CHATER-VII

Conclusion

Research on new religious or spiritual movements today have come to occupy an important place in the field of sociology, anthropology, history and international migration. For the last two decades, significant studies have been conducted in many countries and even centres have been started to study this new and emerging field. The specific centres, for instance, that have established to study the new religious movements in the global context are such as: Centre for Studies on New Religions, Torino, Italy; Centre for New Religions, Kings College, London; Research Unit for New Religions and Churches, University of Birmingham, London; Centre for the Study of Religion, Ideas and Society, University of London; Centre for the Study of New Religious Movements at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, California; Institution for the Study of American Religion at the University of California at Santa Barbara; Centre for Studies in Religion and Society, University of Victoria, Canada and so on.

A few scholarly journals have also been established as fora for theory and research on new religious movements. These include Syzygy in the United States, Update in Denmark, and the Journal of Contemporary Religion in England. A number of recent publications on new religious movements contain comprehensive information on scholarly issues, specific groups, and evaluations of organisation and practices. These include Gordon Melton’s Encyclopedia of American Religions (Gale 1992); Bromley and Hadden’s The Handbook on Cults and Sects in America (JAI 1994); Miller’s America's Alternative Religions (SUNY Press 1995); Thomas Robbins’s Cults, Converts, and Charisma (Sage 1988); and Mark Galanter's Cults and New Religious Movements (American Psychiatric Association 1989).
During the 1960s and 1970s when modernisation theory dominated the academic attention by pushing religion into private space, the last two decades saw religion again has come to occupy an important place following the economic development and advances in science and technology. Recently, several Western scholars such as Peter van der Veer, Raymond Williams, Steven Vertovec, Martin Baumann, Peggy Levitt, Paula Richman and others have drawn the academic attention to the contemporary religious processes in the context of diasporic and transnational experience of immigrant communities.

The present study examines one of the spiritual movements of India and its diasporic and transnational networks. It also examines how “diaspora” in recent time is emerging as a “transnational community” because of immigrants’ networking within their communities and participation and networking in the transnational spiritual movements. Through the case study of Sri Sathya Sai Baba Movement, the thesis examines how the involvement of diasporic communities facilitated the movement in its emergence as a “transnational movement” whose network cuts across several national boundaries (see Chapter- V & VI).

Apart from exploring the above issue of general nature, the thesis also explores the following specific questions: how does the diasporic community come to know about Sathya Sai Baba? How do the members of the Sathya Sai Baba spiritualism in the diaspora perceive Sathya Sai Baba? How do the Indians perform their religious traditions - that include the rituals and festivals - and maintain their cultural identity in the diaspora? How do Sathya Sai Baba groups network transnationally and what are the main criteria that bring them to a common platform for networking?

The study was conducted at Puttaparthi with the help of interview schedules and questionnaires. Out of a total of 400 questionnaires circulated among the devotees of Sathya Sai Baba, survey response rates of 22 percent were obtained during the data collection period. In-depth interviews with the respondents, organisational
members of Sathya Sai Baba Centres in the diaspora as well as members of Prasanthi Nilayam Ashram were also conducted. The qualitative data collected from the field were analysed in Chapter-VI. Analyses of in-depth interviews were helpful in obtaining details on immigration history, socio-economic living conditions, cultural identity, transnational networks of Indians and the intricacy in constructing the Sai Baba Centres/Temps in the diaspora. The quantitative data were analysed from the perspective of collating information from a larger sample of respondents on issues of cultural identity and transnational networks as well as the popularisation of Sathya Sai Baba movement in the diaspora.

Interlinking Diaspora, Religion and Transnationalism

Very few studies have been carried out on the interaction between transnational religious/spiritual movements and diasporic communities. Most of the literature on religion and religious/spiritual movements of Indian origin focuses on continuity and changes besides their significance in promoting group solidarity. The literature addresses such aspects as the role of religion in community and identity formation within a host society, links with religious and political organisations in the homeland, and concerns for future generations or gender relations (Kurien 1998, 2001, 2004; Coward et al., 2000; Jacobsen and Kumar 2004; Tatla 1999; Vertovec 2000; Warner and Wittner 1998).

But, “Indian” religions are not just being practiced or adhered to by “Indians” alone, whether at home or in the diaspora. Like the Sathya Sai Baba Movement, Brahma Kumaris (Babb 1987; Hodgkinson 1999), ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness) (Carey 1987; Knott 1986; Dasi 1999), Mata Amritanandamayi (Conway 1994; Tourreil 1994; Warrier 2001), and Meher Baba (Shepherd 1986), to mention a few, present themselves as “universal” or open to all regardless of national, religious or ethnic background. All have followers not only in India and among Indian immigrants but also among Europeans, Americans, Southeast Asians and others. These movements have generally
become multi-site phenomena, and are practiced somewhat differently in the West and in India (see Howell and Nelson 1997). Followers of these new religious movements world over have a strong organisational link to sacred places or persons in India and consider India a spiritual, if not literal homeland, even for the non-Indian adherents of these movements. It may be observed that, these religious/spiritual ties often translate into material and tangible ones with pilgrimage, tourism and support of social programmes in India. They also lead to acculturation in food, dress, music, ritual, and over all ways of life. For instance, at the Sathya Sai Baba centres in the diaspora, one can find special stalls used to install where white dresses along with the books, CDs and DVDs on Sai Baba are displayed for sale apart from a variety of ethnic foods, just as it is done at the Ashram in Prasanthi Nilayam on special occasions. This shows, to some degree, the “Indianizing” feature of the Sathya Sai Baba movement

The magnitude of participation of devotees and establishment of the number of overseas Sai Centres has increased over the years as a result of the easier and more efficient means of communication and transport technology in recent decades. Further the growth of the Sathya Sai Baba movement shows how religious affiliation, ritual practices and even cultural commodities (such as white dresses, audio and video cassettes) are extending transnational social and religious spaces beyond immigrant Indians, covering non-Indians, European and American devotees. Increasing international participation has taken Sathya Sai Baba religion and spiritualism to transnational space, irrespective of ethnic or even religious orientations.

Perhaps as Brubaker argues, “diaspora” should be seen less as a substantive bounded entity or ethno-cultural fact than as “an idiom, a stance, a claim … a way of formulating … identities and loyalties” (Brubaker 2005: 12-13). Overviews of the diverse range of current usages of the concept of “diaspora” show that the term eludes precise definition (Fludernik 2003) and is already being stretched to accommodate various “intellectual, cultural and political agendas” (Brubaker
In India, as Kapur demonstrates, the basis for definitions and concepts of “Indianness” and of who exactly constitute the Indian diaspora has changed historically, and also been applied inconsistently (Kapur 2004). The definition of “Indianness” is also being contested in political struggles between Hindu and Muslim Indian immigrants in the diaspora especially in the United States and U.K., as to whether India is, or should be, a Hindu state or a multi-religious and multi-cultural society (Kurien 2001).

The transnational Sathya Sai Baba movement today constitutes one of the most important new religious/spiritual movements of India which has a large number of followers both in India and in the Indian diaspora in comparison to other spiritual movements of India. The present thesis draws broadly the following conclusions:

I. The conventional notion of “diaspora” is being replaced with the term “transnational” because of immigrants networking as a result of developments in the field of transportation and communication technology.

II. Immigrants’ religious expression and practice in the diaspora although conspicuously identical with their ancestral land/motherland but in a hybrid form.

III. Although the members of Indian diaspora, or any other diaspora by definition, scattered apart geographically, they are held together by factors such as a common ethnic identity and a collective relation toward the original homeland which is symbolised through their participation in the religious/spiritual movements of homeland.

IV. Participation in the spiritual movements of homeland is now one of the major religious mechanisms for the preservation of cultural identities of immigrants in the diaspora.

V. Spiritual pilgrimages to the land of origin often create new “sacred geographies” in the region.
These points are being analysed further in detail in the following paragraphs and provides at the end the possible future of this transnational spiritual movement.

I. *From being diaspora to become transnational*

A diaspora is a transnational community that has been dispersed from its homeland, whose members permanently resides in one or more “host” countries and possesses a collective, sometimes idealized, myth of the homeland and will to return (Safran 2005; Shuval 2000; Sheffer 1995; Baumann 2000; Schiller 2003; Levitt and Schiller 2004). “Diasporas,” writes Khachig Tololyan, the editor of the journal *Diaspora: A Journal of Transnational Studies*, “are emblems of transnationalism because they embody the question of borders, which is at the heart of any adequate definition of the Others of the nation-state” (Tololyan 1991: 6). He argues, in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the contemporary phenomena of diasporans, one must focus on the practical and the intellectual conditions, which arise from existing at a distance from the (imagined) tranquility of home and national belonging.

One of the common features of diasporic communities today is their transnational presence and linkage or network with the motherland, imaginary or real. The past decade has witnessed a phenomenal dynamism among the diasporic communities, made possible by the recent advancement in technologies for travel, transport and communications. Not only did these developments bring the diasporic communities and their motherland closer but also has facilitated in bringing the members of their community dispersed around the world together. The emergence of such networking, cutting across several countries, is most appropriately described by the term “transnational.”
II. Religious expression of immigrants in the diaspora

The proliferation of religious/spiritual movements in the recent decades has produced new forms of identity, for instance, the participation of members from different ethnic groups in a particular spiritual movement or participation of a member in different spiritual movements. Such multiplicity is one of the many features of new spiritual movements today. This is one of the major consequences of the process of migration in today’s world, which is described by scholars as “transnational migration” (see Schiller 2003; Levitt 1999; Levitt and Schiller 2004).

III. Common ethnic identity of Indians and their participation in spiritual movements

Indian diaspora that formed during 19th and early 20th centuries was marked by rootlessness and an excessive desire for belonging - as it was near impossible to integrate into and accept the cultural system of the host society. Thus, in many cases, Indians had to confront their cultural identity, values, religious beliefs and/or spiritual practices. However, today’s religious/spiritual movements especially rooted in the homeland have made considerable impact in integrating Indian religious and cultural practices, thereby (re)constructing the identity of Indians in the diaspora.

The increasing linkages between Sathya Sai Baba movement and India have shown that there are mutual perceptions and identities involved in this transnational spiritual community. So far as Sai Baba movement is concerned, it is argued that, the movement has crossed the traditional ethnic, cultural and religious boundaries, and seen as a part of a “new” transnational religion.
IV. Spiritual movements and the reconstruction of religious and cultural identity

It may be argued further that while diaspora’s relationship to its “roots,” the original homeland, is an ideological one, spiritual movements of recent time have transformed such ideological one into reality - may be virtually. Participation in the spiritual movements of homeland is now one of the major religious mechanisms for the preservation of cultural identity of immigrants in the diaspora.

The present study points out that the making of a diasporic community and thereby diasporic identity depends on several factors. Indian identity, for instance, in the diaspora always by nature is “fractured identity” (Verma and Sheshan 2003). It needs to be redefined from time to time because of new developments in socio-economic, religious/spiritual and political dimensions.

One of the major objectives of this study was to understand the process of (re)construction of religious and cultural identities by diasporic Indians while participating in the spiritual movement of Sathya Sai Baba. As most of the respondents mentioned, participation in the spiritual movement of Sathya Sai Baba has transformed their spiritual life by giving a different type of identity. It is argued that the diasporic Indians attach great significance to the spiritual movement of Sathya Sai Baba in order to become closer to their homeland and to re-imagining the identity, which was partly lost in the process of their settlement soon after their displacement and dislocation in the colonial world.

The study of Sathya Sai Baba movement reveals that religion and spirituality not only become a catalyst in the preservation of Indian identities abroad but also simultaneously provide space for immigrants to
maintain transnational networks with the homeland and with other
diasporic communities settled in different parts of the world.

V. Spiritual pilgrimages and the creation of sacred geographies

The creation of new sacred sites is often the defining feature of most of
these new religious/spiritual movements in recent times. In the context of
modernization and globalization, and, more recently, in the context of
revolution in transportation and communication technology, there is
transformation in the creation of sacred geography. For instance, in the
Sathya Sai Baba movement, the birthplace of Sai Baba, “Puttaparthi,” is
the part of religious affiliations among the devotees – both in India and in
the Indian diaspora – where the devotees converge for their annual
pilgrimage. Puttaparthi has become a sacred site within the spiritual
movement of Sathya Sai Baba.

“Puttaparthi,” the sacred place of pilgrimage for devotees, can be
compared with the sacred geography of “Shirdi,” a place believed to have
been created by the earlier incarnation of Sathya Sai Baba i.e., Shirdi Sai
Baba, who had reportedly performed miracles and who, himself, used the
place as a place for retreat and meditation. A large number of devotees
from different backgrounds and from different countries pay a visit to
Puttaparthi particularly to celebrate the birthday of Sathya Sai Baba every
year. An important feature of this annual pilgrimage, and the broader
religious movement into which it is situated, is that, it firmly links
different ethnic groups into a single religion, for instance, drawing
adherents from both sides – from India and the Indian diaspora and from
different faith groups such as Muslims, Christians and among others – and
contributing to the shaping of new sacred geographies in the region.
Another area that this study throws some light is “transplantation of cultures.” It is an important facet in the study of diaspora, since culture is central to diasporic identity and continuity with the motherland/ancestral land. Hugh Tinker’s study “The Banyan Tree” (1977) suggests the strong connections that often continue between overseas Indian cultures and their home culture. It also highlights the efforts overseas Indians make to replicate the parent tree with satellite trunks, even when they are in quite different host societies. The metaphor of “transplantation” suggests that roots are taken from the parent tree, transported to a considerable distance, and planted in new, often quite dissimilar soils. Conditions in the new locations have much to do with how the “roots” fare, and local growth can vary significantly from the original. How much of their cultures can and must be imported cannot be determined \emph{a priori}. The process of transplantation always involves a selection that never results in a complete duplication of the old-country form. In this respect, Indians are no different from any other immigrants.

The present study particularly addresses and challenges the conventional assimilation perspective, whose main argument is based on the assumption that, “…in the process of assimilation, the immigrants should abandon his/her religion and culture and embrace the host society’s practices” (cited in Aggad 2005: 2). However, the Indians in the diaspora have retained much of their cultural traditions alive, and the Sathya Sai Baba spiritual movement further strengthens these traditions through their participation in the spiritual movement originated from India.

The question of Sai Baba’s \textit{miracles} is much debated among his followers as well as detractors. While sceptics criticized and challenged Sai Baba’s miracle power, devotees believing in his divine power are on an increase in India and in the Indian diaspora. Reinhart Hummel (2005), while studying Sathya Sai Baba, points out the critical aspects of miracle power. According to him “…miracle is faith’s dearest child and so faith in Sai Baba produces an abundance of rarely verifiable
reports of miracles. The art of ‘materializing’ things with a wave of the hand is something trick artists also hold in their power” (http://www.dci.dk/?artikel=572 &emne=Sai %20Baba).

Indians in the diaspora associate themselves with Sathya Sai Baba following their immense faith in the materialization of Vibhuti in the residences of devotees in their own countries. They are also attracted by the social service activities of Sathya Sai Baba Organisation. For instance, Sathya Sai Baba visited East Africa in 1968, not so much to preach religious or spiritual ideology but to encourage social service to millions of PIOs (People of Indian Origins) who have immigrated to Africa. The social service activity of Indians in Africa attracted thousands of indigenous Africans to become the devotees of Sathya Sai Baba in order to participate in the social service. Further, the shrinking of time and space as a result of communication and transportation technology has made it possible for increasing number of immigrants to participate in the activities of Sathya Sai Baba spiritual and cultural organisations transnationally.

Discussing the Sathya Sai Baba movement from social network perspective, the thesis examines - through ego-centered and whole networks and through spatial and specific networks - how the devotees make their connection with Sathya Sai Baba and influence the persons in contact to become the devotees of Sai Baba, and how their networks further helps the movement to become one of the “transnational movements” in recent time. As discussed in Chapter-V, 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.

The growth of the movement shows that there were three concentric circles developed around Sathya Sai Baba’s charismatic personality. First, a small group consisting of the members of Sathya Sai Baba’s family and his own caste groups
in his village. Second, a wider circle of community supporters beyond his village to neighbouring districts without whose support any charismatic movement would not have been possible. 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. These three concentric groups have their own networks that help further the growth of the transnational networks among the devotees of Sathya Sai Baba in the larger context.

One respondent from Singapore whose grandfather migrated to East Africa during 1880s could not remember the exact date but share the following. Her opinions can be taken as an example of how transnational the movement is and how transnational the devotees are.

I am a third generation person of Indian origin from South Africa, introduced to Sathya Sai Baba almost 20 years ago. I have relatives in South Africa who are also Swami’s devotees. Last year I was invited to attend the Sathya Sai Spiritual Educational Workshop in South Africa organised by International Sathya Sai Organisation, where devotees from all over the world participated. I had also participated in Sai social service activities in UK, USA and Australia. I do not have any problem in visiting any country whenever and wherever Swami sends me to attend his programmes.

The Future of Transnational Spiritual Movements

The proliferation of movements of people during the last five decades has produced new forms of identity as a result of cross-cultural differences as mentioned in Chapter-VI. It has produced new subjects, for when the individual leaves the land of his origin, the conditions attached to him and reflecting his recognition by society, his belonging, what Edward Said (cited in Moreau 2004)
calls “affiliation” to something specific, are things that he leaves behind. Members of diasporic communities define themselves in terms of at least two identities as the devotees of Sathya Sai Baba maintain in the diaspora. For instance, a devotee may be a member of the Sathya Sai Baba religious/spiritual group originating from the homeland, but s/he at the same time is also a member of the host country.

Thus, the making of diasporic communities shows that culture is not a fixed set of features, behaviours and values; nor is it transmitted unchanged from one generation to the next. Rather, culture is dynamic, and more so, the diasporic cultures, which are continually formed and reformed through constant interaction and exchange with each other in the context of a globalized world. For instance, the people who migrated from the Indian sub-continent to the British, Dutch and French colonies as indentured and passage migrants from the late nineteenth century to the mid-twentieth century were dispersed in multiple ways. The experience of uprooting, deterritorialisation, deportation, transplantation, and enslavement caused deep ruptures in terms of cultural identity. Coming from different villages, from different parts of India, belonging to different cultural groups, speaking different languages, worshipping different gods, the common experience that they shared was “indenturedship” and “subjugation.” This has resulted in a range of interrelated Indian cultures, for instance, “Indo-Caribbean,” “Indian-Americans,” and “East Indians.” The cultures and identities they developed drew largely on their Indian “roots,” and also from a shared experience of living in a “strange” environment. But, today, the spiritual movements of homeland have strengthened the affinities of immigrants with their homelands. In the Western countries, especially in the USA, one of the western devotees in the Sathya Sai Baba Ashram at Prasanthi Nilayam remarked how the Indians (focusing especially on Hindus) maintain their religious tradition and identity while participating in the Sathya Sai Baba spiritual programmes despite having many odds in the plural society.
In California, religious communities abound, from Christians to Jews and Muslims. These obvious beacons of religion may lead one to believe that California is a city made up of Christians, Jews and Muslims but many other religious communities also exist. One such community meets every Thursday in a residential apartment is the Sathya Sai Baba spiritual community. Sathya Sai Baba has a large following in New York. The residential space is devoted to the Sathya Sai Baba, popularly known as the “Swami Sai.” Participants in this Thursday evening gathering refer to him as the “embodiment of love.” Bhajans and Meditation are the two main parts of the gathering called “satsang.” The chanting of Sai Baba’s divine name opens the satsang at 7.00 PM. The satsang ends with silent meditation and the performance of arati to Sathya Sai Baba. The devotees receive prashad and everyone heads out of the door by 9.00 PM. This ritual repeats itself every Thursday evening.

In the following passage Lawrence A. Babb describes one of Sai Baba’s satsangs. He writes about devotees of Sathya Sai Baba living in Delhi, but his description could apply equally to devotees in New York:

Attendees tend to be well dressed and obviously affluent, and I suspect that in some circles these events carry a certain social cachet. The main event is the singing of devotional songs, most of which are overtly addressed to Sathya Sai Baba himself. A book containing suitable bhajans is owned by many devotees. The singing is followed by a period of silent meditation, and then arati is performed in the usual fashion before the altar. Devotees receive prashad as they leave (Babb 1986: 170).
This systematic form of ritual performance can be visible in many of the new
diasporas that were formed during the last few decades especially after 1950s.
Many theorists have written on ritual, some commending it and some condemning
it. Durkheim’s important discussion on cult at the end of *The Elementary Forms
of Religious Life*, for instance, reintroduces ritual as the means by which
collective beliefs and ideals are simultaneously generated, experienced, and
affirmed as real by the community. Hence, ritual is the means by which
individual perception and behaviour are socially appropriated or conditioned (Bell
1992: 20). Durkheim further elucidates how ritual is only meaningful to the
community who practices it. Sathya Sai Baba’s followers in the diaspora are not
“generating” beliefs in satsang, but rather “affirming” them collectively, as
mentioned in the Sathya Sai Baba theology “Satsang is not a method of teaching,
but a language of devotion.”

**Scope for Further Research**

During the last two decades, there are several Sathya Sai Baba Centres/temples
established under the guidance of Sathya Sai Baba throughout India and around
the world. Reviewing some of the works on religious/spiritual movements by the
Indians and other gurus with world-wide following in the 21st century, the thesis
observes how Sathya Sai Baba movement has sustained even after it was
internationally discredited for quite some time by sceptics. The movement today
has acquired a large amount of wealth and built up Centres across the world with
organised membership and have a large number of followers in the diaspora who
are also growing day-by-day. The movement even in European countries and
North America - where majority of criticisms came - managed to retain
substantial numbers of active participants. The movement survives today and will
survive tomorrow, though it cannot be predicted how large the scope of the
movement or how small in size and influence or how organised or
institutionalised the movement will it be?
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