

'LOVE ALL, SERVE ALL' - SAI BABA'S MESSAGE LIVES ON AS AN INSPIRATION TO MILLIONS



For millions of devotees of the Sathya Sai Baba, 2011 was the cataclysmic year in which the India-based spiritual guru passed away, unexpectedly, at 85.

Sai Baba had prophesied that he would live till 96.

His rise from a backward hamlet in southern India to preside over an empire whose net worth is estimated at some US\$8 billion (Bt253.8 billion), with followers in more than 100 countries, is the stuff of epics.

Though even his baiters acknowledged the enormous humanitarian services provided by his organization - encompassing free schooling, free treatment at two state-of-the-art super-speciality hospitals, and an innovative water project - criticism and controversy trailed him even after his death, when huge amounts of cash and jewellery were found in his residential quarters.

Professor Anil Kumar, a former doctor of botany, who translated Sai Baba's speeches for almost four decades and had close access to him, was in Bangkok last week. Here, he addresses the oft-repeated questions of skeptics and critics.

How do you explain the huge amount of cash and jewellery found in Sai Baba's room, which was unearthed after his death, especially as the Sathya Sai Organization does not seem to have a history of soliciting funds?

You know, [devotees], they're trying to hand it over to him personally. But he never accepts. They want to give something. He rejects it openly, throws it in their face. But these people don't give up. They send them by courier, they post it. And those that were received by mail were [left] lying there. But he had never looked at them. He never used that money. He never touched those packets.

There were many cheques for huge amounts that had not been cashed, some dating back to 1993. Had he been money-minded he would have got them cashed. Many [packets] were not even opened. Because he was not at all bothered. All the money and jewels found in his room have nothing to do with him.

Why was all the money not taken away? Why was it left lying in the room?

Because no one had access to his room. No official could go to his room. They had to wait for him downstairs. He came down and talked to them. No one knew what was lying in the room. It was news even to the officials. I, having had proximity to him for four decades, can categorically say that he never talked about money. Money was never a criterion for him for anything. Money was never a consideration for anybody to come close to him. He attached no value to it. If you take my example, I was an ordinary college lecturer, with a hand-to-mouth existence ... so how could I be so close to him? I never gave him anything.

Among the jewels found in his room were gems apparently given by a king of Saudi Arabia. Can you throw some light on that?

I've no knowledge of the variety of jewels collected over there or the sources they came from.

Was there any meeting with the Saudi king or his representatives? I ask this because Saudi Arabia is a puritanical Islamic state.

Here I can say one thing. Sai Baba was very simple and so is his place, Prashanthi Nilayam [in Puttaparthi town, southern India]. It doesn't get any facelift just because VIPs or dignitaries are visiting. Prime ministers, presidents and other VIPs come but there are no special decorations. In all probability, he [the Saudi king] or his representatives must have come. Baba may not be accepted as an incarnation or as divine by everyone, but his teachings are universal. His educational system is universal. His educational system aims at total personality development, comprehensive growth. It is a value-based education. So, no matter what the religion, everyone can follow it.

A lot has been said and written over the years about the 'miracles' he performed - producing ash and trinkets, gold chains, rings and watches, etc. His devotees loved it, critics hated it, skeptics were unconvinced. Scientists and para-psychologists did studies on them. Some dismissed them as sleight of hand, others were unable to explain them. For someone who saw them at close proximity, how do you look at it?

I'll quote him. He called it his visiting card. Once you give a visiting card to someone you don't have to introduce yourself again. He steps into your life as a visitor sending a visiting card through a miracle in your life. That which you think is impossible is made possible through a miracle and makes you believe in something transcendental, extra-sensual. The miracle is a bait to draw a person closer to God. He gives an example: to make a child go to school, what do you do sometimes? Give a chocolate. But it's the schooling that is important, not the chocolate. Similarly, a miracle happens in your life, so you will turn your mind towards the divine or spiritual life.

But magicians say even they can perform some of these 'miracles' and you don't need any divine powers...

Magicians do it as a profession. But in Sai Baba's case, miracles are not performed, they happen. The happening of a miracle is different from doing it. One is spiritual, the other is physical.

Can you expand on that?

A magician can perform under certain conditions. But Sai Baba, anytime, anywhere could materialize something for you. A magician will not be able to do that. He needs special conditions to perform. But Baba, by his will, could make things happen. Sai Baba's miracles have a higher purpose; a magician is only aiming for attraction with commercial value.

A leading Indian scientist, S Bhagvantham, who was the vice-chancellor of a university and even the director of India's defense research organization, stayed with him and studied the miracles and became totally convinced that miracles happened in Sai Baba's presence, at his will. One Italian doctor, who attended an international meeting of thoracic surgeons in Puttaparthi, said that though his reputation might be at risk, he would like to state that only Sai Baba could run such a sophisticated super-speciality hospital free of charge.

A BBC documentary on Sai Baba, called "Secret Swami", blighted his reputation with accusations of sexual abuse. If the accusations were false why didn't his organization or he defend himself or take action?

I, personally, would have liked to deal with it differently. But the thing is, Sai Baba never encouraged anybody to counteract [the accusations], especially on his behalf. He said truth is triumphant and spotless. It doesn't need anybody's support.

He went one step further and said to his devotees, "you're happy praising me, they're happy attacking me. I want both to be happy". He narrated a story from the Buddha's life. When the Buddha reached a village, all the youngsters there mocked him and made fun of him for abandoning his wife and child and walking shaven-headed, wearing ochre robes. The Buddha listened patiently and said "Is it over? Are you exhausted? My disciples are on their way. If they hear the things you said, they might beat you up. I don't want violence. So please finish whatever you want to say before they come". That's the compassion of the Lord. Sai Baba told us if you're pained to hear all the criticism, you have legs to walk away. He wanted all of us to develop a state of mind that does not become elated when praised, or depressed when criticized or blamed.

A lot has been said and written about his reported clairvoyance. Apparently in 1998 he told his inner circle that the world was headed for many natural disasters and that the earth's axis might even shift. We now know that during the Japanese earthquake/tsunami the earth's axis did shift. Are you aware of any predictions he made which came true?

He said long ago that Muslim nations will go through turmoil and terrorism. We've seen that in Afghanistan and Iraq; he predicted the unification of Germany, and long, long ago he said the Soviet Union will collapse. Then, he also predicted the decline of the US economy and the dotcom bust.

Talking about clairvoyance, he said more than once that he'd live to 96, but actually passed away at 85. How do you explain that?

Some Hindu scholars believe that, as per the lunar calendar, he did live to 96. According to the lunar calendar, a year has 324 days. Sai Baba never said he'd live to 96 according to the solar calendar.

Two years ago, he pointed to a spot and told me, "This is going to be my Samadhi [resting place]." When I told him "please don't say that", he said "why are you afraid? It's inevitable for anybody. Death is the dress of life".

The British architect Keith Critchlow, who was close to Prince Charles and designed the super-speciality hospital in Puttaparthi, reportedly advised Prince Charles to visit Sai Baba. And Charles was said to be keen to make the trip. There are two versions of this story: one said the British spy agency MI5 dissuaded Charles from visiting Sai Baba because of the sexual abuse allegations; another said they had a quiet meeting. Can you throw some light on that?

It's true that Critchlow wrote to Prince Charles [advising him] to meet Sai Baba. The authentic version I have heard is that the airport in Puttaparthi is small and was not in a position to accommodate the kind of plane Charles would travel in. Later, I heard that Charles regretted not being able to meet Sai Baba, and sent his respects through an emissary.

Since he encouraged everyone to practice their own religion, what kind of role did he envisage for himself?

He saw himself more as a catalyst; as a unifying factor; he wanted synthesis, not antithesis.

He has left an enormous legacy of free schools, educational institutions, free hospitals, social service organizations. His presence obviously helped raise funds all these years. But now, will these institutions be financially sustainable?

Right now, we're in a state of shock. But he has left us with principles to follow, and enough money.

The interest accrued on the principal amount will be enough for the [Organization's] maintenance. There will be no shortage of funds.

If you had to sum up his message in a few words, what would it be?

Love all, serve all; the hands that serve are holier than the lips that pray.

