humanity, self-sacrifice is also self-nurture. Bodily reform—retraining, re-schooling, refocusing physical habits—is crucial to the creation of new subjects and new worlds, as Comaroff and Comaroff (1992: 69–91) argue for the Tshidi Zionist churches. The body, they suggest, is not just a metaphor or template for social classifications but also metonymic with material and cultural processes.