CHAPTER-I

Introduction

For some, religion is primarily a matter of belief, or faith; for others, it is ritual or ethical conduct; and for yet others, it is feeling, sensation, or experience. Although all of these aspects are present in all religions, their salience varies from one to another.

[Wilson 1978:12]

The growth of new religious ideas, philosophies, groups, and organisations during the 1960s in Europe and North America in general, and in India in particular, have led to the emergence of a number of new religious/spiritual movements. These religious and spiritual movements fall outside the realm of mainstream or traditional religions, as they transcend the geographical boundaries of one or more nation-states. While saying this, one cannot deny the fact that the traditional religions have not transcended the geographical boundaries, as there have been instances wherein religious or spiritual communities were involved in cross-border activities through charity and proselytizing activities since the dawn of antiquity. These new religious/spiritual movements also in most cases trace their roots from the traditional established religions.¹

However, these groups often referred as “new,” in the sense that, although they have already in their structures, differ considerably from the conventional forms of movements, such as they are “structured and more committed than groups that were formed spontaneously” (Tigges 1998). The other key elements of these new religious/spiritual movements are their “diasporic presence,” and “transnational networks.” That apart, information and communication technologies have

¹ Darroll Bryant for instance, while studying the New Religions in the North American context, argues that “…many of the ‘new religions’ were not really ‘new’ but just new to North America. For example, the Hare Krishna movement is often regarded as a ‘new religion’/’cult,’ but it was in fact only ‘new’ in North America. It is a community of long standing in India and has its origins in the life and work of the 15th century Hindu reformer, Caitanya. It has been a continuous presence in India since that time, but only came to North America in the 1960s. The same is the case for a number of other new religious movements that have their origins in Eastern Hindu, Buddhist, and Sikh traditions” (http://www.neuereligion.de/ENG/ReligiousNature/03.htm).
facilitated these transborder networks. Gordon Melton (1999), in his paper “The Rise of the Study of New Religions,” has summarised some of the important features of these new religious movements. According to him:

New Religions come in all varieties. They choose their basic perspective from one of the various existing religions, they create a conscious synthesis of two or more traditions, or, on very rare occasions, they propose an original religious myth. New Religions adopt a variety of different organizational models from the dictatorial to the loosely democratic, and all shade in between. They will often change through the first generation as the group grows, and theology matures, and as the transition to the second generation begins (www.cesnur.org/testi/bryn/br_melton.htm).

The Context

India has witnessed large scale international migration of her people during the 19th and early part of the 20th century to work in the plantations of British, French, Dutch and Portuguese colonies. The inhospitable conditions in the plantations and the apartheid behaviour of colonial masters hardly gave them a chance to progress socially and economically. Despite having several socio-economic and political problems, Indians, being hardworking people, made progress in many fields in the course of time.

Although there have been a number of linkages between India and the Indian diaspora, today films, music, religious teachers have contributed a great deal in constructing the new “diasporic” links between the two. One of the linkages established between India and the Indian diaspora in recent time is the “spiritual linkage” as a result of the growth of spiritual leaders. These spiritual leaders have actively sought to construct and maintain cultural and sentimental ties among the dispersed population originating in “India,” the cultural motherland. In the field of
migration and diaspora studies, these groups in recent time have attracted the scholars because of their role in engaging diasporic communities to their homeland through transnational networks.

The concept “transnational network” is wider in scope, as it involves immigrants’ socio-economic, cultural, political and religious activities spanning across the national boundaries. Transnational religious network constitutes only one aspect of activities through which the immigrants engage with their motherland and with other diasporic communities. Although earlier studies on religion covered several aspects of relation between religion and society such as role of religion in cultural creativity, social transformation and institution building (Beckford 1989; Hamilton 1994; McGuire 1987; Wilson 1982), less attention has been paid toward transnational religious networks and the emergence of new religious/spiritual movements in the diaspora.

Studies on new religious movements are significant from diasporic perspective for two important reasons. Firstly, religious movements have become a part of the process of globalisation and transnationalism in which flows of people, images, ideas, objects and money circulate with growing speed, intensity and volume. Added to this, inexpensive transportation, new communication technologies (Internet, satellite TV, cellular telephones), mass media (film, television, video and audio cassettes) and print media (books, magazines, newspapers etc.) have transformed the practice, method and means of organising and strengthening religious movements. Secondly, the tremendous increase in the magnitude of international migration during the past two decades has made significant impact on the rise of new religious networks connecting the local with the global.

During the last four decades India has witnessed an increasing number of religious or spiritual groups emerging out of Hinduism, often based on charismatic preachers, stressing on Vedantic ideology with philanthropic and anti-materialist way of life. Some of the important leaders who enjoyed mass
followers are for instance, Sathya Sai Baba, Sri Ganapati Sachidananda Swami, Mata Amritanandamayi, Pandit Ravi Shankar, Rajneesh (OSHO) and so on who have emerged as significant transnational actors connecting Indians across the world through their teachings of Vedantic spirituality and philanthropic acts. The present work deals with one of such spiritual movements of India called the “Sathya Sai Baba Movement” which has spread across the world. The movement has become so popular that it has not only attracted Indians of the diaspora, but also other ethnic groups into the movement. The movement now claims to have over 12 million devotees hailing from different caste, class, ethnic, religious and regional backgrounds with over 20,000 centres around the world devoted to the promulgation of his spiritual message.

Objectives of the Study

“Diaspora” is a newly emerging field of sociological enquiry. The present study proposes to examine the role of new religious/spiritual movements in the promotion of linkages between India and the Indian diaspora. Keeping in mind the enormous magnitude of the field, the objectives explored in this study include:

- To examine the emergence of Sathya Sai Baba movement from a sociological perspective;
- To examine how the movement has spread into the Indian diaspora. To analyse how the members of Sri Sathya Sai Baba perpetuate their religious and cultural identity in the diaspora;
- To map out the transnational networks of Sathya Sai Baba movement from social network analysis perspective; and
- To identify the mechanisms through which these groups maintain their networks with the motherland, on the one hand, and, with other members settled in different countries around the world, on the other.
Analytical Framework

A theory enables the researchers to conduct empirical studies in an organised and logical manner. There exists a considerable body of social science theory that provides insight into the emergence, growth and development of new religious movements. Most of the studies on social movements base their theoretical perspective on structural-functional approach. Such studies focus mainly on social solidarity, cohesion, functional unity, equilibrium, and on the imitative process of change and mobility. Some scholars also emphasise the importance of the reference group and its relative deprivation conditions. Such studies were mostly carried out during the 1970s when much attention was paid to religious movements and cults in the United States. One of the important analytical frameworks providing insight into the phenomenon of new religious movements is the work of Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge (1996), *A Theory of Religion*.

The present study has been pursued from the perspective of social network theory, as the main features of these new socio-religious movements today lie in their “network.” Some of the works of J. A. Barnes (1972), Barry Wellman (1988; 1992), and Stanley Wasserman and Katherine Faust (1994), are found useful in the analysis of Sathya Sai Baba movement.

Methodology and Research Design

A research design is a way of choosing and interrelating a set of experimental variables and of selecting and assigning participants to experimental and control conditions. As Cronbach (1982: 231) points out, “…there is no single best plan for an evaluation, not even for an enquiry into a particular problem, with a particular budget.” Research design is a function of many factors. Accordingly, the design of this study involves both the use of qualitative and quantitative methods. The qualitative method consists of in-depth interviews, observations and
case studies, and the quantitative method involves the collection of data through questionnaires. Before describing these, it is essential to explain the universe of the study and the sampling procedures followed.

The universe of this study includes both the new spiritual movement of Sri Sathya Sai Baba based at Puttaparthi (Andhra Pradesh State, India) and its followers among the Indian diaspora. The target population for the study has been selected only from among those who have access to resources of Sathya Sai Baba and paid at least a visit to Puttaparthi, the headquarter of the sect. Studies of transnational religious movements must focus on how religious/spiritual movement spread to the countries of the diaspora.

Religious and cultural identity of diasporic individuals is a phenomenon that is largely lived and understood in the rituals of daily life, and in the interaction with social and cultural structures, which could be achieved through in-depth interviewing. As Miles and Huberman (1984: 15) point out:

> Qualitative data are attractive. They are a source of well-grounded, rich descriptions and explanations of processes occurring in logical contexts. With qualitative data one can preserve chronological flow, assess local causality, and derive fruitful explanations. Then too, qualitative data are more likely to lead to serendipitous findings and to new theoretical integrations; they help researchers go beyond initial preconceptions and frameworks…Words, especially when they are organised into incidents or stories have a concrete, vivid, meaningful flavour that often proves far more convincing to a reader - another researcher, a policy maker, or a practitioner - than pages of numbers.

Added to this type of data, information has also been collected from a number of Indian diasporic devotees - who have the sense of Indianness through their
involvement in the Sathya Sai Baba spiritual communities - to know their history and cultural activities at both the sites besides their influences, contributions and transnational networks. This was made possible through the use of quantitative survey methods. As Babbie (1992: 262) points out:

Survey research is probably the best method available to the social scientist interested in collecting original data for describing a population too large to observe directly. Careful probability sampling provides a group of respondents whose characteristics may be taken to reflect those of the larger population and carefully constructed standardized questionnaires provide data in the same form from all respondents.

Selecting the Sample: The Initial Stage

Selecting the sample for this kind of study is a bit difficult task, as it is a study of diasporic religion from a distance. However, a different technique was used to select the target population from the field available at home i.e., Puttaparthi, where the global Indian Sathya Sai Baba community meets every now and then, during special occasions and during holidays/vacations. Sathya Sai Baba devotees visit in large numbers to Puttaparthi during the festival times such as Deepavali, Durga Puja and Sivaratri and also during the major festival time which is Sathya Sai Baba’s Birthday. Getting close to these devotees was not easy. So the major worry at the beginning was how to reach these target groups on the eve of a particular event. The first problem surfaced when the Sathya Sai Baba International Office bearers hesitated to provide the list of overseas visitors’ saying that it was highly confidential though it was readily available with them. However, the information provided by the resource people, later helped in selecting the respondents. The major criterion to distinguish the overseas Indian devotees at Puttaparthi in comparison to Indian counterparts is their “way of dressing.” As per the rules of respective Sathya Sai Baba centre outside India, all
members (including children) should wear a prescribed dress, and if not they have
to tag on their neck a kerchief - in which their country symbol along with Sathya
Sai Baba Organisation’s Logo imprinted. Some of the devotees extended full
cooperation sharing their views. Data were collected from the respondents
through an interview schedule.

In-depth Interviews

The qualitative component of the research is gathered through in-depth interviews
with selected members of the Sathya Sai Baba diasporic community for a deeper
understanding of the phenomenon of Sathya Sai Baba movement in the diaspora.
The main focus of the interview was to discern devotees’ experience of religion in
the context of diaspora in different countries. The enquiries were conducted in the
manner of life-history interviews where each participant was asked to elaborate
upon the experiences of Sathya Sai Baba spiritualism in their respective locations.

A variety of interview techniques have been suggested by qualitative researchers,
all of which are based on a “…express commitment to viewing events, action,
norms, values etc., from the perspective of the people who are being studied”
(Bryman 1988: 61). This approach reflects a departure from the traditional
method of considering interviewees as merely “subjects” from whom data is to be
collected. Instead, the interviewee is considered here as a “co-researcher” who is a
partner in the research process (Nelson 1989). Patton (1982) has identified three
basic approaches to collect the qualitative data through open-ended interviews: a)
the informal conversational interview; b) the general interview guide approach;
and c) the standardised open-ended interview. The fundamental principle of these
three approaches is to “…provide a framework within which respondents can
express their own understandings in their own term” (1982: 166).

The actual interviews were conducted using the interview guide approach as
suggested by Patton. The advantage of this approach is that, it allows the
researcher to develop a general list of topics to be covered, without specifying any particular order or sequence. The “co-researchers” in this case are encouraged to give full expression of their experiences, as they emerge unfettered by any artificial boundaries that might be imposed by the formality of a standardised structure. The co-researchers have an equal share in guiding the discussion, and in providing spontaneous insights into whatever aspects they feel relevant to the topic being discussed. Flexibility and situational sensitivity are the defining features of this approach.

*Interview Sample*

The primary criterion for selecting the participants for the interview was through a purposive sampling. According to Patton, purposive sampling enables the researcher to select “information-rich” cases for in-depth study. Information-rich cases are those “…from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purposes of the research” (1990: 169).

Following Patton’s guidelines, both “typical case” and “maximum variation” sampling procedures are followed in selecting the interview participants for this study. In the “typical case” sampling, key informants are requested to suggest the names of people who might be able to provide illustrative descriptions of the phenomenon being studied. The purpose here is not to make generalisations regarding a particular population, but to identify some typical aspects of experience that may be held in common by many members of the population. These typical cases are selected because they are not “…in any major way atypical, extreme, deviant, or intensely unusual” (Patton 1990: 173). Thus, this study focuses more on the experience of devotees among the people of Indian origin who were actively involved in the programmes of their organisations and have much in common with the majority members of the group than the devotees who display only a cursory or marginal interest in this area.
In the “maximum variation” sampling, one normally selects a small sample that is heterogeneous according to some pre-determined criterion. In this study, the criterion used is age. With the view to ascertain the differences, if any, data on the experiences of devotees from both the Old Indian diaspora including second/third and fourth generations who were born and brought up in the diaspora, and also from the New Indian diaspora constituted those who left India since 1950s. The experiences of these two types of Indian diasporic devotees are envisaged to be different and information from these two types of respondents is expected to yield better insights into the phenomenon being studied.

*Survey Questionnaires*

The technique of the survey employed in this study is through administering questionnaires to gather quantitative data from a large number of respondents. A survey usually involves the analysis of quantitative data that is gathered systematically from a given population or sample through “…some objective random, data-gathering device” (Hsia 1988: 111).

Survey carries the advantage of simplicity and speed of execution, flexibility of design and wide coverage. As an addition to the data generated through the qualitative in-depth interviews, surveys can be used as a tool to fill some gaps in the “…knowledge of a community, group, organisation, or whatever, because the gaps cannot be readily filled by reliance on participant observation, or unstructured interviewing alone” (Bryman 1988: 137).

The emphasis on the techniques of survey questionnaires has provided sufficient scope to gather quantitative data from a large number of respondents regarding the Sri Sathya Sai Baba tradition and practices that they follow in the diaspora and the use of information and communication technologies for networking.
Survey Samples

Any study of this nature, ideally, needs a detailed study of respondents drawn from multiple field sites located in different countries where Indian devotees of Sai Baba are found besides the place of origin of the spiritual/religious movement of Sai Baba, namely “Puttaparthi” of Andhra Pradesh. Since it was not possible to visit different countries for collecting information due to lack of time and resources, the survey samples had to be selected only at Puttaparthi, during their visit to “Prasanthi Nilayam.” In the absence of any official statistical information regarding overseas devotees visiting Puttaparthi, such information had to be collected personally during the fieldwork before identifying the respondents and administering the questionnaire. Instead, contacting few respondents at the initial stage, and through personal observations, a random sampling at the fieldwork site has been conducted.

The survey was conducted administering a nine-page questionnaire (see Annexure-1), consisting of mostly open-ended questions. Some partial close-ended questions were also used. The questionnaire elicited information on respondents’ personal background, initiation as a Sai Baba devotee, daily religious practices, adaptation of new religious norms in the host society, and participation in the Sathya Sai Baba religious movement including transnational networks.

During the fieldwork, 400 questionnaires were circulated among the respondents. Nearly 300 respondents were supplied copies of questionnaire personally, the rest were handed over to the heads of the respective country’s Sathya Sai Centres to secure larger number of responses. A total of 95 (23.75%) questionnaires were returned during November 2003 - December 2004. Similarly questionnaires were also sent through emails to respondents who were located in the diaspora but had the experience of visiting Puttaparthi. This selection of respondents was prepared through collecting individual e-mail IDs from different web directories available
at the Internet site. To check the validity of respondents’ views regarding their personal experience at Puttaparthi, a short description of a few questions was kept at the beginning of the main questionnaire. When the respondent appropriately selects those questions, the main questionnaire would be available to them to fill up. Out of the 200 questionnaires sent, only 15 respondents replied, a response rate of 7.5 per cent. Therefore, a sum total of 110 (18.33%) respondents were selected for the analysis of this study. Besides these 110 respondents, the study interviewed around 20 members from the Puttaparthi Ashram, regarding the Sathya Sai Organisation and its management. A more detailed analysis of the nature of samples is provided in Chapter-VI on “Sathya Sai Baba and the Indian Diaspora.”

Literary Sources

Apart from the above primary sources of information collected during the fieldwork, the study also has taken inputs from literature already existing on the growth and development of Sathya Sai Baba movement, theoretical understanding of social movements, diaspora and transnational networks. The secondary sources of information for this research are divided into three kinds: a) theoretical approaches to study social movements; b) concepts of religion, diaspora, and transnational network; and c) Sathya Sai Baba’s life and preaching.

Importance of the Study

In the contemporary spiritual world of Gurus, Sathya Sai Baba is one of the key actors who have attracted millions of followers across class, caste, religious and ethnic backgrounds all over the world. The question arises what makes people closer to Baba? This is a question of uncertainty, as people may say his words and his materialisation of Vibhuti has healing effect unlike the touch of Mata Amritanandamayi. But, the answer will not end there, as thousands of stories have been written on him by his devotees. Most of the scholars interpreted him as the
manifestation of god. Not to exaggerate, the movement has a social effect in transforming the society by taking major issues into its agenda.

The Sathya Sai Baba organisation, for instance, has not only undertaken the massive water supply project to provide water to the drought-stricken areas of Andhra Pradesh but also has taken initiative through its service organisation in solving the contemporary problems like AIDS awareness programme, Old Age Care, establishment of multi-speciality hospitals and free educational institutions. The devotees, on the other hand, have created massive “Centres” across the world to worship him unlike in the Swaminarayan Movement where the “temple” is the main attraction.

Sathya Sai Baba is one of the spiritual leaders of India to whom People of Indian Origins (PIOs) and Non-Resident Indians (NRIs), and from within India, leading politicians such as Presidents and Prime Ministers obliged him and even take appointment to meet him. It is a matter of considerable interest to know how the Indian devotees outside India (in the diasporas) increase in number day-by-day; how the members pay their visit every year to Puttaparthi; how they send their contribution in the form of philanthropy to run the organisation; and above all, how the Centres are fast spreading to the other parts of the world and networking transnationally. The study attempts to answer these questions in detail in the chapters ahead.

From the academic point of view, the purpose of this research is to develop a systematic approach to the study of sociology of religion from transnational perspective. The main objective is to identify the mechanisms through which the religious/spiritual groups form the complex network between global and Indian communities. The study, therefore, contributes to the development of the field of sociology of religion, social movements, as well as adding to the literature on Indian diaspora.
Chapterization

The thesis is divided into seven chapters besides references and annexures. The first chapter deals with the introduction, objectives of study, methodology and procedures of data collection. The second chapter deals with the literature on social movements, religion and transnational networks. This includes the definitions, theoretical background, and a prelude to the study of new socio-religious movements. This chapter also captures various concepts that have been used in the present study. The third chapter deals with a description of the emergence and growth of the Sathya Sai Baba movement and the organisational structure of the Sathya Sai Baba Organisation. The fourth chapter deals with the structure of Sathya Sai Baba theology. The fifth chapter deals with the interpretation of Sathya Sai Baba movement employing Social Network Analysis. The sixth chapter deals with the method of analysis and interpretation of the fieldwork data. The seventh chapter deals with the conclusion, analysis and future prospects of the study.

The following chapter will discuss the importance of the study of new social movements with special reference to the Indian diaspora. Besides examining various concepts used in the study, the chapter presents a review of literature.