CHAPTER SEVEN

SOMATIC REGIMES OF CITIZENSHIP IN NAIROBI

In the Tracks of Baba

While I was idly watching a documentary one night on the “Out of Africa” thesis about the dispersion of *homo erectus* and *homo sapiens* on the public television channel in my apartment in Atlanta, my attention was caught when an interviewee spoke passionately about the history of the “Africoid” people throughout the world. Images of this population flashed across the screen: Australian aborigines, some citizens in the Middle East, and so on, and then suddenly and without explanation, an image of Sathya Sai Baba. I was struck by how obvious this connection seemed to the interviewee and also about the media tracks made by Sathya Sai Baba’s images that resulted in him being connected to Africa. It is doubtful that the interviewee knew much about Baba and was making claims based on his perception of Baba’s appearance such as his hair. He may not have known that Sathya Sai Baba had once traveled to East Africa in the early post-Independence years. This visit coincided with the growth of a devotion to him there and the formation of Sai Centers in other parts of urban Africa.

The interviewee’s comments did signal the reciprocal links between Africa and South Asia, whether or not we accept the “Africoid” heritage of Sai Baba. There is now considerable scholarship about South Asians in Africa, the roles played by mercantile communities and capitalists, the philanthropic contributions of Asians, the labor flows that coincided with the colonial presence in South Asia and Africa, and Asian-African literature. There is also greater acknowledgement about the experience and presence of Africans in India, the slave trade to the sub-continent, and communities of Sidis in Gujarat, Karnataka, or Andhra Pradesh, who trace their roots to Africa.¹ This historical, fictional, and ethnographic work serves to contextualize the tracks that have been forged in the Indian Ocean world including that of Sai Baba devotion.

¹ A literature review of the former is impossible here but for Africans in India see, for example, Catlin-Jairazbhoy and Alpers (2004), Sadiq Ali (1996).
A study by Markovits (2000) of the circulation of merchants and commercial workers between South Asia and other world regions before and after colonial rule is particularly relevant for this chapter. He makes three main arguments against a unitary notion of the South Asian diaspora. First, since the start of the nineteenth century most South Asians in the “diaspora” were not permanent but temporary workers, many of whom returned and left again. He suggests that these movements “belong to the sphere of ‘circulation’ more than to the sphere of ‘migration’” (p. 5). His approach does not privilege the arrival points of migrants but also examines points of departure. Second, region and locality were more important features of migrants’ identities than religion or ethnicity. Thus, migrants from a particular village or region in India maintained links of sociality with each other (regardless of other differentials) in the new places where they found themselves. Third, there were differences in occupation and class among migrant South Asians. Before 1950, most were unskilled laborers, skilled and semi-skilled workers, and commercial groups. Later, middle-class professionals became more important. Today, migrants and immigrants in business, academia, and the professions, who are very mobile geographically and socially and yet maintain links to points of origin, comprise an “international bourgeoisie” with “great diversity in terms of regional origins and historical trajectories” (ibid. p. 282). As we will see, these aspects are borne out in the case of the South Asian devotees of Sai Baba, who are less of a unitary ethnic diaspora than a networked global bourgeoisie with many points of origin, departure, and historical connection to Africa.

The formation of Sai Centers and the activities supported by them have to be contextualized within the growth of voluntary associations in African cities, where the increase in urban population has accelerated in the last five decades. The population of the urban agglomeration of Nairobi, for instance, grew from about 137,000 persons in 1950 to 2.7 million in 2005. African cities today are experiencing a crisis of services, infrastructure, and democratic participation: about 75 percent of urban services and needs lie in the “informal” sector. While voluntary associations played a role in earlier decades, the urban crisis has highlighted their role in cities as service providers and their influence in the developmental process, governance, and civil society (Tostensen

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