CHAPTER EIGHT

SITES OF SOCIALITY IN ATLANTA

Baba in the Land of Gospel and Blues

The Sri Sathya Sai Seva Organization is not listed in phonebooks in the United States but it is not difficult to find signs of Sathya Sai Baba’s presence in various institutional niches and public arenas in American cities. Walking into the Hard Rock Café in Atlanta or the House of Blues in Orange County, California, one might be faced with a picture of Baba and sometimes a quotation (“Love All, Serve All”) that is attributed to him. My favorite New Age bookshop in Atlanta, Crystal Blue, routinely carries books by Sathya Sai Baba and his devotees; most New Age bookshops do. A friend writing from Los Angeles sends me a brochure for a private Gay and Lesbian Sai Baba Center in West Hollywood. As soon as some Sai devotees in Atlanta learned that I was moving to California in 2002, they insisted that I visit a shrine at the home of the Mangru family in Colusa (a small town in northern California, population 5,000) where ash and ambrosia form on pictures of Sai Baba, Christ, and others. In Colusa, not only is the spontaneous presence of ash and nectar a sign of Sathya Sai Baba’s grace, but one of the new objects of worship when I visited the shrine in the early part of 2003 was a robe worn by Sathya Sai Baba that rested on the chair meant for him in the shrine. Apparently, a devotee who had met Baba recently had been given this robe for “Colusa Nilayam,” as the shrine is sometimes known. Devotees travel from all over the region to visit, even though this is not an official Sai Center. More recently, on a trip in August 2006 to New Mexico’s Mesa Verde, I listened to a white female park ranger talk eloquently about Native American cosmology, remembering and forgetting, and the nature of the body as a garment while seated with other visitors in the thousand-year-old Cliff Palace. I thanked her as I was leaving. She asked me if I was from India and knew of the guru Sathya Sai Baba.

The official US Sai Organization is divided into ten regions comprising several states with their Centers (see Table 4) coordinated by the Sathya Sai Baba Council of America established in 1975. Its first
President was Dr. John Hislop, who visited Baba in 1968. Like Howard Murphet, an Australian Theosophist devotee drawn to Baba in the 1960s, Hislop’s engagement with Baba emerged after his association with other teachers and traditions including Theosophy, J. Krishnamurti, and Buddhism. The Council has established a national information center located at the Sathya Sai Baba Book Center of America at Tustin, California. This provides information to the public and devotees about Baba, Sai Centers in the US, and the Central Council, while distributing books on Sai Baba, videos, cassettes, journals and newsletters such as the Sanathana Sarathi (published in Prashanti Nilayam), the Sathya Sai Newsletter, USA (published in Tustin), Sai World: A Newsletter for Children and Youth (from San Diego), and Sathya Sai Service Opportunities (from Brooklyn). Like Sai Centers elsewhere, each Center has a president, vice-president, and coordinators for devotional, service, and educational activities that are meant to support the spiritual life of devotees. Activities include weekly meetings that focus on the singing of bhajans, meditation, and the study of Sai teachings and literature. Educational activities are geared towards spiritual education for children from ages six to sixteen. Each Sai Center conducts a range of service activities in its neighborhood: food for the homeless and indigent, blood donation camps, work in shelters, with juveniles, and in prisons. Centers are recognized as philanthropic institutions in several regions.

As Table 4 reveals, the total number of official Sai Centers in 2006 was 192. The Mid-Atlantic (32), Northeast (26) and Pacific South (25) regions have the largest number of Sai Centers followed closely by the North-Central region (23) and Northern California and Nevada region (20). The number of Sai Centers is largest in the states of California (40), New York (17), Florida (11), New Jersey (11), Connecticut (9), and Oregon (7), suggesting that the movement is largely coastal in its base. However, it does have a fairly significant mid-Western presence in states like Illinois (7) and Ohio (5) and in the southwest in Arizona (7). These are a little more than half the total number of Sai Centers in the country. North and South Dakota, Alaska, Idaho, Wyoming, and West Virginia have none at all (nor does Washington D.C. but the two Sai Centers in Maryland serve the capital). The US Organization is

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1 Sai Baba: Man of Miracles (1971) written by Howard Murphet, an Australian Theosophist drawn to Baba in the 1960s, must stand as one of the classics drawing non-Indian devotees to Baba.