The Emergence and Growth of Sathya Sai Baba Movement

For modernity, the self is autonomous and God is dead. The death of God is “the inescapable ‘fact’ of modern life.” For Hinduism, new gods jostle for place with old ones... the self is hierarchical, people differ widely, and almost everyone is subordinate to someone else; yet it is open to the Hindu to abandon the social self and become a spiritual self.

David Smith in *Hinduism and Modernity* (2003: 5)

The above quotation of Smith reflects the general understanding of the growth of spiritualism in the world. The quotation also reflects the *faith* tradition of Hinduism - belief in God - and the role of charismatic leaders. The role of charisma and miracles has been entrenched together in the religious traditions of most of the faiths including Hindus in India for years. Several examples can be found in Hinduism that associated with the stories of miracles and influences of Gods/Goddesses in the lives of individuals. For instance, the “milk miracle” of September 21, 1995 which was an unusual religious event, cutting across the entire social strata - from common people to the professional groups like doctors, lawyers and engineers. Even Christians, Muslims, Sikhs and atheists shared the belief in having their offerings accepted by Lord Ganesh (Hinduism Today 1995).

**Miracles in Hinduism**

People often believe that miracles play a very significant role only in Hinduism, but in reality miracles are a part of all most all world religions, although some religions attach greater importance to miracles than others. Buddhists for instance, believe that miraculous healings occurred among the general population at the moment of Buddha’s birth. The Jews have many miracles described in the Torah, especially Moses’ parting the Red Sea as he led his people out of slavery in Egypt. Muslims believe that Allah can do miracles and popular Islam abounds in miracles both of the prophet Mohammed and of wonder-working saints.
Christianity also is firmly based upon miracles, specifically the resurrection of Jesus Christ after his crucifixion on the cross. Besides these world religions miracles are also well established in the tribal religions (Hinduism Today 1995). Anthropological studies by Margaret Mead shows the existence of “special supernatural powers” among the many tribes (Mead 1969). The performance of miracles can be found in popular Hindu epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata and also in the Bible.

The above instances show that miracles are part of all the great religions. As Kenneth L. Woodward (2000) points out, “…the miracle stories are part of all the great faith traditions, and without knowledge of them no religion can be fully appreciated or understood.” It has become much easier to disseminate the near instantaneous experience of miracles around the globe today than in the past, owing to the development of modern communication technology.

Although most of the religions today have given up their belief in miracles, Hinduism “…being a theory of continuous research in God and of life by rebirths and reincarnations, has a moral and legal scope for the possibility of miracles” (Singh 1995: 2). An oft-repeated quotation can be found from the literature on Hinduism and miracles on the Internet, which says “…if miracles could occur and be proven, it would be possible only in Hinduism and like religions, which have limitless dimensions in spiritualism” (ibid.). In Hinduism, the “natural” and “supernatural” are fused in a way that is alien to Western thinking, where miracles are events that interrupt the normal flow of nature (Ostling 2000).

The present study deals with one of the spiritual movements of India which have attracted thousands of believers all over the world besides marking its presence within the tradition of Hinduism in India. Sathya Sai Baba, the supreme authority of the Sathya Sai Baba movement is now more popular by his acts of miracles in the West than in the homeland, and most importantly the followers from western
countries especially non-Indians are increasing in number day-by-day than Indians.

**Sathya Sai Baba Movement**

Several pictures of Sathya Sai Baba showing his red robe, copious hair, and shining smile are now to be found all over India, in temples and shrines, including homes. Not only that, the pictures can also be found in 123 countries around the world. The religious faith in the Sai Baba has appealed millions of people who have surrendered themselves to Sathya Sai Baba both emotionally, mentally, socially and even in material terms. Sathya Sai Baba, the founder of the living spiritual 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. Obviously, it has attracted Indian Diaspora around the world in large numbers. For instance, in many major cities in North America and Western Europe there exit organised Sathya Sai Baba Centres and majority of members of these Centres are belong to Hindu families.¹

The movement is largely based on urban-middle-class groups such as academicians, business people, scientists and professionals besides politicians. Although the movement came into light after 1940s, it gained momentum only recently, especially after the massive expansion in information and communication technology, which has transformed the world into what Marshal McLuhan (1989) called “global village.”

Many scholars have described the life of Sathya Sai Baba in different languages. Hence, it is difficult to portray a biography out of these literatures. As most of these writings are legendary and are transmitted in the centres to portrait the

¹ Sathya Sai Baba and his religion in the diaspora appeals particularly to “Westernised,” middle-class Hindus (see Bowen 1988; Klass 1996), besides attracting a number of Europeans and North Americans.
divine character of Sathya Sai Baba from the childhood, emphasizing on demonstrating his miraculous power. Similarly, there are scores of publications associated with Sai Baba movement. Many of these publications contain records of the public and private talks and discourses given by Sai Baba. However, despite these works it is found that, there has not been any thorough academic study on Sathya Sai Baba movement. The present work deals with the transnational aspects of Sathya Sai Baba movement from diasporic perspective, focusing on networks in the global context. The earlier studies on Sathya Sai Baba are largely based on specific locations and events. Hence, a systematic study of transnational character of Sathya Sai Baba movement is needed to understand the movement in its totality.

**Emergence and Growth**

In consonance with Hindu scriptures, Sathya Sai Baba is called by different names to indicate different status and stages of life. His childhood given name was Sathyanarayana and his family name was Raju. During his youth, his friends and villagers used to call him in different names. For instance, Kasturi (2003: 13), the much closer person to Sathya’s family, described Sathyanarayana in his book *Sathyam Sivam Sundaram* as: “…He is Shiva, He is Sakthi; He must have both Vibhuthi and Kumkum (sacred ash and red ochre).” However, when Sathyanarayana declared himself in 1940s that he is the incarnation of former Shirdi Sai Baba, became to be known as Sathya Sai Baba. These stages - from childhood to youth - provide an outline for the life of Sathya Sai Baba. The process that began with the birth of “Sathyanarayana Raju” and culminated in the emergence of the “Sathya Sai Religion” is an interesting study of sociological significance.

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2 In the coastal districts of Andhra Pradesh, the Rajus of this sub-caste were known to be as Telugu speaking minstrels or Telugu teachers (Rao 1985: 4). They were Kshatriyas of the ruling caste. They considered themselves scions of the Solar Dynasty, of Bharadvaja Gotra and Apastambha Sutra (Ganapati 1985: 16).
The stories of the movement goes back to early part of the 20th century when Sathya Sai Baba, born as Sathyanarayana Raju, from a Kshatriya family at Puttaparthi village of Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh, India on 23rd November 1926. His birth fell on the day, which according to the Telugu calendar was Akshya (year), Kartheeka (month), and Somavaramu (Monday).

Sathya’s immediate family details are available, especially the Rathnakaram Kondama Raju, the grandfather (1840-1950) and his four sons. These family details are important because the family of the Sathya’s ancestry provides religious histories for the growth of the movement (see for further detailed analysis of Sathya Sai Baba’s family Chapter-V). The elder brother had two wives and a number of children by both. The younger had only five children. They were having joint family, though living separately. Kondamaraju was known for his talents for religious roles on the stage at the village operas.

Puttaparthi, where Sathya was born has some historical importance. The village was initially known as “Gollapalli,” a name “…reminiscent of the leelas of Sri Krishna and redolent with music of His Flute” (Ganapati 1985: 16). A couple of miles to the south there exist another village called Brahmanapalli and in the north Bukkapatnam. The town Bukkapatnam was named after Bukkaraya who, along with Harihara founded the Vijayanagar Empire which was flourished from 1336 to 1635 A.D. The Golapalli and Brahmanapalli were the satellite villages during that time to Bukkapatnam (Rao 1985: 1-2).

Historically, in the more recent times of Vijayanagar Empire and during the heydays of the town of Bukkapatnam, Puttaparthi was situated on the banks of river Chitravathi.3 The village was also known as Agra ham - a gift by the feudal lords to the Brahmin community. The story of the river Chitravathi depicts the story of Brahmin community to the land. Moreover, the story that stands

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3 Currently and unfortunately the Chitravathi is the source of sand for all construction in Puttaparthi, as there is no water flowing on the river, except for few days during rainy seasons.
testimony to the village was that of the five satellite hamlets around Puttaparthi, which were clusters of specific non-Brahmin communities (Rao 1985: 3). The 1981 census reports found that, the areas like Kammavaripalle, Peddakammavaripalle, and Ravillavaripalle were inhabited mostly by the Kammas, whereas Karnatikanagapalle and Nagireddypalle by Reddies and Kapus; and Kavilaguttapalle by Balijas. The Brahmin population at that time constituted of all the sub-sects: Vaishnavites, Madhwas, Niyogis and others. As the literature shows, for some reason or other, which was quite unknown, the Brahmin population slowly dwindled and migrated. The one important Brahmin family amongst the handful of leftovers was that of the “Karanam.” Karanam was the hereditary revenue official - the liaison between the village community and the district collector at Anantapur. The district, which was once a backward district under the Madras presidency, now becomes one of the twenty-three districts of Andhra Pradesh with rich cultural heritage. New temples and the physical surroundings inhabited by elite people and new buildings have tremendously changed the landscape of Anantapur today.

In Andhra Pradesh, unlike in some other South Indian states, there is traditionally a family name attached to each person belonging to the Hindu community. The male progeny continues the same family name as the father’s, whereas the female takes the family name of their husbands. Irrespective of their caste, the legendary origin of the Hindu families can be traced to Gothra, named after an ancient Rishi. For example, the Rathnakaram family, into which Sathya was born, had Rishi Bharadwaja as the patron saint and hence are members of Bharadwaja gothra. In the course of time, the family followed the principles - Suthras - laid down by one of the Bhardwaja’s disciples, Apasthamba. Sathya in this sense would be referred in all religious ceremonies as belongs to Bharadwaja Gothra and Apasthamba Suthra (Rao 1985: 5).

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4 Kammas, Reddies and Kapus are the upper caste groups in the Andhra Pradesh, whereas, Balijas are recognised as backward community.
Map of Puttaparthi
The childhood name of Sathya Sai Baba was especially appropriate because of several reasons. One of the stories describes the life of Pedda Venkama Raju (Sathya Sai Baba’s father), the elder son of Kondama Raju who was married to Easwaramma, daughter of Sri Subba Raju of Kolimigundla of Kurnool district. Easwaramma gave birth to a son and two daughters, namely as Seshama Raju, Venkamma, and Parvathamma. Easwaramma was not satisfied with that, since she had a strong desire to have another son. She prayed to all the village gods and even performed Sathyanarayana Puja besides keeping number of vows, which were rigorous and needed vigil and abstention from food. This age-old Vartham⁵ mentioned in the Hindu Puranas, is a religious vow undertaken by the Telugus of all castes seeking of Sathyanarayana’s blessing.⁶ After giving birth to the blessed child, the parent gave the name to the child as Sathyanarayana, because of the celestial relationship of the Puja to the God Sathyanarayana and the vow that Easwaramma had taken.

Soon after his birth, Sathya⁷ became the pet of the entire village of Puttaparthi. As it was mentioned by Kasturi, “…even the ryots and cowherds vied with each other in fondling, feeding and playing with the lovely silken curls hair child” (2003: 12). Sathya during his childhood days has demonstrated exceptional qualities of wisdom, compassion, and generosity. The theoretical premises within the sociological tradition of studying different religions revealed that, a charismatic leader shows his character from his childhood just to proven that he is a blessed one and distinct from other simple human beings with divine power (Weber 1978). The following is the characteristic of Sathya’s life, which he developed from his childhood, the quality of a cherished leader.

Sathya has always kept away from places where pigs or sheep or cattle or fowl were killed or tortured, or where fish was trapped or

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⁵ The word “Vartham” traditionally means the practice of performing fasting with a motive to get closer to god.

⁶ Sathyanarayana is a form of the Hindu god “Vishnu.”
caught; He avoided kitchens and vessels used for cooking flesh or fowl (Kasturi 2003: 13).

By this divine nature of “love and sympathy” towards creation, he was called by his neighbours as “Brahmajnani.” Besides this distinctive quality, Sathya was also a genius among his friends by learning more things and much quicker than others. According to Kasturi, Sathya even “…composed at the tender age of seven or eight, some heart touching songs for a cast, which were gladly accepted later for public presentation” (Kasturi 2003: 17). These are some of the qualities of Sathya. He followed celibacy similar to those of ascetics of any cult. He also believed in the separation of males and females in the discourse meetings.

According to Max Weber, the charismatic leader is “…accorded with special, possibly divine qualities, which endow him (occasionally her) with authority over his or her following. When the leader dies, the charisma dies also, leaving a gap, which is generally filled by institutional structures” (Chryssides 2001). In case of Sathya Sai Baba movement, the authority was passed on from one avatar to another leaving behind the institutional structures. For instance, Sathya Sai Baba has alleged that he is the institutional inheritor of his previous birth - the Shirdi Sai Baba. The Prasanthi Nilayam Publication Trust has mentioned the declaration of avatarhood of Sathya Sai Baba in all most all the publications.

One day Sathya has invited all the neighbours to his home. It was

Thursday 23rd May 1940. He celebrated the day by materialising

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7 Sathya and Sathyanarayana have been used here and there in the thesis, all implies Sathya Sai Baba’s early childhood name.
8 The word “avatar” refers to the incarnation of a Hindu deity, especially Vishnu, in human or animal form.
9 Shirdi Sai Baba (1856 -1918), a personification of spiritual perfection and an epitome of compassion, was believed to be the previous incarnation of Sathya Sai Baba who has lived in the little village of Shirdi in the state of Maharashtra (India) for sixty years. He was admired in his lifetime for his austere lifestyle and particularly for the miracles that were attributed to him. See more about Shirdi Sai Baba (Mani Sahukar. 1997. Sai Baba: The Saint of Shirdi. Somaiya Publications, Mumbai, p.121. Chakor Ajgaonkar. 1999. The Foot Prints of Shirdi Sai. Diamond Pocket Books, New Delhi, p. 212. Marianne Warren 1999. Shirdi Sai Baba in the Light of Sufism. Sterling Publications, New Delhi, p. 439).
and distributing delicious *prasadam* to them and declared that he was *Sai Baba*. All of them were astonished, as many had never even heard the name. When someone asked him for proof, he threw a handful of jasmine flowers on the floor. Lo and behold! To their utter surprise, the flowers on the floor rearranged themselves into four letters in Telugu to read *SA YI BA BA!* Sai Baba of Shirdi reborn!! (Rao 1985: 24).

A similar kind of story was described in Kasturi’s work where he mentioned about the declaration of *avatarhood* of Sathya Sai Baba. When Sathya declared himself that he is the incarnation of earlier Shirdi Sai Baba; several people had doubt on his revelation and required proof for that. During his chat with the villagers, one devotee with doubt posed the question, “How can we believe that you are He?” The person was astonished by the demonstration of Sathya:

> The cynic was flabbergasted by the ocular proof that was vouchsafed to him. Baba, it seems, stretched out his palms in front of the critic, and asked him to look at the opened palms. And, lo, he could see on one palm, a resplendent portrait of Shirdi Sai Baba and on the other palm, an equally effulgent portrait of Sri Sathya Sai Baba himself! …Baba uses the same means even now to convince seekers that, he who had come then as Shirdi Baba has come now as Sathya Sai Baba (Kasturi 2003: 190).

By his charismatic, divine and miraculous power, Sathya Sai Baba has established today the Sathya Sai Baba Religious Movement.

Weber discusses the authority of charismatic leaders with two types of authority such as bureaucratic and traditional authority. According to him charismatic leadership certainly emanates from the leader’s *charis*, or “gift of grace,” and contrasts with “bureaucratic authority” or “traditional authority.” Just as there is
no appointment to the office of charismatic leader, so there is no dismissal, career prospects, or promotion. Charismatic authority depends on its recognition by disciples or followers, who obviously believe they benefit in some way from such recognition. Disciples tend to live communally, often handing over their possessions voluntarily. Further, Weber argues, since authority generates obligations on the part of those who respect that authority, charismatic authority must generate new obligations, since it differs from legal-rational or traditional authority, the obligations of which already exist. Weber thus categorised charisma and defined it as follows:

…charisma is a quality of an individual personality that is considered extraordinary, and followers may consider this quality to be endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or exceptional powers or qualities. Whether such powers actually exist or not is irrelevant – the fact that followers believe that such powers exist is what is important (Weber 1968: 215).

Unlike other Gurus or spiritual leaders, Sathya from childhood was not influenced by saints or sages of any kind; rather he himself developed such qualities of charismatic leader by his extraordinary visions. Some of the stories of childhood of Sathya can be illustrated here for understanding how his charismatic activities helped him to become popular worldwide. The legendary story of the childhood of Sathya has portrayed him as a perfect student (brahmachari). For instance, during his young age Sathya used to “…puzzle the demons, false teachers in the class, and the unbelievers with his great powers” (Kasturi 2003). However, the incident that brought him closer to his parents and villagers is as follows:

It was Ramanavami (Lord Rama’s Birthday) and late in the night the procession wended its way, round the village. A huge picture of Sri Rama was placed on a flower bedecked bullock cart but every body was surprised to see Sathya was sitting underneath the
picture. The little charming boy was even in that tender age
came a “Guru” to the children of the village showed the sure
sign of divinity (Kasturi 2003: 15).

The pictures of such garlanded child with so much devotion by the villagers can
be seen today in the household of many devotees.

In another group of writings, it is mentioned that, Sathya was the embodiment of
the attributes, powers and character of divinity and therefore was called by his
followers as Guru.\textsuperscript{10} In Hinduism the origin of guru can be traced back as far as
the early Upanishads, where the conception of divine teacher on the earth first
manifested from its early Brahmin associations. Even the word was continuously
described in the Hindu traditions such as Vedanta, Yoga, Tantra and Bhakti sects.
In more mystical Hindu circles, it was believed that the guru could awaken
dormant spiritual knowledge within the pupil, known as \textit{shaktipat}. Accordingly,
the institution of guru has always been an essential feature of Hinduism since
ancient times. Sathya Sai Baba in this sense claims to be both the avatar of \textit{Shiva}
applies the term “guru” to figures as diverse as Jesus, Muhammad, the Buddha,
Jim Jones, David Koresh, Rajneesh, Steiner, Jung and Freud. While
acknowledging that gurus display some differences from each other, Storr
contends that in general they claim special spiritual insight, based on personal
revelation, offering new ways of spiritual development and paths to salvation.

Sathya Sai Baba right from his early childhood has been deeply religious. He used
to have leadership qualities and gather around him his cousins and friends to sing
\textit{bhajans} or religious songs in chorus (Rao 1985: 10). For instance, when Sathya
was only ten years, he had formed a “Pandhari Bhajan Group” in Puttaparthi, on

\textsuperscript{10} The word \textit{guru} means \textit{teacher} in Sanskrit and other Sanskrit-derived languages like Hindi,
Bengali and Gujarati. The word originated in a Hindu context and holds a special place in
Hinduism, signifying the sacred place and imparter of knowledge. Literally, the word comes from
the root “gu” meaning darkness and “ru” meaning act of removal (www.wikipedia.org).
the model of one that existed in the nearby village. The group consisted of about sixteen to eighteen boys, “…dressed uniformly in gerua clothes (or orange-coloured robe), holding each a flag in the hand and wearing jingle-bell-anklets” (Kasturi 2003: 23). It was the great attraction for villagers during that time as Sathya used to play leading roles in the group, performing simultaneously multiple roles such as organiser, treasurer, teacher, composer and singer. He did every role so wonderfully that the villagers believed that they could even imagine in their eyes “…the Mathura and Brindhavan reproduced, and ‘Balagopala’ with his flute enchanting the Gopis, the cows and calves, the trees and even the river Yamuna” (Kasturi 2003: 24).

Kakar in his study of the psychology of the relationship between the guru and his disciple, stresses the surrender of the disciple to the guru and also the intimacy that the disciple enjoys with the guru (1991: 52-60). This was the case of Sathya’s life in the village Puttaparthi where he was to became the guru not only for his friends but also for the entire village soon after.

At the age of 14, Sathya left home - visited different places surrounding the village Puttaparthi - and claimed that he is the reincarnation of an Indian saint who had died in 1918 named Shirdi Sai Baba. In addition to making frequent public claims to be the reincarnation of the revered saint Shirdi Sai Baba, Sathya made special efforts to describe his affinities with Shirdi: teachings, types of miracles, and sayings, as well as exhibiting pictures of Shirdi in his ashram. He also made references (including allegedly omniscient ones) to Shirdi’s life, especially to older devotees. All of these activities played an important role in spreading Sai Baba’s fame far and wide that attracted large number of devotees, including a number of elderly aristocratic patrons. Sathya then proclaimed his mission, and began teaching on the basis of his newly announced divine status.

The incident, which took him to this greater glory, has been described in the literatures as the stepping-stone of his simple life to the world of legendary
figures. There was a great transformation in him when he was 14 years which his family considered as a “crisis” when he proclaimed that, he is the reincarnation of previous Shirdi Sai Baba, stating to have a precise mission:

I am no longer your Sathya…I am Sai…I do not belong to you;
Maya has gone, My Bhaktas are calling me, I have My Work, I cannot stay any longer. Give up all your efforts to “cure” me; I do not consider myself related to you.

Sathya Sai Baba on 20th October 1940 (Kasturi 2003: 56)

Such spiritual vagrancy - leaving home for wondering truth - was not an uncommon practice, as there were other nineteenth century spiritual leaders who left home at early ages for travel and study. For instance, Rammohan Roy, the founder of the Brahma Samaj, and Dayananda Saraswati, the founder of the Arya Samaj. During his time of wandering as a child (when he was 14 years old) and performing miracles, many people believed Sathya as god’s avatar and he was named as Sathya Sai Baba due to his uncommon power of performing miracles. Later he returned to his native place, Puttaparthy, where the devotees built a house for him in 1950 called “Prasanthi Nilayam” - the abode of peace.

After returning to his native village, Sathya started performing miracles in a more attractive manner than those he performed as a young boy attracting many visitors to Puttaparthy. He then became even more popular due the character and integrity of those who told their own tales of spiritual experiences in print on their return from Puttaparthy. These descriptions attracted several early spiritual seekers from the West, such as John Hislop, Arnold Schulman, and psychiatrist Samuel Sandweiss from the USA, as well as Howard Murphet from Australia. These scholars decode Baba as a compassionate human being who delivers “…divine favour to all those who seek his blessings” (Hislop 2003). Further these

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11 The “miracles” of Sathya Sai Baba include materializing sugar candy, flowers, vibhuti (sacred ash) and other presents for his devotees. It also includes healing the sick and knowing the thoughts of his disciples whatever be the distance between them.
revelations were published in more stylised form through books, magazines and pamphlets, which later inspired other spiritual seekers to visit and examine Sai Baba.

While describing Sathya Sai Baba religion as a “cult” Lawrence Babb (1995: 185) points out that:

One of the remarkable features of Sathya Sai Baba’s cult is that he has managed to preserve the imagery and atmosphere of a purely personal constituency, despite the fact that many of his devotees see him rarely, and then often only from a distance… Nonetheless, despite its size and complexity, the cult expresses, and is energized by, Sathya Sai Baba’s personal charisma. The cult-in-the-world is a kind of devotional empire, far-flung but totally dependent on the authority of its sovereign.

As Steel (2002) points out, the major attributes that distinguishes Sathya Sai Baba from other contemporary spiritual gurus “…is his claim to be ‘God on Earth,’ an avatar endowed with divine attributes and powers.” From the source of Sathya Sai Baba’s official Discourses of 1953, it is revealed that, Sathya Sai Baba claimed himself to be the living incarnation of God and the divine powers of Omnipotence, Omniscience and Omnipresence. Another claim is that, he is the second incarnation in the series of three consecutive incarnation of God that began in the 1830s with Shirdi Sai Baba. A more anecdotal is the claim that a third incarnation, Prema Sai, will appear soon after his departure in the year 2022 (Karanjia 1994:18-19).

Sai Baba’s claim to be the reincarnation of Shirdi Sai Baba deserves very special attention, both because it was pivotal to Sai Baba’s early mission and because it reveals several less than convincing aspects (Steel 2002). As Hislop mentioned:
To me, as well as to many hundreds of thousands of people in North and South America, Europe, Africa, Australia, New Zealand and Asia, Sri Sathya Sai Baba is considered to be an Avatar, Divinity in human form. His wisdom, the love which is so strongly felt when one is in his presence, and his awesome power over the natural elements and human circumstances contribute to the extraordinary veneration in which he is held and to the almost irresistible attraction felt by people of all ages and races when they see him, or begin to give close attention to, his teachings and to his life (Hislop 2003: vi).

The personal characteristics of Sathya Sai Baba such as charisma and psychic power has engendered perhaps a million followers or more who believed that he is god himself. The simple definition of Sai Baba as avatar or god incarnates, relates to the deification of human nature, which makes man god to the same degree as god himself became man.

Babb (1983) argues that, it is the “miracle” that is the absolute axis of the movement since the teachings contain nothing unique or remarkable - they are typical of Hindu devotionalist (bhakti) movements in general. It is a fact that, as far as the West is concerned, it is the miracle that attracts many followers and transforms people into devotees. The miracles that Sathya Sai Baba performs initially create a quasi-contractual relationship between him and his devotees (Kent 2004: 48). The devotees in this sense forge a social bond while exchanging their compassion with the gifts, which Sai Baba materialises. This compassionateness of devotees ultimately turns into “charity” in the portrayal of seva, which is an integral part of Sai movement today. As Kent (2004: 48-50) points out, “...the gift exerts a grip upon its recipient, obliging him to receive and later to reciprocate.” As a social actor, Sai Baba puts his devotees under contractual obligation, commanding their participation in the implementation of the mission, in exchange for his possible delivery of God’s grace. In return the
devotees see Sai Baba and his teaching as unquestionable truth - the direct outpouring of universal divinity. Similar instances can be comparable with the Hindu tradition of *dana* or charity.

According to traditional Hindu beliefs, human being is not born with birth rights, but with birth duties (Klostermaier 2000); that is, every human being must endeavour to redeem throughout life duties towards *devata* (divine powers), *rishis* (sages), *pitrulokas* (ancestors), and *bhutas* (fellow-creatures other than human). The first duties can be performed through means of regular worship, the second through the reading and studying of sacred lore, while the third through commemorations and rituals. The fourth and fifth duties which are most important can be rendered through charity: providing food and shelter, as well as expressing in daily prayers one’s gratitude to all those who make one’s life and well-being possible.

*Dana*, gift giving or “charity,” plays an important role in the Hindu traditions over the years. For instance, the *Rig Veda*, the oldest existing source of Hinduism, contains numerous references to gifts and donors; even one hymn was devoted to the praise of *dana*. According to Klostermaier:

The gifts mentioned in the *Rig Veda* are usually very substantial: large numbers of cows, horses, land, and gold. It was the duty of princes to reward with generous gifts the Brahmins who officiated at the sacrifices. In turn, the Brahmins assured the princes that their gifts were not in vain but brought rich rewards in this life and the next. Making promises and not delivering the gift was considered a serious offence that deserved punishment (Klostermaier 2000).

The way, in which Sathya Sai Baba decided to represent the responsibility and authority among the devotees, and the members of his own family, has profound effect on the growth and development of the movement. The history of the
devotional groups of any Hindu sects (for instance, Arya Samaj) gives example of
the way religious groups and sects are formed, the modes of administration
employed by the leaders, and the types of administrative structure of the sect etc.
There is a possibility of occurrence of conflict and contradictions in most of the
religious movements when the leader became famous however, this conflicting
situation hardly occurred in the growth of the Sathya Sai Baba movement so far.
There has been hardly any mobilisation or literature contradicting his claims.
When the movement increased in strength thereby wealth and activities, it was
difficult for Sathya Sai Baba to handle. He assigned people those who were close
to him to hold the administrative positions by forming the Sathya Sai
Organisation.

Growth of Sathya Sai Organisation

Sathya Sai Baba’s mission has always proclaimed a manifesto for charity,
education in human values, worship and meditation (Kent 2004: 48). To execute
this he has established the International Sathya Sai Organisation, which is devoted
to the service of the people. The organisation, which was first started as a small
charitable organisation in Puttaparthi during the mid-1960s, has now emerged to
be a well-knit, purposeful and service-oriented global organisation. Apart from
the spiritual efforts, the organisation’s main objective includes social activities
such as the training children, youths and adults in the human values, working in
hospitals, prisons, old age homes and similar institutions, and taking
responsibility of the family, neighbourhood, community and the state. The steady
growth of Sai organisation all over the world has resulted in the formation of
transnational networks of Sathya Sai Baba (see Annexure-2 for World Regions of
Sai Organization).

There are hardly any resources available that enable us to know how the
organisation started and gained momentum. As Robert Priddy (2002: 1) points out
“…it neither presents any documentation of its origins nor its history as such. The
organisation does not make any of its internal or financial transactions public and reserves information about its real decision-making procedure to office-bearers on a rather strict need-to-know basis.”

The members of the organisation have united with a common bond i.e., “love of God” and with a common goal of “spiritual growth.” Each organisation has certain unique activities which include: the study of the teachings of Sathya Sai Baba and the sacred literature of all religions, group devotional singing, spiritual meditation, and selfless service to the community, society, the world, and the environment. The fundamental objective of the Organisation as laid down by Sathya Sai Baba is to “awaken in man the divinity inherent in him” by propagating, through practice and examples of the basic principles of Love (Prema), Truth (Sathya), Right Action (Dharma), Peace (Shanti), and Non-violence (Ahimsa). Membership to the organisation is open to people from all walks of life. Regarding the code of conduct, it is pointed out that all those who participate in the activities of Sathya Sai Baba movement must undertake Sadhana (spiritual discipline), which is as an integral part of Sathya Sai Baba’s daily life.13

Sathya Sai Baba organisation operates on two levels - managerial organisation at the central level and seva organisation at the local level. At the managerial level, different trusts function at local, national and international level. It is important to mention here that all the Sathya Sai Baba Trusts in India promote education, health and rural development. The Central Trust situated at Prasanthi Nilayam

12 To become a member or hold any administrative charge one has to undergo several stages. His training as a religious specialist comes from his total devotion to the work and spread the message of Baba either through media or through public discourse. See appendix-1: for Sai Organisation Charter.
13 The main Codes of Conducts of Sathya Sai Baba are as follows: a) daily meditation and prayer; b) devotional singing/prayer with members of his family once per week; c) participation in the educational programs conducted by the Organization for children; d) attendance at group devotional programs conducted by the Organization; e) participation in community service and other programs of the Organization; f) regular study of Sai literature; g) putting into practice the principle of “Ceiling on Desires” and utilities any savings thereby generated for the service of mankind; h) speaking softly and lovingly with everyone with whom he comes into contact; i) avoiding talking ill of others especially in their absence.
having eleven members is the national apex body and acts as a bridge between different trusts. The organisations in the overseas countries however vary from what is exists in India. In the USA for example, where the Sathya Sai activities are getting more popular than other countries - there found to be two complementary agencies. One consists of Sathya Sai Baba Society of America, which runs the Sathya Sai Baba Books Centre at Tustin, California, while the other branch is Sathya Sai Council of America that provides guidelines for various American Sai Centres.

The organisation is well established on the grounds of “legal-rational authority” with a strict hierarchy of management. Taylor (1987: 124) in his study points out how this organisation has been responsible for the growth of Sathya Sai Movement. At the apex level, there is the World Council of Sri Sathya Sai Organisation which oversees the two sub-organisations, namely the Council of Central Management and Sri Sathya Sai Seva Organisation. The Council of Central Management looks after another important body called the Sri Sathya Sai Central Trust. The Sri Sathya Sai Seva Organisation is divided into three wings i.e., 1) the Centres Wing, 2) the Women’s wing, 3) the Service wing. The service wing is divided further into several branches such as health, education, general public welfare etc. The Chart-1 shows the organisational management and networks of Sathya Sai Organisation.

Indian as well as Overseas devotees use different names for the organisation such as Sri Sathya Sai Seva Organisations and Sathya Sai Organisation. The organisation today has reached in a stage where the members are able to maintain transnational networks with their counterparts across the world through the establishment of centres/temples and educational institutions.
Sathya Sai Organisation and Social Service

Social service has always been given great importance in Sai organisations all over the world. The devotees show their love towards Sathya Sai Baba by serving their fellow beings. Service is defined in Sai discourse as “Love made manifest.” Irrespective of gender, colour, caste and race, people from all backgrounds serve their fellow beings in one form or other, both in India and in the Indian diaspora. Sathya Sai Baba’s message of social service to the wider society has been told and retold many times and published in many manuscripts, books and magazines.\(^{14}\)

The Sathya Sai Organisation, which fulfils this purpose called as Sathya Sai Seva Dal Organisation. The structure of Sathya Sai Seva Dal Organisation consisted of a state president nominated by Sathya Sai Baba, who organises Seva Samithi work by nominating a District President and Seva Dal by appointing a State Convenor. It is the Seva Samithi, which first decides to have a Seva Dal in their respective area by appointing a Seva Dal Convenor for the Samithi. Thus, there

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\(^{14}\) According to Sathya Sai Baba, “...human being should engage himself or herself in service activity... The ideal of service has the ability to remove the ego; it promotes love and affection; it takes one away from worldly attachments and puts one on the path of the Divine.”
are three organisers at three different levels playing important role such as: a) Seva Dal Convenor for each Samithi, b) District Convenor for each district, and c) State Convenor for each state. Chart-2 shows the organisational structure of the Sathya Sai Seva Dal Organisation.

Chart-2

SATHYA SAI SEVA DAL ORGANISATION

State President

State Convenor for Seva Dal (Group)

District Convenors
In district where Seva Samithis function

Seva Dal Convenor for each Seva Samithi in the district

Conducts training and examination at district level

enrolls members for Seva Dal for training

conducts various activities

gives certificate and badge

In this context, it is worthwhile to mention here some of the important landmarks in the contribution of Sathya Sai Baba Movement to the larger society. First, the educational programme, which is organise through establishing schools and colleges in various regions. For instance, Sri Sathya Sai Arts, Science and Commerce College for men and women at Anantapur, Bhopal, Jaipur, Hyderabad
and Bangalore. These colleges are affiliated to the Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning, Puttaparthi, which has been accorded Deemed University status in India (Taylor 1987: 129). The second important field is the health programme, which is organised through establishing healthcare institutions and hospitals with the following purposes: 1) medicine for all, 2) medical care free from the stigma of commercialisation, and 3) human values in medical care. Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Medical Sciences at Puttaparthi and Bangalore, and Sathya Sai Baba Super Specialty Hospital at Puttaparthi are established to promote the above ideals. The third major initiative taken by Sathya Sai Organisation is Sri Sathya Sai Drinking Water Supply Project, to the people in the drought-prone rural areas of Anantapur, Medak, and Mehaboobnagar districts of Andhra Pradesh.

**International Sathya Sai Organisation**

The International Sri Sathya Sai Organisation consists of Sathya Sai Centres and Groups in countries outside India. Today, Sathya Sai Centres are found in all most all countries around the world. For administrative purposes, countries outside of India have been divided into ten geographical regions of the globe (http://www.sathyasai.org/organize/content.htm). In the Indian diaspora one could observe the number of centres increasing especially in the old diasporic countries like Fiji, Trinidad and South Africa. There are more than 20 centres in Fiji and 50 centres in Trinidad. In short, the worldwide spiritual movement of Sathya Sai Baba appears to be growing in geometric progression for the last few years. Each region is headed by one or more Central Coordinators to guide and assist for the smooth functioning of the Centres. The activities of the Sri Sathya Sai International Organisation fall into three categories: Devotional/Spiritual, Educational and Service. Chart-3 shows the organisational structure of Sathya Sai Organisation.

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15 The first Sai Baba centre outside India was established in 1967 at Sri Lanka. In the USA and UK centres started during 1969. Establishment of centres in South Africa (1973), Italy (1974), Mauritius and Australia (1978), West Indies (1983) followed.
Although it is suggested that the Sathya Sai Baba organisation is not a proselytising organisation, scholars have described the miracles of Sai Baba as “proselytizing miracles” that cause the potential devotee to accept Sai Baba as father God and integral avatar (see Hummel 1985) thus in similar way the members to the organisation recruits on the basis of a strict criteria. The organisation led mostly by Hindus however, exceptions are there in countries in which foreigners become the head of the organisation.\(^{16}\) The organisation made all effort to incorporate Hindu spiritual teachings and discard other beliefs and

\(^{16}\) This is the case of most of the European countries where the Indian population is meagre.
persons of different spiritual inclination. As Robert Priddy (2002) observes, in the organisational character there is an attempt to

…universalise the Sathya Sai Baba teaching, the groups soon gravitate towards an exclusive membership, of which the first requirement is belief in Sathya Sai Baba and at least the basics of his teaching. Non-members are tolerated, but room is never made for them within the heavily Hindu-oriented doctrine that prevails in both the Charter, in the nature of all central conferences and festivities and in devotional gatherings … however much one tries to involve other faiths. There is also an inbuilt inertia towards Indian rituals rather than those of any other faith. This is not an inclusive practice, though it is highly natural and probably unavoidable in any culture… one sticks mainly to one's own timeworn symbols and behaviour. The only persons of other faiths who interact with the Sai organisation are those who also accept or tolerate silently the claim that Sathya Sai Baba is nothing short of the Divinity Itself. One does not have to be much of a deep thinker to see what limitations this sets upon the spread of the doctrine preached by Sathya Sai Baba, though faith also can have great power in clouding sensible judgements… and such beliefs can and do often stultify human moral conscience.

Sathya Sai Baba organisation plays important role in popularising Sai Baba’s mission world over through organising seminars, workshops, conferences on religion and spirituality and the contemporary needs of gullible people. These public activities sometimes act as practical alternative to spirituality as a result of the overseas tours by Sathya Sai Baba (only to East Africa), if not by his close disciples or associates. Since 1943 Sathya Sai Baba mission has been prospering without needing general public meetings in overseas countries. Nowadays, the close associates of Sathya Sai Baba - persons like Anil Kumar, Indulal Shah and
others - travel across the world to spread Sai Baba’s message, his philosophy and teaching. This prominent persons travel every year to different countries with the invitation of the respective countries’ Sai Centres. The organisation for the last few decades has initiated conducting international conferences and workshops on spirituality and religion in different countries around the world.17 The spontaneous overflow of Centres outside India is the best example of this effort.

The organisation has divided the responsibilities (such as environment, health, education, women, Bhajan group etc.) into different departments and the administrative committee looks after all this with the help of its co-members. Administrative committees have been established in each country where there is a Centre. These committees are registered or incorporated according to the laws of the countries where they have located, but in each case Sathya Sai Baba is the president of the committee.

There are now committees in East Africa, South Africa, Caribbean, Mauritius, UK, USA, Australia, and Canada. The activities of each committee in all the countries are coordinated through a central committee which is in India. The effective administrative structure combined with a centralised authority formed by the intellectuals to make decisions is one of the major factors leading to the growth and success of the Sathya Sai Baba movement in the last few years.

To sum up, Sathya Sai Baba movement today has achieved transnational character as a result of its global networking through the establishment of Centres all over the world. The chapter examines how the movement gained momentum specially focusing on the charisma and charity which is the ultimate aim of the movement. Further, the chapter shows the organisational structure of the movement and its charitable activities. The following chapter will deal with the structure of Sathya Sai Baba theology.

17 For instance, the first world conference was held at Dharmakshethra, Bombay in June 1968, and the second in 1975. The third in 1980, the fourth in 1985 and the fifth in 1990 were held at Prasanthi Nilayam during Sathya Sai Baba’s birthday.