

Sai Baba

Sathya Sai Baba (1926–2011) was an Indian religious leader known worldwide for 'miracles' such as producing objects from thin air. These ostensibly psychic phenomena far surpassed anything reported in the West, and were witnessed by thousands of people. Despite allegations of trickery, no firm evidence has ever been found that establishes them as simple conjuring tricks. Parapsychologists Karlis Osis and Erlemdur Haraldsson made two visits to Sai Baba in the early 1970s. They failed to persuade him to take part in tests in controlled conditions; however, they were able to observe the materialization phenomena on several occasions.

Sai Baba's Background

Sathya Sai Baba was born in 23 November 1926 as Sathya Narayana Ratnakara Raju. His family were poor farmers in Puttaparthi, a remote village in the state of Andhra Pradesh in southern India. At a young age he gathered children of the village to sing religious songs. From his early teens, if not earlier, he was handing out sweets, flowers and ice cream that appeared to form in the palm of his hand or from the air around him. When he was thirteen, he declared he was the reincarnation of [Sai Baba of Shirdi](#) (1837–1918), a holy man from a small town near Mumbai who had gathered a considerable following and was influential in reconciling Muslims and Hindus. Disciples started to gather, calling him Sai Baba (holy father) in place of his given name.

As the crowds grew, his devotees built the first ashram in Puttaparthi. People gathered from all over the world to see him, and by his later years it had grown into a town where everything revolved around the 'miracle man', served by a good road and railway line, and eventually also an airport. Sai Baba died at age 84 on 24 April 2011, in Puttaparthi.

Sai Baba's Religious Views

Sai Baba saw himself primarily as a religious leader. He emphasized the essential unity of all religions, declaring that it does not matter to which faith a person belongs, only that he or she is a good member of that religion. He was famous for sayings such as:

- Hands that help are holier than lips that pray.
- There is no prayer more fruitful than service to fellow men.
- Love is giving and forgiving.
- Pardon the other man's faults but deal strictly with your own.

More about Sai Baba's religious views can be found in [this 1976 interview](#) in *Blitz News Magazine*.^{[1](#)}

Sai Baba's 'Miracles'

Parapsychologists [Karlis Osis](#) and [Erlendur Haraldsson](#) made two visits to Sai Baba in 1973 and 1974. They attempted but failed to persuade him to take part in tests in controlled conditions; however, they were able to observe the materialization phenomena on several occasions. Haraldsson continued to investigate phenomena associated with Sai Baba during later visits to India, as described in his book, *Miracles are my Visiting Cards (Modern Miracles*, in its American edition), in 1987. This book was re-issued by White Crow Books in 2013 as *Modern Miracles. Sathya Sai Baba: The Story of a Modern Day Prophet*.²

As documented by Osis and Haraldsson, the phenomena observed in relation to Sai Baba ranged from psychic readings to apparitional appearances, healings, and effects of light. The most frequent were materializations of *vibuti*, the 'sacred ash' used in Hindu rituals, which Sai Baba routinely produced in abundance, apparently by drawing it from the air. In the same way he often presented small gifts to those around him, typically sweets and small, intricate items of jewellery that contained precious gold and metals, occasionally also larger ornaments. Sai Baba's routine was to take people in for interviews twice a day, usually several at a time, and perhaps a total of fifty to sixty persons, of whom as many as two-thirds might receive a materialized gift.

Some of the reported phenomena are on the scale of New Testament miracles, for instance the materialization of entire meals.³ Another such, described to Osis and Haraldsson on their 1973 visit, occurred as follows: A man of means from Bangalore, Ranjoth Singh, travelled to Puttaparthi in his car but lacked sufficient petrol for the return journey. He told this to Sai Baba, who asked his young devotee, Amarendra Kumar, to fetch a bucket and fill the car's petrol tank with water. Sai Baba then told Ranjoth that he could drive back to Bangalore, which he was able to do. Talking later with the investigators, Amarendra Kumar said he had simply poured buckets of water into the empty tank.

Observations by Osis and Haraldsson

On the first morning of their visit to the Puttaparthi ashram, Sai Baba invited them into his interview room. All present sat on the floor. Sai Baba waved his hand in a circular motion and *vibuti* appeared in his hand, which he gave to them. He waved his hand again and now a big gold ring lay in the palm of his hand. He put it on Osis's finger saying it was a present to him. The ring fit perfectly, a beautiful ornament with a large enameled picture of Sai Baba in colour encased within it. The image was held by four little notches that protruded over it from the circular golden frame, fixing it as if it and the ring were one solid piece.

Osis expressed admiration of the ring, but went on to say that he and Haraldsson were primarily interested in carrying out scientific research into Sai Baba's unique talents, in order to rule out any idea that these were mere conjuring tricks. A long conversation on the value of scientific research followed. Sai Baba did not belittle science, but seemed to think that science could never explain miracles. He stated that he only used miracles for the good of those who believed in him, and never for show. For him, what mattered was a pure and religious life that could lead men to greater understanding. The investigators continued to insist on the importance of science. But they did not prevail.

Haraldsson asked Sai Baba how he was able to do what he did. Sai Baba answered that he thought, imagined and then the object came into existence – it was as simple as that.

Sai Baba said that spiritual and daily life should be interwoven like a double *rudraksha*. When asked the meaning of *rudraksha* Sai Baba could not explain, nor did their interpreter know. Haraldsson asked him several times, by now somewhat irritated that they were not getting anywhere. Sai Baba tried in vain to explain. Then he seemed to lose patience, waved his hand and opened it in front of Haraldsson, saying, 'This is it'. In his palm lay an object: two fruit kernels half grown together, each a little larger than a prune stone and with folds like a brain.

Haraldsson took the ornament, observed it carefully, and handed it to Osis, who did the same, then handed it to the interpreter who looked at and handed it back to Sai Baba. Sai Baba held it between his fingers, blew on it, and gave it to Haraldsson, saying, 'This is a present to you'. Haraldsson observed that the double *rudraksha* now had shields of gold above and beneath it, held together by a thin gold chain. On top of the upper shield was a little golden cross and on it a little red gemstone. It was undoubtedly a beautiful piece.

On his return to London, Haraldsson had it examined by a jeweller. The gold was found to be at least 22 carat and the stone was a genuine ruby. A double *rudraksha* itself is rare: the Botanical Survey of India had not been able to secure a good example, although the Smithsonian Institution in Washington possesses a chain of them, purchased from the estate of an Indian maharaja. These are partly encased in gold, like the one given to Haraldsson.

Osis and Haraldsson made a second visit in 1974, but again failed to persuade Sai Baba to participate in experiments. On this occasion he seemed to become impatient and said to Osis, 'Look at your ring'. The stone imprinted with Sai Baba's picture had disappeared from it. The investigators looked for it on the floor, but no trace of it could be found. The frame and the notches that should have held the stone were undamaged. For it to have fallen out of the frame, it would have been necessary to bend at least one of the notches or break the stone. Neither had happened. Sai Baba teasingly remarked, 'This was my experiment'.

The two men were sitting on the floor about five or six feet from Sai Baba when he drew attention to the stone's disappearance. They had not shaken hands with him when entering the room, nor did Sai Baba reach out to touch them. Osis sat cross-legged with his hands on his thighs. Haraldsson had observed the ring moments before the incident, as also had two foreign visitors; at this time the stone was clearly present.

The objects Sai Baba produced were of a great variety, sometimes in response to a specific situation or in response to a visitor's direct request. On one occasion, the investigators were standing outside with Sai Baba when Haraldsson received a sweet from him, apparently acquired by his usual method of waving his hand in the air. Another time, the pair saw him produce a large necklace 20 to 29 inches long that contained a variety of gems interspaced by small golden pieces.

Osis and Haraldsson spoke with many people who testified to having experienced such occurrences, for instance being presented with a statuette of a deity on request, or a ring containing a picture of a visitor's favorite deity. They also heard accounts large objects being produced, such as a bowl the size of a dinner plate, and a basket of sweets twenty inches in diameter.

Intrusion in Dreams

Gopal Krishna Yachendra described the following incident to Haraldsson. He was a son of the raja of Venkatagiri, who had got to know Sai Baba early in his career and wished to invite him to his palace. He ordered his son to fetch him, but Gopal refused, saying he had no interest in gurus or swamis. That night he woke from a dream shortly after falling asleep. Sai Baba had come to him and brought him a delicious mango, which he loved. The dream changed everything: Gopal quickly got dressed and set out with his attendants, arriving at Puttaparthi at lunchtime the following day. As they approached they saw Sai Baba standing on the other side of the river, and before they could speak, Sai Baba said: 'The mango made you run here'. That convinced Gopal that Sai Baba's talents were real.

Healing

CTK Chari, professor of philosophy at [Madras Christian College](#), described an exceptional personal experience in relation to Sai Baba, the healing of his young daughter. From birth, the child,

showed emaciation, and later developed frequent lung infections and fevers. Two physicians diagnosed a congenital ailment of the circulatory system, closely associated with the heart. An eminent cardiologist in Delhi identified it as a case of *patent ductus arteriosus*: an "extra" canal or duct, persisting after birth, connecting the aorta with the pulmonary artery and impeding the efficiency of the heart.

The condition was only curable by surgery. Chari continues:

At this stage Sai Baba met the little girl and her mother. He advised against surgery and 'apported' two white tablets for the child to swallow. Since then her lung infections and fevers have subsided, and her growth has been perfectly normal. She is now a young married woman with a child of her own.⁴

Bilocation

Sai Baba was said to have disappeared and reappeared in a place so distant that he could not have done so by ordinary means or, sometimes, was seen in two places at the same time (bilocation). Osis and Haraldsson investigated a case that occurred in Kerala on the south west coast of India, interviewing those involved. Sai Baba visited a house of a family where a young girl was ill, suddenly appearing in the doorway. He initiated a sacred ceremony in which religious hymns were sung; family members and neighbours all taking part. It was assumed that Sai Baba had been visiting Kerala, and had taken the opportunity to stop by the family's house. But afterwards it was discovered this was not the case: at this time he had been

visiting in the palace of the raja of Venkatagiri on the east coast of India. Osis observed Sai Baba's signature in the guestbook of the Venkatagiri family on the day he appeared in Kerala.⁵

Criticism and Controversy

Accusations made against Sai Baba were mainly of two kinds: that he performed feats by ordinary conjuring, and that was guilty of crimes such as sexual abuse and financial fraud.

Basava Premanand, an Indian magician sceptical of psychic phenomena, attacked Sai Baba as one of the class of fraudulent 'Godmen', describing methods by which their feats might be faked.⁶ He unsuccessfully tried to sue Sai Baba in 1986, on the grounds that his purported materialization of gold objects broke Indian financial regulations. In 1976 [Hosur Narasimhaiah](#), vice-chancellor of [Bangalore University](#), challenged Sai Baba to submit to investigation by a scientific committee, but Sai Baba refused, giving rise to controversy in the Indian media.

In the West, considerable media publicity followed allegations of sexual abuse by a former devotee Alaya Rahm, which were later embroidered and amplified by Indian sceptics such as Premanand, but without supporting evidence.⁷

Deccan Chronicle Videotape

In 1992, the *Deccan Chronicle*, a daily newspaper based in Hyderabad, published a front page 'exposé' based on television footage of a function in the city, which, it claimed, showed Sai Baba secretly taking a large gold chain from an assistant and then claiming to have materialized it. The incident was investigated by Haraldsson and [Richard Wiseman](#), a British psychologist and amateur conjurer. The pair visited the offices of the newspaper, where they interviewed the relevant editor and acquired a copy of the videotape. They also viewed a number of letters sent in the wake of the exposé, including an unpublished one that disputed the newspaper's interpretation of the incident in detail.

Before examining the tape in depth the investigators had the quality enhanced with specialist equipment. However, this did not improve it to the point that it was possible to interpret what it showed with any certainty. They concluded:

The brief video recording contains a hand movement of Sai Baba's which is open to different interpretations and hence looks suspect to some (to a greater or lesser degree) and not to others. It would have given Sai Baba an opportunity to receive an object from the hand of his assistant, especially if the latter had some skill in handing over an object of this kind and size. Whether he did so or not cannot be seen on the tape. The statement made by the *Deccan Chronicle* that Sai Baba 'takes the gold chain from his assistant' is not corroborated by the tape nor by the picture they print. Though it looks suspicious, it offers no unequivocal evidence of fraud. ⁸

Arguments Against Fraud

Ex-Devotees

Defenders have pointed to several factors that count against explanations in terms of fraud. One is that the feats would have required extensive preparation, of a kind impossible to conceal from the associates by whom Sai Baba was surrounded. Those close to him would have had access to his personal quarters, and he certainly would not have been able to conceal from them the objects that he later produced – indeed, he would have had to rely on others to source them. Over a period of decades, many people left the ashram to marry, retire or simply follow a different life. At least a few expressed disillusionment with their former guru, for instance that he promised cures to sick people who in fact did not recover. However, it is striking that no ex-devotee has ever come forward with accusations of trickery.

Haraldsson interviewed two ex-devotees who were extremely critical of aspects of his personality, but said they had no cause to doubt the genuineness of the miracles they observed. M Krishna converted to Christianity, having been close to Sai Baba in the 1950s. He told Haraldsson that he was particularly fond of *kova*, a sticky sweet that was not available in Puttaparthi. Sometimes he would ask Baba to give him a *kova*, and one would always be produced. He did not believe that Baba could have hidden it in his clothes.

A second ex-devotee, Varadu, reported that on one occasion Sai Baba produced a small locket with his own picture in the centre, surrounded by diamonds and other precious stones. He said: ‘Whoever can hold it can keep it’. But nobody could hold it; it would slip out of their hand, whether by imagination or hypnotism, they could not tell. Sai Baba said: ‘Go back to wherever you came from’, and it disappeared.

Lack of Constraints

Sai Baba’s ability to materialize objects did not seem to be constrained in any way. He accomplished it with ease in any circumstances: seated in his ashram, walking outside, even when travelling in cars and aeroplanes.

Sai Baba often produced objects in response to requests that he would not easily have been able to anticipate, such as fruits out of season.

In one incident observed by Osis and Haraldsson, he poured a number of sweets onto the palm of someone’s hand and distributed them to the rest of the group. Then a person who had not been present asked to be given a sweet also, and Sai Baba produced more of them.

The feats also sometimes far exceeded what might be expected from even the most accomplished conjurer, for instance the production of steaming hot meals in the open air.

Defenders

Although some Indian academics and stage magicians have alleged fraud, this suspicion is far from uniform. An Indian magician, Dr Fanibunda, observed Sai Baba closely and also filmed him extensively, quickly becoming convinced that the phenomena were genuine.

Several prominent scientists in India had the opportunity of observing Sai Baba over a long period, including Dr S Bhagawantam, former director of the All India Institute of Science, and Dr VK Gokak, former president of Bangalore University. Both men told Haraldsson and Osis of inexplicable phenomena that they had observed in a variety of circumstances.

Erlendur Haraldsson

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1](#). Karanjia (1976).
- [2](#). Haraldsson (1987, 2013).
- [3](#). Haraldsson & Osis (1977); Osis & Haraldsson (1979).
- [4](#). Chari (1978), 67.

- [5.](#) Osis & Haraldsson (1976).
- [6.](#) Jones (1992).
- [7.](#) Datta (2008).
- [8.](#) Haraldsson & Wiseman (1995).

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