CHAPTER-V

Transnational Networks of Sathya Sai Baba Movement

Introduction

Social network analysis is one of the most influential theories in social science today especially applicable to the analysis of local social groups to the entire global system. The disciplines that find social network analysis include anthropology, sociology, psychology, management and health studies. Social network approach in social sciences initially began in the field of sociometry, attempting to quantify social relationships. Although Mark Granovetter (1973) extended the use of social networks to understand many different relations in the social sciences, it was J. A. Barnes (1972) who first applied social network analysis to the analysis of social relations. The social relationships of Sathya Sai Baba with his family and kin, childhood friends and neighbourhoods including villagers and in larger context the million devotees across the world are key to understand the social dynamics of this transnational movement.

Any social network consists of a set of people connected by a set of social relationships such as friendship, family relatives and others (Knoke and Kuklinski 1982). Social network analysis has concentrated mostly on patterns of relations among people, organisations, states etc. (Berkowitz 1982; Wellman 1988; Wasserman & Faust 1994). In the social network analysis, emphasis is given to two types of relations (i.e., center and periphery or egos and alters or object and objects), examining how these networks work within this environment.

Social network analysis uses variety of techniques to understand the dynamics of these networks. Barnes (1972) points out that while studying social network of two-person ties (dyadic network), one has to interpret their functioning in the light of the two persons’ relation with other network members (ego-centered and
multiplex networks). Thus it analyses human networks based on the terms such as *egos* and *alters* and their internal dynamics such as direct and indirect networks between alters (i.e., friend of a friend) which leads the networks into larger social systems. This social network approach facilitates the study of how information flows through direct and indirect network relations. The network analysis can also be used to determine the social capital of individual actors. These concepts are often displayed in a social network diagram where nodes are the points and ties are the lines (see Diagram -1).

**Diagram-1**

![Diagram-1](image)

**Units of Analysis**

The concepts used in social network analysis vary from study to study based on the scope and nature, and from one discipline to another. However, the important concepts that may be employed in the network analysis of religious/spiritual movement of Sathya Sai Baba are briefly given below with illustrations.

*Relations*: Relations (sometimes called *strands*) are characterised by content, direction and strength. The content of a relation refers to the resource that is exchanged. A relation can be directed or undirected. For example, the actor ‘A’ may give social support to the actor ‘B.’ Thus it shows that there are two relations: giving support and receiving support. Alternately, actors may share an
undirected friendship relation i.e., they both maintain the relationship and there is no specific direction to it. However, while they both share friendship, the relationship may be unbalanced: one actor may claim a close friendship and the other a weaker friendship, or the communication may be initiated more frequently by one actor than the other. Thus, while the relationship is shared, its expression may be asymmetrical. Relations also differ in strength. Such strength can be operationalised in a number of ways (Marsden & Campbell 1984; Wellman & Wortley 1990).

**Ties:** Although a tie connects a pair of actors by one or more relations, it is possible that, pairs may maintain a tie based on one relation only. Thus ties also vary in content, direction and strength. Ties are often referred to as weak or strong (Marsden & Campbell 1984). Ties that are weak are generally infrequently maintained and are non-intimate connections, whereas strong ties include combinations of intimacy, self-disclosure, provision of reciprocal services, frequent contact, and kinship, as between close friends or colleagues.

**Multiplexity:** The more number of relations in a tie, the more multiplex (or multistranded) the tie becomes. Social network scholars have found that multiplex ties are more intimate, voluntary, supportive and also durable (Wellman & Wortley 1990; Wellman 1992).

**Types of Networks**

There are essentially two major types of social networks, viz., ego-centred and whole networks, as enumerated by social scientists. These two types form the most basic variety on which all other sub-types are developed. A brief note on these two types of social networks, which are found useful in the analysis of Sathya Sai Baba movement, is given below.
Ego-Centered Networks: The simplest kind of network beyond the dyad is the ego-centered network. In the ego-centered type of network one can consider all the objects or nodes that have a direct relationship with the object. Social network analysts build a picture of the network by counting the number of relations; the diversity of relations and the links between alters named in the network. The ego-centered approach is particularly useful when the population is large, or the boundaries of the population are hard to define. When all the persons (actors) connected or related directly to a given person (actor) it is called the “interpersonal environment.” In graph theory this is called “neighbourhood.” These persons in the neighbourhood also have their own interpersonal environment and so on. The immediate environment is called the “first order zone”; those who constitute the environment of persons in the first order zone are called the “second order zone.” It is also important to note here that, in graph theory there is a minimal path distance of 1 (one) to every person in the first order zone, a minimal path distance of 2 (two) to every person in the second order zone (Garton et al., 1999).

Whole Networks: The second type of network is called “whole network” which is based on some specific criterion of population boundaries such as formal organisations, departments, and clubs or kinship groups. This approach considers both the occurrence and non-occurrence of relations among all members of a population. A whole network describes the ties that all members of a population maintain with all others in that group. Ideally, the approach requires responses from all members on their relations with all others in the same environment. The number of possible ties here is equal to the size of the population (n) multiplied by (n-1) and divided by 2 if the tie is undirected i.e., for a population of size 20, there are 380 links for each specific relation (Garton et al., 1999).

An attempt is made here to analyse the Sathya Sai Baba movement from the social network perspective, focusing on the relationship between actor (Sathya Sai Baba) and actors (his devotees). It will also examine how the devotees (actors)
make their connection with Sathya Sai Baba and influence the persons in contact to become devotees of Sai Baba.

Graph-2

Social Networks Analysis of Sathya Sai Baba Movement

The charismatic power of Sathya Sai Baba can be seen through his ability to attract his community sympathisers beyond the boundaries of his close relatives and friends. The growth of the movement shows that, there were three concentric circles developed around his primarily charismatic personality. First, a small group consisting of Sathya Sai Baba’s family members and his own caste groups in his village – primary charismatics. Second, a wider circle of community
supporters beyond his village to neighbouring districts without whose support any charismatic movement would not have been possible – secondary charismatics. Thirdly, people as a whole, namely, those people who listened to Sathya Sai Baba and were attracted to him through his miraculous power of healing – tertiary charismatics.¹

Sathya Sai Baba Movement is very similar to the network model of ego-centered network especially in the context of his early popularity within the village “Puttaparthi.” The primary charismatic corresponds to Ego, whereas the secondary charismatics, tertiary charismatics, and the people as a whole roughly correspond to ego’s intimate network, effective network, and extended network. This correlation is analysed further in detail in the following discussion.

Sathya Sai Baba’s childhood is described in literatures in great detail, underlying his charismatic attributes at home and outside it. Most of his charisma during the childhood was seen in his village and its surroundings such as the bank of river Chitravathi with admirers mainly from around that village. Sathya Sai Baba also moved beyond this geographic boundary to other villages, districts and so on to demonstrate his charismatic personality during his teens. These exceptional qualities of Sathya Sai Baba and the locations where he moved were carefully written in the Sathya Sai Baba’s biography written by scholars such as Kasturi, M.N. Rao and other close devotees who had first hand experience of miracles during that time. In the social network analysis it is important to note that, the networks do not give importance to a particular context rather it takes multiple context into consideration. For instance, in addition to Sai Baba’s everyday charisma (at home and at schools) one has to look at his network with the kin and friends in the villages and surrounding regions.

¹ The idea of Network Analysis of Sathya Sai Baba Movement here in this chapter is drawn from the work of Dennis C. Duling (1999; 2000). I sincerely acknowledge the author and the original works from where I borrowed the ideas and interpreted in this chapter.
From the perspective of network analysis, Sathya Sai Baba can be considered as an intimate alter to another ego’s social network i.e., Shirdi Sai Baba. According to the literatures, Sathya Sai Baba attracted and accepted devotees of both men and women from rich and poor classes. These devotees were basically from the nearby villages who had spent much time with Sathya Sai Baba while discussing in his native language. For the initial years, especially between the year 1940 and 1950, when he was between the age 14 and 24 years, as early devotees have recorded in their account, Sathya Sai Baba gave few talks but discussed mostly with his devotees in his native language.

Baba used to take the devotees out almost daily to the sands of the Chitravathi River, and prayers were held there under the stars with the hills as venerable listeners and the river murmuring response. ... Sitting on the sands, Sai Baba teaches the devotees new songs in Telugu. He has composed for their elevation and edification, and he encourages people to ask him any questions regarding spiritual matters, for which he gives satisfying answers (Kasturi 2003: 108).

In the ego-centered network, the secondary charismatics, the followers of Sathya Sai Baba are alters, in ego’s intimate network and form as ego’s first order zone. They represent at least two “activity fields,” family and outside the family in schools and villages - include his close friends. These alters have the most frequent and lasting interaction with ego, thus they form the greatest “adjacency” and “reachability.” They have more centrality and prestige than other members in the network. These three alters have the strongest ties with ego and form a “cluster”; they are also focal persons and form third-party links.

In any network, a major problem is that as the network expands, ego spends increasing time and resources holding it together in the face of competition from other focal members. Thus, rivalry develops in what is already an unstable alliance in most of the religious and spiritual movements. In case of Sathya Sai
Baba, these rivalries did exist during the early days of his popularity, especially during his declaration of avatar of earlier Sai Baba of Shirdi. The challenges that Sathya Sai Baba had to encounter in opposition to his claim, that he is the re-incarnation of Shirdi Sai Baba are extensively debated in a number of works (one can refer the following works for an understanding of the conflicting situation (Haraldsson 1987; Gokak 1975; Babb 1983).

Despite the divided opinion of people on whether or not Sathya Sai Baba is an avatar and that too an avatar of Shirdi Sai Baba and certain negative popularity, Sathya Sai Baba’s early devotees in the villages did not abandon their belief in him; they remained active throughout, providing all their support to Sathya Sai Baba wherever he went to preach and surprise his audience through his miracles. They also helped him to effectively negate the adverse propaganda from his critics. To a large extent Sathya Sai Baba succeeded in advocating his message of salvation and liberation, and the act of healing; in return the villagers offered food and shelter and “moral support” to Sai Baba and his devotees.

In the network analysis, tertiary charismatics generally correspond to ego’s effective network in the second order zone. They are “friends of friends,” usually known to ego, but less adjacent. They are outside the intimate network. The content of the exchange between them is spiritual, political and material besides hope and hospitality. In so far as they are initially unknown to ego, they could be imagined as overlapping ego’s extended network. According to the literary sources, there was a third group, “the people as a whole” in other words the blind followers, who include physically challenged and diseased people who were blessed through the healing touch of Sri Sathya Sai Baba’s miraculous power. In the network analysis such largely anonymous persons would normally form ego’s extended network, or third order zone. They are “friends of friends of friends,” unknown to ego, but helpful at a distance. It is argues that, all the members of Sathya Sai Baba spiritual movement believed in his divinity and charisma. The
following section will attempt to develop a rather extensive network of Sathya Sai Baba through the analysis of “Spatial Networks” and “Specific Networks.”

Spatial Networks

In modern archaeology, “regionalism” or “settlement archaeology” can be defined as an archaeological/anthropological method that excavates a number of sites, alternating with field surveys in a larger geographical region. Its aim is to shed light on surviving literary evidences about that region, and thus the history (Duling 1999; 2000). There are two important locations where Sathya Sai Baba’s charisma was brought into light. The first of course, is the Puttaparthi village on the bank of the river Chitravathi. In comparison to this, the other sites where Sathya Sai Baba revealed his charisma were in the neighbouring states of Karnataka, Tamilnadu and Maharashtra - especially during and after 1940s.

Graph theorists argue that there are physical and natural points where one location emerges and that has the ability to control the flow of goods, services, and information in exchange networks. Some urbanologists maintain that villages and cities form an “urban system” in which goods and services flow from the periphery to the centre and with corresponding social-structural stratification and its attendant unequal distribution of goods and services. Although the authors of the above theories discussed in relation to business or trade networks between places, it is argued that Sathya Sai Baba’s network with other villages form a kind of transaction, which is exchanged through spiritual or charismatic knowledge.

It is well known that rural places mentioned in the literature of Sathya Sai Baba are vague. However, the scholars argue that the villages had a wider network and contained networks of “village clusters,” that is specific population centres (Kasturi 2003). As the river Chitravathi of Puttaparthi village flows and connects to other important villages in the neighbouring states, it is argued here that, there could be possible linkages between people of Puttaparthi village with other
villagers for the transactions of spiritual/charismatic knowledge. M.S. Leela’s book *Lokantha Sai* contains some of the exceptional and exquisite divine miracles of Sathya Sai Baba that she personally witnessed in company of her parents during her childhood.

A few of them are mentioned here:

An old widow - from a distant land - whose husband had expired in 1924 came to Sathya Sai Baba and requested him for her husband’s photograph which she wanted to worship. Sai Baba produced the same from the sands of Chitravathi River, despite the fact he was never photographed throughout his life, while Sai Baba had incarnated in 1926 (http://sathya-sai0.tripod.com/bala/lokanatha-1.htm).

M.S. Leela has also witnessed Sathya Sai Baba’s transforming of tamarind tree into Kalapavruksha - from whose tips of branches, apples, oranges, plums, dates, guavas and lockets were seen hanging. As she wrote in her book:

> We all rushed to the tree and plucked whatever we wanted. With Baba’s permission I took a branch with two apples hanging, to show it to my classmates and professors at Presidency College, Madras when I was doing my post-graduation in Botany in 1949 (available at: http://sathya-sai0.tripod.com/bala/lokanatha-1.htm).

Puttaparthi is described many times by scholars in almost all the literature, because it is the birthplace of Sathya Sai Baba. It is an agricultural village situated on a hillside of Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh. The population estimated during the initial days of Sathya Sai Baba’s popularity was 1200 to 2000. Sathya Sai Baba always projected Puttaparthi as the centre of his activity, apparently because of his kin base. Not much attention has been paid to write on the relatives
of Sathya Sai Baba in Puttaparthi and the neighbouring villages, on whom he could depend. Sathya Sai Baba’s network has gone beyond the Puttaparthi village to Bukkapatnam, Kamalapuram and Uravakonda in Cuddapah district of Andhra Pradesh. During the early 1950s, he attracted a large number of devotees from Madras and Bangalore. As the devotees increased in number, invitations requesting Sathya Sai Baba to visit then cities and towns in the neighbouring states started. Accordingly, Sathya Sai Baba began travelling to places such as Bangalore, Mysore, Madras and Madurai.

**Specific Networks**

While the spatial networks of Sathya Sai Baba gave the historical knowledge about the urbanology and settlement archaeology, the specific networks will provide the kinship networks of Sathya Sai Baba. Such an analysis of networks based on social proximity is underlined in “homophily theory” (McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook 2001). Homophily refers to the tendency of people to interact more with their own kind - whether by preference or induced by opportunity constraints - as defined by such individual characteristics as race, gender, educational class, organisational unit and so on (McPherson & Smith-Lovin 1987). The most visible cluster in the intimate networks of Sathya Sai Baba consisted of Kondama Raju (grandfather), Pedda Venkama Raju (father), and Karnam family (neighbour) especially Subbamma (Karnam’s first wife).

*The Kondama Raju Family*

Kondama Raju’s family has consisted of six members including Lakshamma - the grandmother of Sathya Sai Baba and wife of Kondama Raju - and four sons: Pedda Venkama Raju, Chinna Venkama Raju, Venkatarama Raju and Venkata Subba Raju
Kondama Raju, the grandfather of Sathya Sai Baba, plays an important role for the spiritual development of the movement. He was a religious person in the sense that he believed in Hindu scriptures. Important among them was the Ramayana. He used to act the role of Lakshmana in the Ramayana plays that were enacted at Puttaparthy and other villages of the Taluk during his time. Added to this, he also followed strict vegetarianism and observed all holy festivals of Hindu calendar with great devotion. He was very fond of his grandson Sathyanarayana especially because of his early orientation towards asceticism. Sathyanarayana inherited all the qualities of his grandfather such as vegetarianism, religiousness and humanitarianism including the art of good cooking.

While most of the family members had their doubts on Sathyanarayan’s unique power for miracles, Kondama Raju admired young Sathya’s capabilities and encouraged him. When Sathya was in Uravakonda with his elder brother for his schooling, his grandfather was always anxiously waiting at Puttaparthy for Sathya’s visit. And when Sathya returned to Puttaparthy his grand father appreciated him for his deeds of miracle. He supported Sathya for his “divine quality” and told to Sathya’s father Venkama Raju that, “…let Him do whatever He wants, do not raise any objection. He is immersed in divine consciousness. Let him stay with me for some time” (http://www.eaisai.com/baba/docs/d031123.html). This shows that, the early spiritual awakening of Sathya Sai Baba was greatly encouraged by his close circles of relatives who assume a very important role in the extension of social network beyond the primary group.

Sathya’s grandmother Lakshamman too also has influence on him through her religious beliefs and practices. She was a highly religious lady, more than her husband Kondama Raju, whose life was entirely regulated by the religious calendar, with its rotation of holy fasts, vows and vigils. She observed these festivals very scrupulously. Her role as “grandmother” was greatly appreciated by Sathya Sai Baba in later days. However, there is hardly any description referring to his grandmother’s role in this spiritual movement in any of the writings on Sai
Baba. The social network analysis also deals with such characters which are unknown to ego’s extended network but have played important roles in the network.

*The Pedda Venkama Raju Family*

Pedda Venkama Raju, the father and Easwaramma, the mother of Sathya Sai Baba had three sons and two daughters: in the order of their birth, Seshama Raju (son), Jaanakiraamayya (son), Venkamma (daughter), Parvathamma (daughter) and Sathyanarayana (son). In Hindu scriptures it is mentioned that, the individual child’s life is greatly influenced by the qualities of his parents. The instances could be found in the life of Jijabai who made Shivaji a great warrior; Rama’s divinity blossomed because of the noble qualities of his mother Kausalya; the twins Lava and Kusha became powerful and famous due to their noble and virtuous mother Sita; Gandhi became Mahatma because of his pious mother Putlibai etc. (www.sssct.org/Discourses/2003/PDF/birthday.pdf). These instances are recalled in the case of Sathya’s birth, as he was regarded the avatar of god in the Raju family. In Puttaparthi, as elsewhere in India, it has been a common practice among Hindu women to perform the sacred ritual “Sathyanarayana Vrata” (a vow to the lord Sathyanarayana) on every full moon day. Easwaramma used to regularly perform Sathyanarayana Vrata in the company of her neighbour Karanam Subbamma.

The incidents described in the Sai Baba theology depict the stories similar to the birth of any of the avatars in Hindu scriptures, which the ardent devotees loved. In the same way, the birth of the child “Sathya” became a miracle of god’s incarnation on earth. It may be of interest to explain a few incidents that took place in Puttaparthi before and after Sathya’s birth to explain the social network perspective. Prior to the birth of Sathya, a significant incident took place in his home, especially with his mother Easwaramma.
One day Easwaramma was fetching water from the well. All of a sudden she saw a white luminous light emerging like lightning from the sky entering her womb. There was a sudden gust of wind. Subbamma (neighbor) who came out of her house at that time saw the light entering the womb of Easwaramma (www.saibaba.ws/avatar/adventsathyasai.htm).

The incident of this kind – involving unusual experiences – brought distant groups called “friends of friends” in network analysis to Easwaramma to know more about gods and his miracles. Later on, these groups form a “clique” in the social network of Sathya Sai Baba movement.

The Karnam Family

Karnam, the village headman, was the neighbour of Venkama Raju. He had two wives, Subbamma and Kamalamma. Subbamma, the first wife, who had implicit faith on Sathya’s early miracles, plays an important role in his social network, especially in promoting his “extended networks.” Although elderly in age, Subbamma was childless; she used to invite the village children and provide them food as a token of love and affection.

Subbamma was closely associated with Sathya’s mother even before his birth as a close friend. Although she was an orthodox Brahmin lady, she was very much influenced with Sathya’s family, especially by pious nature of Easwaramma. She supported Easwaramma and gave her company in performing Sathyanarayana Vrata in order to have a child who will enhance the prestige of their family. It was mentioned that, during the seventh month of Easwaramma’s pregnancy, Subbamma told her “…the child in your womb is safe only due to the grace of Lord Sathyanarayana.” She took the promise from Easwaramma that the child would be named “Sathyanarayana.”
Sathya from childhood, especially when he started performing miracles, used to stay at the house of Subbamma, because of her special treatment. Being the close follower, Subbamma had experienced the miracles of his childhood such as “early experience of smiling of Sathya while pinching to cry” and “seeing the entire universe in Sathya’s mouth while feeding.” In course of time Subbamma even provided some land for the construction of a temple for Sathya when his fame spread far and wide and the number of visitors increased. This small temple provided the initial base for the Sathya Sai Baba movement during its early phase. It was also mentioned that, from Subbamma’s house to small temple, Sathya started teaching and revealing important miracles and this divine quality took him to different places.

Karnam, on the other hand - the husband of Subbamma and an actor in the extended network of ego’s second order zone - by virtue of being childless went to attend the Pandaripur shrine of Sri Vittal and made offerings there for obtaining a son. Upon his return to Puttaparthi, he started bhajans in praising the Lord of Pandaripur. Sathya also joined that group with enthusiasm and was instrumental in dyeing of clothes for orange uniforms, headbands, sticks, red cloth to be used for performing Pandari Bhajans. He also asked villagers to keep oil lamps during the Pandari Bhajans. These qualities of Sathya brought Karnam closer to Sathya and his family. The social network takes these small groups (circles of families or friends) as an important factor for the culmination of the large-scale movement. As Jacobson points out “…the small group has its place in the majority of religions, the master and the disciples the band of brothers and the family” (Jacobson 1992). The following section will deal with the three important zones that created as a result of the growth of the Sathya Sai Baba movement.

First Order Zone: Dyadic Networks

During the childhood, Sathya Sai Baba performed various miracles, which attracted his childhood friends. The network that was created between Sathya Sai
Baba and his friends was simple during his childhood, as it was a two-way reciprocal network that the friends liked him and his miracles, and on the other hand he entertained them through miracles. In network theory, the sharing of an attribute leads to the stronger relationships; the sharing of attributes of Sathya Sai Baba especially his miracles through which he gave different kinds of gifts to his friends and in return received their attention and reverence. This simple two-way network between Sathya Sai Baba and his friends constitutes what the social network theorists call “ego-centered network.” The friends, relatives and village neighbours are connected directly to Sathya Sai Baba. This is what in network theory refers to “interpersonal environment” and “neighbourhood” in graph theory. These persons in the neighbourhood have also their own interpersonal environment, which includes friends, kin, and members of the village or any organisation.

In the social network theory, the first order zone consist of two types of relationships between kin groups such as mother, father, children, aunts, uncles and cousins, and the second order zone consists of friends, neighbours, acquaintance or co-workers. The first order zone of social networks developed by Sathya Sai Baba’s family, which later projected the charismatic leadership to the outside world, is examined below.

In the analysis of social network of Sathya Sai Baba, two major types of “social system” and its offshoots “culture” are found which are interlinked with each other. The first kind of system appears to be “formal system” which can be compared and contrasted with the “informal system.” Network theorist calls this as non-prescribed or non-instituted reactions. Although these informal or non-instituted or non-prescribed relations are sidelined from the formal/prescribed relations which always the case of “taken for granted,” there is internal and logical dynamics correlates between the two. In the Sathya Sai Baba movement, the formal consists of the complex kinship systems that are embedded within the
structured social relations. This embeddedness appears to be the ‘cause’ for the emergence of social networks.

**Second Order Zone: Ego-Centered Networks**

As Sathya’s fame regarding miracles spreads far and wide, people from other villages, towns and cities started visiting Puttaparthi. Even persons possessed by evil spirits were brought to Sathya, by believing that he could drive away the evil spirits. Similarly, mentally retarded persons were also brought to Sathya. True to their faith, Sathya Sai Baba’s miracles could succeed in driving away the evil spirits and curing the patients suffering from mental ailments. This was the quality of Sathya, which made the villagers to believe him as a divine being. These groups from different villages occupy an important place in the ego-centered network of Sathya Sai Baba and falls under the category of homophily. These early networks of villagers had a lasting effect in expanding further the ego-centered networks to extended or multiplex networks.

Initially Sathya Sai Baba’s network was confined to Puttaparthi village and its adjacent villages along the bank of river Chitravathi. The people associated with Sathya’s miracles were very much associated with the river Chitravathi. The early followers built local temples to worship Sathya Sai Baba as an icon of their preferred god along with other Hindu gods in their temples. The town now is surrounded by several temples - both small and large - with imposing images of Sathya Sai Baba. His followers built a Shiva temple at Sathya Sai Baba’s birthplace, to signify his divine origin.

Similarly, Sathya Sai Baba’s childhood friends constitute important as being “alter” in ego’s second order zone. Sathya Sai Baba performed several miracles while he was with his childhood friends. His friends became close to him and considered him as their “Guru” recognising his extraordinary qualities. The legendary stories of the childhood portrayed Sathya Sai Baba as a perfect student.
The ego-centered network constitutes the core of social network analysis as mentioned earlier in this chapter. The networks between Sathya Sai Baba, his parents and kin groups, neighbours and friends formed the key to understand the emergence of Sathya Sai Baba from an ordinary person “Sathya.” Beyond this ego-centered network, Sathya Sai Baba’s relations extended to multiplex network, with key actors being the believers of Hinduism, Indians in other parts of the world and the non-Indians forming the “third-order zone.”

**Third Order Zone: Multiplex Networks**

The number of Sathya Sai Baba devotees has been constantly growing; initially his devotees were drawn from within India and later on Indians in other countries, Europeans, Americans, and others from all over the world. These wider networks were possible as a result of the “miracles” which Sathya Sai Baba has been performing right from his childhood and continues to do it even today, especially the materialisation of “lingam” being most important during the Sivaratri festival. Publication of Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings through print media has further extended his fame and spirituality. The devotees, who initially visited Puttaparthi in large numbers especially from Maharashtra, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, and Orissa, were basically the devotees of former Sai Baba of Shirdi. However, these devotees after experiencing Sathya Sai Baba’s Darshan and miracles publicised him as an avatar of god. His fame attracted especially overseas Indians, who started visiting Puttaparthi. The “diasporic Indians,” as they are called in a generic term, have shown greater interest in becoming Sathya Sai Baba’s devotees than the native Indians. It is important to note here that, Sathya Sai Baba’s visit to Indian diaspora (East Africa) during 1968 became a milestone in the history of the movement in the Indian diaspora. The Indians who came in contact with Sathya Sai Baba basically belonged to the different class, caste and religious backgrounds in their respective countries. An alternative to the harsh treatment of the colonial host societies during the early 20th century, Indians were looking for a kind of leader who could give them the spiritual satisfaction -
the memories of their homeland. The emergence of Sathya Sai Baba movement later filled this spiritual gap between India and Indian diaspora.

Publication of books and other works on Sathya Sai Baba by his devotees further helped the movement to popularise Sai Baba’s spirituality and teachings in the diaspora. The information revolution - the use of Internet, besides newspapers, magazines, and radio and TV channels - has further extended the popularity of Sathya Sai Baba and his teachings since the 1980s across the world.

An important concept in the Sathya Sai Baba movement is the “social service,” called in other words “seva.” This activity of serving people cutting across race, class, creed and religion is an important factor that attracts large number of Indian diasporic groups to Sathya Sai Baba. The third order zone also covers networks beyond the circles of one’s religion or nation to other nations. In other words it spans outside one’s own linguistic and national boundaries. The number of devotees from other countries often called “foreigners” in Sathya Sai Baba’s ashram, increased over the years as a result of Sathya Sai Baba’s popularity in their respective countries.

One of the reasons for this increasing number of foreigners being attracted to Sathya Sai Baba spiritualism is the publication of Sai Baba discourses and biography that underlined his miracles and spiritual healing. For instance, Peter Phipps’s *Greater Than You Know: Sathya Sai Baba, Jesus Christ and Christianity*, influenced many Christians to become the follower of Sathya Sai Baba. In this book the author has illustrated the similarities between Jesus Christ and Sathya Sai Baba. For instance, Phipps mentions:

I have found that in studying Sathya Sai Baba one come closer to understand the nature and mission of Jesus Christ. More than by reading the Bible and imagining oneself in New Testament times, by observing the works and studying the teachings of Sathya Sai
Baba, one may understand better the works and teaching of Jesus, for they are very much the same (1997: 41).

Many foreigners thus came to Prasanthi Nilayam in order to have a glimpse of Sathya Sai Baba and experience his miracles and turned to be ardent devotees. Personal accounts of such experiences of Western devotees, who became close to Sathya Sai Baba and his paranormal powers are important in understanding the process of networking beyond India and Hindus.

The first Australian devotee who met Sathya Sai Baba in India was Howard Murphet. He was probably one of the earliest “foreigners” to witness the materialisation of Lingam - Lingodbhava through a miracle - during Sivaratri days. While Howard Murphet had discovered Sathya Sai Baba in person, an American by name Charles Penn discovered him in spirit. Charles Penn had also witnessed the leelas (miracles) of Sathya Sai Baba. After Charles Penn came John Hislop from USA. His experiences were a virtual store of spiritual knowledge for Sai devotees. His writings were highly illuminating that attracted many devotees from distant places, especially from English speaking countries. One of his experiences with Sathya Sai Baba that attracted maximum number of western audiences was the story of “Weeping Saris” (2003: 22-24). Hislop had also witnessed a resurrection - the resurrection of Walter Cowan - that he has described at great length in his book My Baba and I (2003: 28-31). Samuel Sandweiss, a Jewish psychiatrist from the USA, is another well-recognised devotee of Sathya Sai Baba. His book Sai Baba - The Holy Man and Psychiatrist (1972) is one of the important introductory sources for Westerners on the early life and miracles of Sathya Sai Baba. Few other important “foreigners” having personal experiences with Sathya Sai Baba and had extensive influence on Western devotees through their writings are: Erlandur Haraldsson and Karlis Osis from Iceland, Lowenbrg from Africa, Peggey Mason and Ron Laing from UK, Jagadeesan from Kuala Lumpur and so on.
To sum up, this chapter analysed the social network of Sathya Sai Baba from his early childhood to that of his present day transnational popularity. It is important to note that the spatial networks of Sathya Sai Baba, which the network analysts suggest, form the core of analysis of any such movement where historical, archaeological and urban geography plays crucial role as much similar to specific linkages play through kinship and neighbourhood networks.

The following chapter will examine the growth and development, construction of new religious/spiritual identity, and transnational networks of Sathya Sai Baba with special reference to Indians in the diaspora. The chapter also explores the process of networking of Sathya Sai Baba in the global context.