

BOOK REVIEW

Modern Miracles: Sathya Sai Baba: The Story of a Modern Day Prophet by Erlendur Haraldsson. Guildford, UK: White Crow Books, 2013. 390 pp. \$19.99. ISBN 978-1908733252, eBook 978-1908733269.

This is a revised edition of a book first published in 1987, and most of the material is the same as in the first edition. It comprises a short account of personal interviews with Sathya Sai Baba by the author and various colleagues, as well as extensive interviews with people who were devotees of and close to Sai Baba during the 1940s and 1950s, when his miracles were most prominent. Most of the material is probably beyond most Westerners' boggle-threshold, which makes an evaluation of it rather tricky.

Haraldsson, in his summing-up, clearly considers that the vast majority of the reported materializations for which Sai Baba is most famed are probably genuine. However, he met the man and the interviewees, and therefore probably has greater trust in what they have to say than will the reader who has not met Sai Baba or the interviewees, and maybe has never been to India and so has no idea of the norms of belief within that culture. While I have a measure of sympathy with Haraldsson's conclusions, I suspect that most Western academics would not.

Sathya Sai Baba was born Ratnakaram Sathyanarayana Raju into a low-caste family in 1929 in a remote village some 200 miles from Bangalore in South India. Like most villagers at that time, he had only a rudimentary education and left school after his crisis in 1943, when he was 14 years old. This crisis was ostensibly caused by a bite from a scorpion, which left him unconscious for several hours, and is typical of a shamanic crisis experience. When he recovered he was no longer an ordinary village boy, but claimed to be the reincarnation of a previous south Indian saint known as Shirdi Sai Baba. Hence his name of Sathya Sai Baba. He would frequently fall into trance during the next two decades, so often that he was taken to see a doctor. Some people might see this as a form of possession, especially since those close to him often described him as two very different people—the partially educated village boy who was “very human,” and the divine saint who could do miracles with a flick of his wrist. It took decades for the local villagers to accept Sai Baba as a guru.

His most impressive miracles occurred during the decade or so after this transformation, while he was still young and, as described by the

interviewees, playful. After the crowds started to amass during his 30s he still performed miracles, but they were his common garden-variety manifestations, of which there must have been an estimated 500,000 over his lifetime. He died at age 81, so for 67 years he manifested things on average 20 times a day. Haraldsson checked with various local goldsmiths in an attempt to find whether or not any of them had made any items for Sai Baba, and found no one who would admit to doing such a thing. If anyone had personally created all these objects, they would be strikingly wealthy by now!

Haraldsson visited Sai Baba several times, the first in 1975 with the late Karlis Osis. They had a personal interview with Sai Baba in which he manifested a ring for Osis and a double rudraksha (special sort of holy nut) for Haraldsson. Neither Osis nor Haraldsson are skilled magicians and they detected no signs of fraud. This was the case whenever Haraldsson visited. On a second occasion when they visited, the enamel picture of Sai Baba within Karlis Osis' ring disappeared as a result of their skeptical questioning of Sai Baba. Haraldsson mentions this a few times as he considers that this would be very difficult to do as some form of trick. However, Sai Baba refused to take part in any experiments, and no other parapsychologists from the West attempted to work experimentally with Sai Baba, so no definitive study was ever done.

In 1976, when Sai Baba was 47 years old, extremely famous, and no longer performing some of his most impressive miracles, an Indian committee was set up by Bangalore University to perform an investigation. They wrote several times to Sai Baba requesting an interview, but received no reply. When they went to visit the ashram, having given prior notification of their visit, they were not permitted to enter. And thus ended the only formal investigation. The committee did, however, subsequently receive about 1,000 letters, which Haraldsson was never able to examine despite several attempts to get access to them.

As he was unable to do any experiments, Haraldsson decided to interview as many people who were close to Sai Baba as he could. Michael Thalbourne and Joop Hootkooper were the colleagues who assisted Haraldsson in obtaining these interviews. During the 1940s to 1950s there were about 200 to 300 devotees. Haraldsson states that he interviewed "a large number" of people who had been devotees of Sai Baba at this time, and presents interviews from more than a dozen of these people: a scientist at the Bangalore Institute of Science, the sister of Dr. C. T. K. Chari, a pharmaceutical manufacturer, a building entrepreneur, a local Raja and his brother, two classical singers, a Westerner (the son of the famous artist Nicholas Roerich), and the wife, sons, and daughter of a businessman. These

sons were teenage boys at the time who lived and slept in the same room as Sai Baba, dressing him and being with him most of the day. They report that at no time did they see him doing anything fraudulent. They also report a bewildering array of miracles. And “miracle” is the appropriate word for the things that he did. Haraldsson likens them to the miracles of Jesus Christ and more recent Christian saints. The manifestations reported by most of the above interviewees ranged from the most common, *vibhuti*, which is ash from sacred fires and incense, all the way to the feeding of large numbers of people from pots that were known to be washed, clean, and empty. Along the way we have him picking leaves off a tree and giving the person a fruit they had requested, often fruit that was out of season, or telling someone to go and pick some fruit from a nearby (non-fruit bearing) tree; rings, amulets, locketts, and necklaces manifested with a flick of the wrist; gold statues of various sizes were pulled out of the sand by the nearby river; the creation of a sheet of stamps with his face on them occurred; rain stopped in a specific area; various scents occurred; clairvoyance, precognition, and telepathy were expressed; things disappeared; water turned into petrol; his weight altered; he appeared at distant places; his robe changed color; *vibhuti* appeared from his forehead, mouth or feet; sacred objects appeared from his mouth; and so on and on and on, for every day of his life.

Less common but still fairly frequent were healings, such as a purported tonsillectomy (though the tonsils were not actually removed), none of which were properly documented or verified by doctors or hospitals. Haraldsson’s one attempt at verification with doctors and a hospital resulted in a very different story from that reported by the devotee. And there were many reported cases in which healing did not happen even though Sai Baba had promised it, and times when he refused to help.

Also reported were distant phenomena, most commonly that of *vibhuti* appearing on photographs of Sai Baba that people had in their houses or shrine rooms around the world. For some people, this *vibhuti* appeared constantly over a number of years. Other distant phenomena were when Sai Baba appeared to know what had happened to a person, either in life or in a dream. There were some phenomena about which Sai Baba seemed to have knowledge and others, such as *vibhuti* appearing on photographs, about which he knew nothing. There are also a few reports of him appearing to people in a distant place many hundreds of miles away, one of which involved several people and which has been carefully tabulated with regard to what was seen and heard by whom. The most often-reported instance of disappearing and then reappearing at another place was when he was walking with people to the river, and he would disappear from their midst only to reappear a few seconds later on a nearby hill. On a few occasions

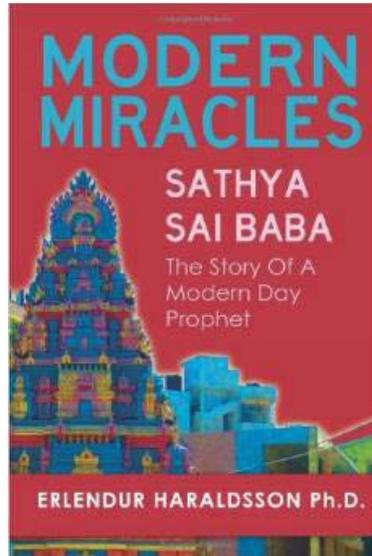
in the 1940s he did this and then manifested as a strong blinding light on that hill. Haraldsson interviewed ten witnesses to these manifestations.

There are two accounts of interviews with people who are no longer devotees, and once again there are many reports of miracles. Their reasons for no longer following Sai Baba were personal ones, rather than fraud. Haraldsson also mentions the time when Sai Baba was televised manifesting a gold necklace while at a presentation. This produced quite a stir in India, with newspapers claiming that Sai Baba had been found to cheat. Haraldsson examined the tape and did not find any evidence of fraud, but the quality of the tape is such that no final verdict can be given.

These interviews go on and on, reporting these phenomena again and again. Reading all the different interviews becomes rather repetitive because it's just one manifestation after another. Sometimes the reports are of the same occasions but reported by different people at that location, so there are different viewpoints of what occurred. Some of these are high-status people, e.g., a raja or university scientist, whom Haraldsson obviously considers will engender a higher degree of trust in the accuracy of their report. There is one interviewee who kept a diary at the time and permitted Haraldsson to use the information recorded at the time of the occurrence. Most of the memories essentially corroborated each other, but there were several minor discrepancies, as one would expect from memories that were 20 or more years old at the time that Haraldsson and his colleagues collected them.

After recounting all the interviews, Haraldsson reports on a questionnaire he gave to 29 people in 1983. Haraldsson then condenses the reports of the manifestations and other miracles, such as the fact that of all the people who had seen *vibhuti* produced more than 50 times, 25 of them saw manifestations of lockets and sweets more than 50 times, half the people reported seeing Baba change an object such as a leaf into something else, etc.

Haraldsson finally considers some of the theories that have been put forward to try and explain some of the lesser miracles, such as the production of *vibhuti* by palming pellets of ash, manifesting objects that were hidden



in his hair, secret pockets in his robe, and the use of accomplices, and finds that none of them can explain all that has been witnessed and reported.

All in all it is a remarkable account of a modern saint who purportedly had miraculous powers similar to those reported of Jesus Christ, and of the same order as those reported of some more recent Christian saints. It is therefore a real shame that Sai Baba would not assist in experimental procedures, as that might have given the world some phenomenal information concerning the further reaches of human experience and abilities. However, having done research myself in India, I am aware that many people there consider science to be a force that denigrates spirituality, and Sai Baba considered his miracles to be merely in the service of the spiritual message of “love all, serve all,” and he performed his miracles in order to show people that there is more to this world than our normal lives.

Because many of Haraldsson’s interviewees commented on the lack of any report of Sai Baba’s spiritual message in the earlier edition of the book, Haraldsson has included some information on Sai Baba’s teachings, and in particular has mentioned the good works that Sai Baba did as a result of the many donations he has received. Four colleges giving education up to the Ph.D. level to 2,000 students have been founded, and four hospitals have been built with the money, so that students and patients can receive free education and medical treatment. A huge water supply system has been built to provide clean water to 740 villages in the local area. This is very much in the tradition of a spiritual teacher who continues to live a simple life devoting all his time to good works, looking after and giving interviews to his devotees. All money received is usually spent on others.

There is insufficient information about his teachings for me to say at what level he taught, but the interviewees seemed perfectly satisfied with his level of wisdom and particularly with his gift of singing sacred songs. Therefore, in this respect, as a spiritual leader Sai Baba acted in a normal manner. The only unusual aspect was his ability to do miracles. This was frowned upon by other spiritual teachers in India at the time because it is considered damaging to your ego if you do such things unnecessarily. There are also reports of Sai Baba behaving in a manner that was abusive to others—definitely not the behavior of a true spiritual leader. He was an inconsistent person; sometimes the village boy and sometimes semi-divine.

Sai Baba is a controversial figure and Haraldsson is to be commended for taking so much time and trouble to get some measure of assessment of his miracles. Many people in India did not consider him a guru (teacher), but rather a fakir (Miracle man). This is not considered to be as holy. A saint is one who is humble, does not show off, lives an intensely spiritual life, spending most of the time in one sort of practice or another, and who

has noticeably attained some level of compassion and wisdom. While Haraldsson does briefly mention Sai Baba's spiritual teachings and simple lifestyle, these are not the things that most people associate with him or that stand out as being the most important aspects of his life. His teachings, according to Haraldsson, were basically "love all, serve all," which are good teachings, but relatively unremarkable. And while he lived the traditional life of a holy man, as a village boy he did rather well for himself, being fed, clothed, housed, driven around, and in fact having every aspect of his personal life looked after by his devotees, who were essentially his servants.

All in all, this book is a classic, a unique documentation of an Indian Miracle worker from the viewpoint of a Western academic. This is a quality book about Sai Baba, who, whether you consider his miracles to be real or not, was a truly remarkable man.

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