



# THE MAKING OF A POSTCOLONIAL HINDU IDENTITY IN THE SHARAVANA BABA MOVEMENT

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## THE MAKING OF A POSTCOLONIAL HINDU IDENTITY IN THE SHARAVANA BABA MOVEMENT

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### ABSTRACT

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This paper examines the ways in which Hindu identity is constructed and maintained in the Sharavana Baba movement. As the Baba's new religious movement is still in the process of being institutionalised, there is much to be broached on the topic of the Indian New Age as it consolidates itself with varying devotional groups dotting India's vast spiritual terrain. Since this guru movement is gaining ground on the world stage, the paper draws from existing academic perspectives on gurudom and maps the beginning stages of sacred new ethics and sites, whilst charting out the ocular translations of this charismatic leader to depict the differences and similarities of his movement set against more popular ones. It fills part of the lacunae in the literature on guru-faith in the modern world by invoking the anthropology of insight, offering an optic through which this particular guru-faith can be understood within Hindu worlds of worship.

This paper explores decolonisation in praxis through a relatively unknown guru movement that is attracting a vast transnational following.<sup>1</sup> It examines certain questions without providing textbook answers because it is the first academic paper on this movement. Where is the guru Sharavana Baba positioned in being a Hindu guru amidst varying religious communities in the world? Does he negate his Hindu identity, such as the hugging guru Amma (Lucia, 2011), or does he avowedly recreate his Hindu identity to suit the demands of his Sri Lankan Tamil Hindu following? What are the politics of being a transnational guru seeking larger provinces? The paper attempts to analyse the Sharavana Baba movement to posit that it is a movement based on Murugan culture from where myriad magical tropes can be imagined.

Unlike organised 'world' religions, such as Islam and Christianity, that do not accept other religious equals<sup>2</sup>, Hindu spirituality in the Sharavana Baba movement summons us to rethink preconceived notions of spirituality within the anthropology of religion. Sociologies of gender, class and religion implore us to question Hinduism and India's ways as their gurus emerge triumphant spectators of the methods of the academic establishment. Whilst they simply do not bother about what we write about them, it is clear that they will nevertheless expand and dominate<sup>3</sup> spiritual India. Scholarly attempts at absorbing the complexities of new-age guru movements are linked inextricably to careful observations on

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<sup>1</sup> Anthropologists such as myself use the word 'decolonisation' hesitatingly because to broach the topic in social anthropology would mean to speak in the personal pronoun and as the insider. This is problematic because it relegates decolonisation to atavistic readings of history and religion. I spot decolonisation on an inquiry that is essentially broad and that draws on cross-disciplinary, critical postcolonial interpretations that move beyond strict disciplinary boundaries. The move is not without pitfalls because a true decolonisation cannot exist without problematising the colonised zone. In other words, both the colonised and the coloniser carry histories of contention. The colonised had their own inherent problems before colonisation and this requires an appropriate account of the intersections between modernity and tradition as well as identity and religion in the postcolonial era. My reading of this movement is planted in this zone of meaning-making where gurus are figured as beings who attend to the masses who are swayed by their charisma and propaganda, the shifts and changes in their media. Due to space constraints, I cannot chart out the history of gurus and offer a weightier analysis of a gargantuan phenomenon. However, the decolonisation theme runs throughout this paper for it absorbs research methodologies currently animating academic discourse, which negotiates uncertainties like the generalisations and assumptions we have of our subjects whilst they are being probed. I, therefore, understand my subject through this pemmicanized view 'from below'.

<sup>2</sup> This is similar to the claim made by historian Romila Thapar that 'A fundamental sanity of Indian civilization has been due to an absence of Satan' in Romila Thapar, *Early India*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 18. The truism that Hinduism is a pluralistic religion accepting of other faiths unlike Judeo-Christian religions which do not do so in their 'tolerance rhetoric', is brought out in Shashi Tharoor, *Why I am a Hindu*, (New Delhi: Aleph Book Company, 2018), 310.

<sup>3</sup> My concern is neither to situate Sharavana Baba as a 'genuine' or 'fraudulent' guru nor to assume that all gurus are the same. Similar to the claims of many scholars who examine gurus in a monolithic whole due to the volume of guru movements warranting documentation, the construction of a guru as a charismatic leader capable of appealing to large sections of the electorate bears a mark on the social landscape of religion in the modern world where both the fraud and his counterpart feature as actors reflecting particular frameworks of the zeitgeist. On the other hand, as T. Srinivas writes, '[T]he McDonalds Corporation.. moved to India, but the Sathya Sai movement was an example of an Indian religiocultural movement that had people from different regions of the world gravitating towards it.' Tulasi Srinivas, *Winged Faith*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 3. Sharavana Baba's movement is similar to Sathya Sai Baba's movement inasmuch that it reimagines religion for devotees to contribute to the publicity of the Baba as he travels around the globe.

those movements that have already shifted paradigms, villages and cities, whereas the Sharavana Baba movement is still in the process of becoming as it reworks on Hinduism for a wider consumer base. I will now explain why these factors need to be weighed in.

## SHARAVANA BABA AND HIS MOVEMENT

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Sharavana Baba was born in the village of Sreekrishnapuram in Kerala on 8 October 1979. He was considered to be self-realised and a god from birth. His hagiography describes him as a reincarnation of Lord Murugan, Shiva's second son. He is believed to be a world preceptor or an avatar. His first ashram was established in Calicut and his second ashram in Palakkad in south India. Subsequently, a branch was established in Bangalore in July 2007 and later in London in 2010. Apart from spreading love, his mission consists of four main forces: 1) free food to those who need them 2) free clothing to those who do not have them 3) free books to the poor and needy and 4) free medicines for those afflicted by sickness.

As his movement was borne in India, the main services at the moment are geared towards the poor and village communities around his ashram in Kerala. Yet as he travels to Britain and around the world frequently, a large number of Sri Lankan Hindu followers seek his blessings and guidance.

## HINDU SPIRITUALITY AND AVATARS

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Religion is intimately connected to believers and their belief systems. Since most seekers of self-revelation are religious, religion is a set of practices and processes that dissect the nature of creaturely life for religious audiences who are very often themselves at the receiving end of the prescriptions laid down by worldly institutions. There are complex gender, caste, class, national, regional and ethnic divides that are embedded deeply into the systems of globalised religion where divinity is cathected into the worldly for living the good life. In the Sharavana Baba movement originating in Kerala, spiritual illumination is embedded within these fractures and bridges of the religious imagination.

Scholars have noted that devotees of popular new-age guru movements are primarily from the middle-classes (Warrier, 2006), with the exception of the many from the periphery who are reduced to the ideal-typical devotee waiting patiently in a queue for the guru's *darshan*, or seeing, which is 'the apotheosis of the devotional experience; a sacred moment both ritually and experientially' (T. Srinivas 2009, p.317). Whilst this is certainly the case, the Sharavana Baba movement accommodates all classes in the main so that all followers may receive *darshan*. Added to *darshan* is the preponderance of catering to the 'lower-classes' as beneficiaries of charitable services. The affluent put in energies into acts of *seva* (selfless service) which benefit the poor who receive free food, books and clothes. The devotional base varies in identity but those in the lower order of the economic hierarchy are primary recipients of the services of the mission owing to the money that the rich can afford to spend.

In most guru movements, the rich can secure a faster *darshan* of the guru if they know someone from the guru's bureaucracy or are a part of it. A politician ruptures the guru's stage further. Not only is s/he called to bear witness to the guru but s/he is also acquainted with the guru through party politics and utilises political affiliations to connect to the

divinity in question.<sup>4</sup> Whether right-wing or not, the politician registers on the guru's stage an invocation to the ideal politics where, gazers surmise that, all politicians work under a heterogeneous guru system in which a guru can have many politicians at his/her disposal. The speed at which affluent devotees secure *darshan*, the politics of positioning and the surrounding atmospheres aiding in the goal of sacred sight are crucial in receiving grace from living gurus whose service-oriented activities are linked inseparably to the affluent whose wealth goes into the channeling of those very services.

So those who write about spirituality are those who occupy privileged positions, whilst those who write off spirituality as perpetuating otherness are prone to noticing how spirituality today is the management of high Hinduism across the board. The Baba makes a clear line between 'insiders' and 'outsiders' to his adherents:

"Mahatmas come into this world to spread the message of service and sacrifice. Among many millions, they will choose only a few. You are among the few. Know that this is a rare opportunity. Do not fritter it away." (p.107 of *GMSSB*)

Spiritual travel diaries and hagiographies are exclusionary, holding promises for believers who partake in ritualised Hindu modes of wondering, benefiting those who moderate the discussions of and on inter-faith dialogue. Rather than speaking of the subaltern, they speak to the subaltern in a rhetorical tongue, namely in postcolonial Guru English (Aravamudan, 2005) and from the spiritual discipline that does not accommodate a critique of itself. Why do guru movements refrain from accepting their Hindu modes? As A. J. Lucia (2011) writes, 'For many, the active distancing from the Hindu religiosity of their roots develops in tandem with their rise to global fame' (p.74). In the first official hagiography of Sharavana Baba<sup>5</sup>, the Baba comes across as deeply religious in his instructions to his followers:

"Every place of learning like a school must first teach morals (maybe one period per week) through the practice of explaining religious works like *The Bible*, *Quran* or the *Gita*, which contain the same message. It is important that children understand the logic and rationale behind the spiritual sciences. It is the responsibility of schools to teach values like respect, compassion and love through the study of the scriptures."<sup>6</sup>

Apparent in the Baba's take on an ideal education system (he runs a school free of cost for children belonging to low-income groups in Calicut) is that it should be religious. These views are not only symptomatic of the Baba's movement but also of other guru movements that focus on education as stemming from the 'heart' that has to put the 'head' to rest in a religious way:

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<sup>4</sup> Politicians from India's two main parties, the Indian National Congress (INC) and the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), flocked to Sathya Sai Baba's ashram in Puttaparthi when the godman died. See "Prime Minister, Sonia Gandhi pay homage to Sathya Sai Baba," accessed May 31, 2018, <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/prime-minister-sonia-gandhi-pay-homage-to-sathya-sai-baba-453991>. Mata Amritanandamayi has hauled devotees from the communist party as well. See "Praying for a revolution in the heart," accessed May 31, 2018, <https://www.amritapuri.org/8884/06-praying.aum>.

<sup>5</sup> Ramnath Narayanswamy, *The Global Mission of Sadguru Sharavana Baba* (Bangalore: Books for Change, 2010), 28.

<sup>6</sup> This is dissimilar to the religious education project of ISKCON in Britain which is fundamentally a Hindu project. See Maya Warriar, "Krishna Consciousness, Hinduism and Religious Education in Britain," in *Public Hinduisms*, ed. Raymond Brady Williams, John Zavos, Maya Warriar, Pralay Kanungo, and Deepa S. Reddy, 463-486.

Sathya Baba: "Education that originates from within has a sound basis and is permanent. It is referred to as *sathyam*. A step higher than *sathyam* is *ritam*, as proclaimed in the *Vedas*. What we normally refer to as truth in daily life is merely a fact... What we need today is not bookish knowledge, though we require it to a certain extent to cope with life in this world. But what is essential to us is the knowledge of the *Atma*. Spiritual education is the highest education, says the *Bhagavad Gita*."<sup>7</sup>

Take, for another example, the essential Hindu underpinnings of the Amma movement:

Mata Amritanandamayi: "If you are reluctant to learn Sanskrit, how will you understand our scriptures? Sanskrit is our mother-tongue. You can't fully appreciate the *Upanishads* or the *Gita* without understanding Sanskrit. To understand the mantras and chants, you should learn them in that language. It is the language of our culture. We can't separate the culture of India from Sanskrit. It is true that we can buy the translations of the scriptural texts in other languages, but they don't amount to the real thing. If you want to know the taste of honey, you have to taste it by itself. If you mix it with something else, you won't get its true taste. Even uttering Sanskrit words is good for our mental well-being."<sup>8</sup>

Apparent as well in the Sharavana Baba movement's promulgation of spirituality is that its physicality and cultural proxy for communal harmony is Hinduism stemming from a premodern Murugan culture catering to Tamils and those who get accustomed to Murugan in his movement<sup>9</sup>:

"You need to recite 'Om Sharavanabhava' at least 21 times a day. Only through such recitation can you connect to Swamiji... The chanting of Om Sharavanabhava is enough for you! You don't have to go and find other solutions to your problems!" (p.41 of *LFTI*)

"You must utter the *Guru namam* 'Om Sharavana Bhava' always." (p.126 *ibid.*)

"Daily read the *Subramania Ashtothram* for at least 21 days and you will automatically notice all the changes in your life." (p.133 of *LFTI*)

Receivers of guru teachings, or practitioners, who read and listen to discourses, or *satsangs*, by self-realised masters do so to reflect on their personal journeys of self-transformation. The subaltern does not speak in these pages as these teachings are customised and contemporised artificially for devotees and potential devotees. Ramana Maharishi, the 19th century saint of Thiruvannamalai, who espoused the philosophy of non-dualism, was once asked if Hindu 'untouchables' should be allowed inside temples. He stated, 'There are others

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<sup>7</sup> "Educare Is True Education," accessed May 31, 2018, <https://www.sathyasai.org/discourse//educare-is-true-education>.

<sup>8</sup> "Amma's words on Bhagavad Gita," accessed May 31, 2018, <https://www.amritapuri.org/66743/16-gita.aum>.

<sup>9</sup> I have addressed the issue of how the Sri Lankan Tamils are attracted to Sharavana Baba in "Why a relatively unknown guru movement is attracting Sri Lankan Tamils in Britain," LSE South Asia, accessed May 31, 2018, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/southasia/2018/04/24/why-a-relatively-unknown-guru-movement-is-attracting-sri-lankan-tamils-in-britain/>.

to decide it.<sup>10</sup> By not showing solidarity explicitly—as an opinion on the subject would entail he denounce it—he resonates tragically with the underlying assumption that the lowest denominator needs the state, not spiritual heads, to rearrange caste society. Considering the Maharishi was a Brahmin by birth (unfortunately the author is as well), why did he not sanction the reasons for 'touchability', whose attainability was impeded by caste-Hindus? Reading on, the Maharishi submerges the caste discourse with spiritual aggressiveness. Sharma (2013) writes, 'Ramana Maharishi refused to be drawn into a discussion of social issues of this kind' (p.108), preferring the alternate route of extreme spiritual questing to social activism. Similarly, Sharavana Baba's movement replaces social justice with spiritual service, as evident in its leader's pronouncements.

## POSTCOLONIAL MORE THAN DECOLONISED

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To invoke the meaning of a postcolonial movement I read Sharavana Baba beyond Sharavana Baba and ask: Is there really a public domain in the Sreekrishnapuram ashram or is there a clear demarcation between private and public, inner and outer? The answer lies in the conflictual presuppositions which come to bear upon a globalised network. Neither are private and public eliminated nor are they born from ashram spaces. They work in tandem in subjective encounters, negotiated difference and a studied acknowledgement of the Baba as incarnation. The private and public are established through an 'Easternisation thesis' (Warrier 2011) of which Oriental suppositions permeate the discourse. Lucia's (2011) conclusion that Amma's movement is couched in Hinduism, though alleging to be spiritual, copiously demands a relooking on the notion of spirituality as religion. Take, for example, the Baba's essentialising move to put himself in a position of absolute authority over his disciples' lives:

"Grow in *satyam* and *dharmam*. Develop *satyam* and *dharmam*. Everything that takes place in the universe, know that it is a result of My resolve. Everything is happening in the world because of Me. Nothing happens in the world without My resolve."  
 (p.110 of *GMSSS*)

The entire page, if not entire book, is dependent on an ecumenical spirituality which begets a kind of neo-Hinduism as a rightful place of honour. The semantics are heavily Sanskritic and other religions are placed accidentally but with precedence given to the 'Hinduness' of the movement's spirit.

Furthermore, the movement borrows from ritualised modes of the Amma and Sai Baba movements, where private and public are contested through public sociologies conversing with each other. It is palpable that guru movements work against each other, otherwise these two movements would have merged into a mammoth one by now, over which the masses can worship the same living leaders, yet this has not happened. Methods for outsiders to get to know insiders are through reading promotional material, things which other movements share, such as digging out avenues for a remarkable and eminently commendable free food culture (the mission feeds hundreds of persons a day free of cost); producing curious of

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<sup>10</sup> "Talks with Sri Ramana Maharishi," accessed May 31, 2018, [http://ramana-talk-mailer.appspot.com/read?post\\_name=Talk&index=308](http://ramana-talk-mailer.appspot.com/read?post_name=Talk&index=308).

magic (trinkets, glass-bead chains, rings and holograms); supplying playful interregnums in which stages are erected for cultural enactments such as Bollywood dances, popular musics, storytelling through syncretistic weaving of hybridised cultural forms borrowed from a utopia of the soul and inviting right-wing politicians, saffron activists and other religious leaders to share the podium with the Baba. This is not to say the mission does not involve leaders from other guru movements, in fact they come there as equal leaders endowed with the same power accruing to the legitimation of the powerful by a consolidated proletarian act of viewing.

Striving for complete glorification of the Baba, devotional literature is principally though not exclusively meant for devotees:

"These sayings of Mine must be absorbed by all of you, heard day and night so that you fully internalise them. In later years, when someone approaches you and asks you for anecdotes and events of those early years, you must give them these nuggets of wisdom so that they can build upon them and develop on them... This is your solemn duty. No excuses." (p.102 of *GMSSB*)

In respect to hagiography, devotees take part in buttressing tapestries of 'divine' light which to them are irrefutable. Arising from the Baba's mouth, they shiver when they come to know through guru discourse that that light of spectacularity and play is to be seen as stemming from the Baba's resolve that they must obey without questioning. Their reciprocation of their love for their guru is apparent in their social media deliberations where 'Om Sharavana Bhava' is keyed in as a reply to every post<sup>11</sup>.

It is known that devotees can become ex-devotees. The restrictions imposed by guru structures are such that identities must be categorically stated for a devotee to take part in praxis. When the devotion translates into outright rebellion not only to the structure but to national law itself, it reads as both against guru and state. On 8 August 2013, the Baba told his devotees, in a car on the way to Lourdes via Paris, of wily ex-devotees who went against international law:

"I know everything. I can tell you today that Gokul, Uma and Jyothi, were all created by Me and it was I who sent them off (this is a reference to some unscrupulous persons masquerading as devotees who sought to tarnish the reputation of Swamiji and the Ashram.) I know what goes on in all meetings, I know all conversations and I know what people speak about other people, including devotees. There is nothing that I am not aware of and I know what I need to do. You must understand Me." (p.91 of *GMSSB*)

Or a telling paragraph on internal politics at his London ashram:

"People should not think in our committee that they own Me. Have they come to listen to Me or have I to listen to them? The collections of Sri Sathya Sai Baba go to Puttaparthi and the same applies to the collections of Shirdi Sai Baba as they all go to Shirdi. It is my decision to decide the destination of funds raised in My name. Not anyone else. We have several options before us. We might like to dissolve the Trust

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<sup>11</sup> Satguru Shree Sharavana Baba ( Powerd by Sharavanabhava Matham ). Facebook, 31 May, 2018. <https://www.facebook.com/Satguru-Sree-Sharavana-Baba-Powerd-by-Sharavanabhava-Matham--213491618686308/>.

or start a new Trust. Wait for My direction. Subramanya is the law. Everything originates from Him." (p.97 of *GMSSB*)

The addressees in these pages are devotees themselves who quest for higher plains. They are rallying for higher awareness by possibly being smitten by their master's enigmatic sayings. It is a truism that the audience for his promotional books are potential devotees as well. The idea of 'things to come' are suffused with serious proscriptions developed calculatedly for the Baba's promotional literature where astrological predictions are realised and revealed.

How do these alarmist comments to devotees play out in the minds of sceptics? A dichotomy between good and bad is palpably visible. There are no reasons not to find the quotes objectionable as their meanings do not surprise. This is illocutionary spirituality entailing a cutting up of previously held beliefs and gurus do not shy away from proclaiming their divinity through this enticing arena of possibility. The religious dissect innocently and slowly their wordy ways through contemplating on experiences in order to find a rightful place in the heart of their guru and when they cannot, due to personal or public defeat, they retard like badly behaved children or self-congratulate themselves upon their pro-rational activism. It is what makes the devotee and the guru a 'type' and a 'brand'.

In advanced capitalist societies, the trend to 'subscribe' is paramount. The Baba's quotes create a space for potential devotees to enter the cult officially through the imposition of to-be-followed rules and regulations. It could be said anyone who does not heed to these instructions are relegated as 'outsiders' but are devotees forced to listen to abidings and more importantly, heed to them completely? Is there a moral policing at work in the Sharavana Baba movement? The answer is no. The movement embraces a plural pedagogical superstructure in which freedom *to* choose is given primacy over freedom *from* choosing. Apparent in the exercise of to choose is the fact that not all men wear white in the ashram, although those who identify as 'devotees' do so since they are recognised by fellow travellers and have been part of the movement for a whilst. Needless to say, white as reflective of nearness to the Baba is translated into unwritten rules waiting to find expression in written codes and manifestoes.

It is not so easy to categorise 'insiders' and 'outsiders' when locating the porosity between choices and progressions in the outside world. His devotees pick and choose from a mix of his teachings that which suit their needs, wants and aspirations at certain critical moments in their lives. Membership to the movement is seen more as contribution to it rather than the imbibing of its armamentarium. Subscription to the movement at the expense of following the Baba's teachings is one aspect to a larger cosmological goal that accepts challenges along the way, mirroring in the quotable bromides littered across promotional literature that necessitate the free-flow of ideas.

Sharavana Baba does not hug thousands of people a day, his signature style has not been fully manufactured, marketed and worked upon like another guru from his state, Mata Amritanandamayi, though the movement takes Murugan out from both temple and legend and inserts him in Sharavana Baba. His devotees, however, try to package him well so that he may reach the alternative world soon enough to be like her. Outside India these include temples, community halls and yoga centres inside which he performs his main routines of

*pooja, bhajan, satsang* and *darshan*<sup>12</sup>. These performances are programmed meticulously for their transnational audiences who prepare themselves for the act of the spectacle and to be enamoured of the vestiges of a bygone past located in devotees' experiences of the Baba who strategises, reconstructs and preserves fascinating taxonomies of belief.

There is no scope for parabasis in his movement unless the parabasis stems from an inner world of cathecting. The chosen ones have access to resources which grant them a ticket in order to be released from profanity during their sojourns with him and during programmes they gather their minds to inscribe themselves into a shared culture borrowed from Murugan symbology, a profound new performativity I tease out at the end. These devotees attribute their nearness to him physically as a result of their past birth's good deeds and even to the Hindu god Murugan himself. As Shyamala told me on a hot afternoon in Sreekrishnapuram:

"What have I done to receive His grace? I do not know. I may have done a lot of good things in my previous births... My grandfather frequented Murugan temples and he prayed that I may find my guru. I know at last I have."

As memory positions the roles of devotees, *bhakti*, or devotion, balloons or slowly picks up speed with acute awareness of what was done in memory. Whilst academicians, recognising the lower orders as integral to the perpetuation of gurus' statuses, have pointed out that gurus are reoriented to suit soft Hindutva agendas<sup>13</sup>, it is a wonder how similarities between movements render intelligible the domains of community and shared life, on which traditional beliefs are uncontaminated by modernity and held on by devotees for salvation. An example of such balances between the two can be seen in the number of Indian engineers and doctors who have assimilated the knowledge and craft of 'modern' and 'Western' sciences but have not let go of traditional Hinduism in their everyday lives.

Lawrence Babb, who inaugurated the fieldwork of the global spiritual market for anthropologists, argued of Sathya Baba's teachings:

"His philosophical views are simplistic, eclectic, and essentially unoriginal. His ethics are basically common-coin, though certainly not to be dismissed on that account.... Rather, what is important about what Sathya Sai Baba says is not its *content*, but the fact that *he* is the one who is saying it." (Babb 1983, p.117)

Consider Sharavana Baba's words:

"Mindfulness is essential. Life must be lived mindfully,"; "Be in a meditative state all the time! There must be power in your sight! Pursue spiritual practise relentlessly! Develop positive affirmation! Bask in the Divine Presence! Quieten the mind! Absorb the power of silence!" (p.119 of *GMSSB*)

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<sup>12</sup> The author's ethnographic-cum-hagiographical film chronicles and captures the lives of his devotees. See "A Garland for the Guru," YouTube, accessed May 31, 2018, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PW\\_BrHbKnWc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PW_BrHbKnWc).

<sup>13</sup> Meera Nanda, "The God Market: How Globalisation is Making India More Hindu," accessed May 31, 2018, <https://newhumanist.org.uk/articles/2238/the-god-market-how-globalisation-is-making-india-more-hindu-by-meera-nanda>.

Similar to such a reading is not so much *what* the Baba says but *how* devotees receive it. In a discourse given by the Baba to his devotees in May 2010, the author of the volumes *Living from the Inside* writes:

"After the *puja* I rushed to the Bank and returned home at around midday. I handed over our customary *dakshina* to Swamiji and He began to move around the house. He came near the *puja* altar and saw a photograph of Srimad Sai Rajarajeshwari Amma [a living guru] and playfully asked me whether She was Kali. I said no. I said She was Rajarajeshwari Amma. He asked me whether I was fond of Her and I said yes (as if He did not know all this already!). Then He said if a Sai devotee goes to another master, Sathya Sai will not like it. Similarly if an Amma devotee goes to somebody else, Amma will not like it. He said playfully that all this was a part of spiritual politics! I replied by saying that He was not present in Her as well? He smiled in reply." (p.97 of *GMSSB*)

Interesting in these sentences is that in the book from which it was taken the author quotes Sathya Baba quite frequently and alludes to the words of 'self-realised' masters very often, interspersed with the Baba's quotations. There are other delicious beliefs which strike one as stemming from a heightened self-awareness privy only to the Baba:

"In the car, He also said that all ashrams have problems in spreading the message of the avatar. He said like Lord Krishna, he too was born in a prison (*karaga vasam*) and that was why He had to undergo many challenges in the years 2008 and 2010. He said while the worst was over He was still to face two more challenges and after meeting those challenges, His mission will be smooth. He spoke of Jayalalithaa, Rajanikanth and Prime Minister Modi and said they were all avatars. We were a little taken aback. I asked about the case of the Kanchi Acharyas and He said that it was Jayalalithaa who secured their release. She had acted lawfully in this matter." (p.163 of *GMSSB*)

The words are daring, bold and imbued with political affect. By categorising political figures as avatars, the Baba is presented as a reader of fates, as someone who is omnipresent, someone who renders the 'bad' politician clean at the same time as he glorifies himself for his devotee base. The affect resonates with a larger discourse in which anything the Baba says is to be ipso facto god's very words. Since the Baba speaks in Tamil and Malayalam it is unclear whether translation has anything to do with what is lost, gained or withheld in the fulfillment of his missionary objective.

Copeman and Ikegame (2012) have reflected upon the politics of guruhood and the amputations of gurus via other gurus which result in subtle power plays which simply speed up the religious process enfolded in a Hindu teleological concept of the universe. How do Sharavana Baba's foreign devotees draw in their identities when participating in publicised and organised events? They assimilate the ideas, dramatics and rituals of this shared Hindu culture and spit out their dreams whilst making sense of the cosmopolitan creative matrix of a spiritual joint family. The politics of cultural assimilation and translation within other prominent movements, like Amma's and Sai Baba's, resonate well with these thematics and codes. Some of Sharavana Baba's followers come from the Skanda Vale ashram in Wales, from where Hinduism was taken to be the best vegetarian religion in Britain thanks to a tuberculosis-stricken bull that historicised a concern among academicians

as to where Hinduism in Britain is headed (Warrier, 2009). That the bull was killed in the end reflects the secular state's drive for equality amidst the cacophony of bull-lovers and assorted monks. Having fit into Sharavana Baba's movement as devotees, they stake claims in the movement whilst not leaving behind their Skanda Vale origins. They merely have one hand in one area and the other in another so that Sharavana Baba himself is brought to the Skanda Vale ashram to spread his sacred message.

In this sense, Shambo is also Sharavana Baba: he is susceptible to being castigated, appropriated, humiliated, blasphemed, obfuscated, tolerated, worshipped and confiscated. A guru acknowledges the spectacle of himself which, by the policies of guru governmentality, result in his idolisation. It is tough to be the centre of all attention. Therefore, he is an object of pity as he is a subject of control with eternal virtues ascribed to his divinity. In many instances, he is portrayed as a crook, but he also repudiates negative beliefs by sudden role-switching where he makes himself fleshly and emotional deliberately to straddle an identity of being human and divine simultaneously:

"Are you aware of even a fraction of the pain and sacrifice that is necessary to wear My clothes and perform My role? I have to show multiple faces to multiple personalities. Each devotee has his/her own disposition and inheritance and I must customise My message to each and every one I meet. Have you any idea of how difficult it is to manage this diversity and yet keep everybody happy and yet ensure that the contents of what I want communicated gets across?" (p.92 of *GMSSB*)

What exists in Sharavana Baba's movement is the staging of a new religiosity with whites, browns, et cetera, wrestling with 'foreign' or untranslatable categories. This is to be seen as a 'test' by which hurdles are necessary steps to attain self-revelation. In other words, they must know that the Baba comes from a taintless position. If the hurdles do not get translated properly by follower, it results in animosity towards all gurus, notwithstanding internal anti-guru politics. The Baba tries best to direct his permutations and combinations to a larger Hindu network in the hopes that they are not translated incorrectly. Examples such as ex-followers cheating former followers and stories of criminality are abundant when translation is withheld. When finding solace in the Baba's literature does not free them from the shackles of their personal hurdles, animosity replaces previously held emotions. The rather crude and deliberate misapprehension of the Baba in the video 'Jilebi Swamy' by a local television channel, Asianet News, is apt when speaking of such controversial and awkward parallel activisms which invite viewers to perceive the Baba as trickster when ex-devotees are revengeful<sup>14</sup>.

For the reason that Sharavana Baba's enemies have not formed a large camp, though they exist, the politics of anti-guru activism in the Sathya Baba movement is revealing. Anti-Sai activists, consisting of foreign and Indian ex-devotees, who have a large online presence, continue to go on a rampage about Sathya Baba whom they assert, was in connivance with the corrupt. To devotees Sathya Baba (deceased) remains spectacularly above and beyond these pronouncements, withdrawing from the pettiness that is of concern to those who wish to believe in the activism of 'guru busting'. It is well known that ashrams house untold

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<sup>14</sup> ""Jileby Swami " - Sweet vendor turns saint," YouTube, accessed May 31, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AWl2wuDHQ3M>.

secrets and politics and are often seen by the media as places of scandal, treachery and illicit activities, paralleling the schema of popular cultural motives that paint the Baba as fraud and misogynist in the eyes of the public. For example, in the documentary *The Secret Swami*<sup>15</sup> an ex-devotee of Sathya Baba had said that he felt outcasted in his American school when he identified as a devotee. Personal loss shelters ex-devotees into camps. Guru-rebellion annuls 'anything nice' of gurus and devotees. The deriding literature on gurus consolidates the experiences of 'whiteness within whiteness' and 'whiteness amongst brownness' as consistent with the ticklish matter of the Third World migrant transgender thrust into the First World male-dominated metropolitan city unable to negotiate claims from both outside and inside to merge effectively into becoming permanent citizen. The impulse to seek refuge is personal and historical at the same time as it marks the anticipation of an experience that is, like utopian idealism, untrammelled by all believers of the doctrine. Guru-faith is indeterminate in its persuasion towards persons from various walks of life who must enter into its intangible spheres without being swayed by the shifts and changes which take place during their journeys as ideal disciples.

Regardless of the countries to which they owe allegiance, current foreign devotees hold onto their guru with deep attachment. In this sense, allegiance to nationality is subsumed under allegiance to the guru. In fact, everything is brushed aside to invoke the guru as the prime steerer of synchronicity. Truly but not fully seen, diasporic cultures and affluent devotees relate themselves to the contexts in which they serve as temporary or permanent participants. They play a role in shaping his mission and even if they cannot be bracketed as official entrants, their participation is a contribution to the fulfilment of the guru's mission, or else as part of a diasporic community they act within the cultural network. Had the effects of war and migration not bolstered transnational guru governance in his movement, the Baba would not be able to travel so frequently as he does to Europe today.

## TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING A MURUGAN PHENOMENON

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In other worlds, diaspora, war and Murugan have pulled communities to engage with each other to move away from excessive materialism in the West, especially in Europe and London where majority of the affluent devotees work. Sharavana Baba's ritualised prescriptions borrow liberally and mostly from Murugan culture and are a clever way of bringing devotees to him. The Baba says he is Murgan himself, yet he subsumes himself under the pantheon of Hindu gods and goddesses occasionally:

"I am the third avatar. I am an avatar of Pashupati. I have close proximity to the earth. I am fond of the earth. I am associated with the third avatar of Vishnu: the Lord in His form as a boar lifting the earth from the ocean." (p.156 of *GMSSB*)

"Trichendur is my birthplace. I took birth here." (p.156 of *LFTI*)

"Lord Subramanya is in effect Shiva! This (pointing to Himself) personality stems from Shiva." (p.93 of *GMSSB*)

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<sup>15</sup> "The Secret Swami," YouTube, accessed May 31, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hOjk2NpKMFm>.

"I know my job. You must know yours... You can play with other deities but Lord Subrahmanya is a deity that you should not fool around with. He is a strict and demanding deity. There should be no mistakes." (p.97 of *GMSSB*)

"I am Skanda." (p.107 of *LFTI*)

He is also introduced as Murugan's incarnation explicitly:

"Firmly identified with Lord Muruga since the date (1997), Sadguru Murali Krishna is widely regarded as an *avatar* (divine incarnation) of Lord Muruga. Lord Muruga, (second son of Lord Shiva and Devi Parvati, the other being Lord Ganesha), is usually regarded as the presiding deity of the Tamil community." (p.7 of *GMSSB*)

Insights into Sharavana Baba's Murugan idioms include the main mantra of the movement 'Om Sharavana Bhava'. The Baba's 'divine moods' (a phantasmagoric universe I am touring for an upcoming paper in which I reflect upon how we can read the advent of Prem Sai Baba, the last avatar of the Sai trilogy, as being possibly Sharavana Baba himself) soak him in a Murugan and Hindu space but his Muruganness comes out most through the nod he gives to the possibility that he is Murugan's incarnation. Literally, there is no question in his books that he is somebody else, though to devotees with moral-philosophic and neo-Vedantic leanings they see all the gods and goddesses inside Murugan, thus in him too. Still, Murugan culture is the open framework in which the movement's codes, symbols and motifs loom. 'The Subrahmanya Ashtothram' is chanted vehemently every morning, afternoon and evening by ascetic disciples sequestered in his ashram. The movement's greeting 'Haro Hara' is not only a metaphor for this shared Murugan spirit, denotative of the Baba's travels to the Palani temple once a month, but also an incantation to be replaced by other greeting styles. 'Haro Hara' promises a perfect opportunity for the movement to recover the phrase from its native origin and popularise it. If the Om Sharavana Baba Seva Foundation patents it, the move will proffer new understandings of the intersection between modernity and tradition in South Asia. The movement attracts Tamils from around the globe to look forward to sharing Murugan practice and theory, not only in Tamil Nadu where the six dominant Murugan temples were built but also in their guru Sharavana Baba whom they see as Murugan in all his glory.

What does Murugan as Sharavana Baba afford to the Indian spiritual terrain brimming with gurus? Firstly, as a Hindu movement, the Sharavana Baba movement explains its religiosity by employing a vigorous Hindu veneer on which Murugan is given primacy and leads the way for followers to understand the movement. Secondly, it obtains an ancient Murugan culture to suit a largely Tamil audience across the globe. Thirdly, in the complex space of gurus and devotees, the Sharavana movement can be placed in current academic literature on the subject of Hindu traditions in modernity which underscores aspects of devotion and communitarian life. Fourthly, this scholarship that is not devotional, is nuanced and of value to postcolonial literature rather than decolonised practices because decolonisation is, in point of fact, tied to notions of the postcolonial. In such a scheme of things, Murugan, a mythical figure from the Hindu pantheon, is abstracted and implanted into a living guru whose organisation seeks to institutionalise fully. The making of a postcolonial Hindu identity in the Sharavana Baba movement is ongoing.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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After completing his Bachelor's in English Studies from India, Dhruv worked as a filmmaker and photographer for various organisations and NGOs until he, followed by a long stint as an intern with Swarajya magazine and then as a copywriter for the Times of India, found his way to the School of Oriental and African Studies as a student of Social Anthropology. He is interested in the mainstream media's role in shaping opinion on Hindu gurus as well as in how guru organisations leverage the media to attract transnational followings. He has increasingly found himself writing about the Sharavana Baba movement due to his anthropological association with it for over ten years.

The Sathya Sai Baba movement is inspired by South Indian Hindu guru Sathya Sai Baba who taught the unity of all religions. Some of his followers have faith in his claim to be a purna Avatar (full divine incarnation) of Shiva and Shakti, who is believed to have been predicted in the Bhagavad Gita. This means that some of his followers see him as a God. Devotees engage in singing devotional songs called "bhajans" and selfless service (seva). Its official organization is the Sathya Sai Organization