

ONE evening twenty years ago in Puttaparti, a village in Andhra Pradesh, a 60 year old man lay close to death. As his wife and daughter looked on anxiously his breathing became erratic and he went into a coma. An hour later, his body began to turn cold, and the relatives clustered around his bedside, heard the "death rattle" in his throat. A few minutes later the man was medically dead.

The widow refused to allow the body to be taken away, convinced that a man she thought was a saint would somehow help her. People began to object — the body was beginning to smell.

On the morning of the third day, the man she believed to be a saint walked into the room and as the crowd watched with hushed expectancy he gently ushered both the widow and her daughter out and closed the door.

A few minutes later, he emerged from the room and called the relatives in. There, on the bed, was the "dead man", sitting up and smiling at them. "I have given your husband back to you," the 'godman' said. "Now get him a hot drink".

This scene might sound straight out of the Holy Bible — shades of Christ raising Lazarus from the dead. But it's not. The man who raised the dead patient was Satya Sai Baba of Puttaparti.

Sai Baba, as he is known, is always clothed in a flowing saffron robe. His hair stands straight up from his head in a crinkly black, Afro mop. And he is considered by millions of people all over the country, and many abroad, to be a "living god" — the Messiah of the 20th Century. He is modern India's foremost miracle man.

Why are so many people drawn to one man? Most of them go to Sai Baba hoping that he will solve their problems. A large number have been convinced by his miracles — "Seeing is believing," they say. They find solace in clinging to the concept of his being a godman — he has the ability to do things that are, at best, superhuman.

Howard Murphet, an Australian who initially came to scoff but was convinced of Sai Baba's 'divinity', has written a book on him, titled 'Sai Baba: Man of Miracles'. In his book, Murphet says that "as they say in journalism, one picture is worth a thousand words. A miracle is worth many thousand."

Where did the phenomenon of Satya Sai Baba begin? He was born Satyanarayana Raju on November 23, 1926 to Pedda Raju and his wife Easwaramma.

The Rajus had lived in Puttaparti for many generations. Easwaramma had been told by a wandering soothsayer that her child would one day be a great saint. How-

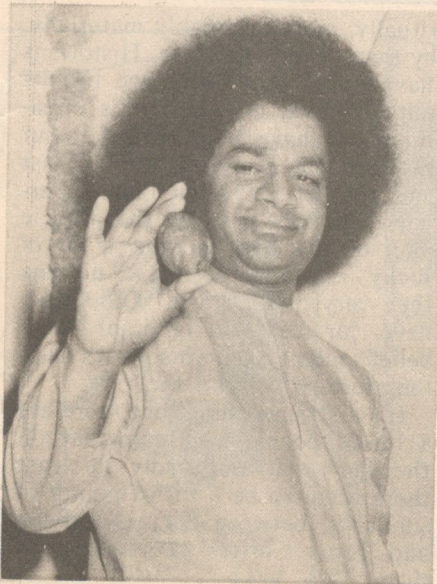
ever, she soon forgot about it.

Satyanarayana had an uneventful childhood. He attended school in Uravakonda, a town a few miles away from Puttaparti. On March 8, 1940, at 13, he was bitten by a scorpion while walking near his home and this event was to change his life greatly. To his parents' alarm, he was racked by alternating bouts of unconsciousness, and 'possession' by some mysterious spirit — and during these 'possessed' periods, Satyanarayana gave long discourses on philosophy, and religion and produced things like sugar candy, flowers, and balls of rice cooked in milk out of thin air.

Slowly, a group of people began to collect to view this wonder. But Pedda Raju was not impressed. He summoned a noted exorcist to drive the 'demon' out of his son. The exorcist failed to cure Satyanarayana. And two months after the scorpion bite, Satyanarayana suddenly announced one evening to the crowd in his room that he was "Sai Baba", a re-incarnation of Shirdi Sai Baba, a Muslim saint who had gained renown with his holy prowess in Shirdi, a town in Maharashtra. Sai Baba of Shirdi had passed away in 1914.

In October 1940, Satya Sai Baba, as he got to be known, made the final break from his family, saying, "My devotees are calling me. I have my work." He soon collected a small group of devotees. Most

Seeing is believing



"Don't venerate me, just rely on me."



'Prasanti Nilayam' — Sai Baba's ashram at Puttaparti.



of them were perhaps drawn to the child because he materialised things that they wanted, and won them over with his charming ways. With his followers, Satya Sai Baba established his ashram a quarter of a mile from Puttaparti, and called it **Prasanti Nilayam** — Abode of Great Peace. Over the years the ashram has grown in size and when the festivals come around thousands of devotees flock there.

Sai Baba has based his mission on four qualities of the mind: Satya (truth), Dharma (the spiri-

tened with. A few approach him for spiritual instruction — these are the searchers of faith. But a lot of Sai Baba's devotees have been helped materially by him — through miracles or otherwise. There have been innumerable instances when Sai Baba has materialised a ring, a pendant, a diamond and handed it to a delighted devotee. He has cured others of illnesses by giving them materialised **vibhuti** or sacred ash.

But there has also been a lot of criticism levelled against Satya Sai

Many have been won over. Some critics, however, are still virulently against him. A few scientists, notably **Dr S. Bhagavantam**, former scientific Advisor to the Defence Ministry, who have become Sai Baba devotees, admit that all their scepticism had been ceased by the supra-human feats of Satya Sai Baba.

The Satya Sai Baba phenomenon ultimately boils down to a matter of faith. People believe in him because they are fundamentally selfish: they would like to benefit spi-

| Jesus Christ | Satya Sai Baba |
|---|--|
| When Jesus was 12, he was lost for nearly three days. After a long search, his parents found him in a temple, teaching some learned men. This was the first sign of his divinity. | Satya Sai Baba was only 13 when he manifested signs of his 'divinity'. A few months later he began his mission. |
| There was the story of Mary's sister, Elizabeth, running out of her house to greet her and saying: "The Lord is with thee" — which meant that Mary knew beforehand that her child would one day be a God. | Easwaramma, Sai Baba's mother, was told by a wandering soothsayer that her son would one day be a great saint. |
| There are a few instances of Jesus Christ casting out evil spirits from a possessed person. | Satya Sai Baba has been known to have similarly exorcised many people of the devil. |
| Jesus Christ raised Lazarus from the dead. | The man whom Satya Sai Baba raised from the dead was Mr V. Ramakrishna, a well-known factory owner from Kuppam, A.P. |

tual law of living), Shanti (peace) and Prema (divine love). As the years passed, he gathered a following in many parts of the country. These devotees organised themselves into Sai Seva organisations and propagated Satya Sai Baba's message, holding bhajans (congregational singing) and forming study groups to understand Sai Baba's teachings better.

Whenever Satya Sai Baba travels he is mobbed by hundreds of his devotees. His lectures are absorbed in perfect, attentive silence. In fact, his followers say there is no God but Sai Baba.

"What does Satya Sai Baba do for the common man?" is the question often asked. He helps his devotees on two levels — the spiritual and the material. A lot of his followers approach him for solace, for small things like the auspicious time for an operation or the results of an examination or the name a baby should be christ-

Baba. His detractors accuse him of being a "street magician" with a limited repertoire of tricks. His followers, however, defend him by saying his miracles are meant to convince the sceptical of his divinity, that they are his "visiting cards."

He is accused of patronising the rich — fingers are pointed at the organisations he runs. Where does the money come from, they ask.

Another point his critics bring up is the number of foreigners in his following. It is noticeable, they say, that no foreigner who goes to see Satya Sai Baba goes back empty-handed, or without meeting him. On the other hand, among the Indians who flock to catch a glimpse of him, they remark that only a select few ever get to meet Sai Baba personally and even they are made to wait sometimes for days before the great moment comes. Can God, ask the doubters, be so inaccessible?



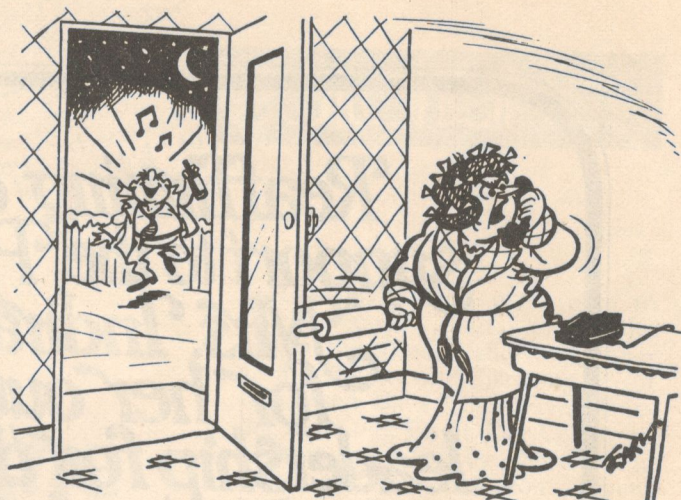
Sai Baba's predecessor — Shiridi Sai Baba, the Muslim saint

ritually, more preferably materially, by association with him. Historians have noted that every age has its miracle man, and hundreds of similarities have been pointed out between the story of Jesus Christ and that of Satya Sai Baba. Perhaps Sai Baba may be the miracle man of this age, guiding a lot of lucky mortals towards a nirvana they very much crave. Others believe, for fear that ignorant "non-belief" might incur his wrath and, therefore, why take the risk.

It's a strange thing, but there are a lot of people who comment on the fact that outwardly at least there seem to be a lot of points of similarity between Satya Sai Baba and Jesus Christ. Let's look at them. (See box).

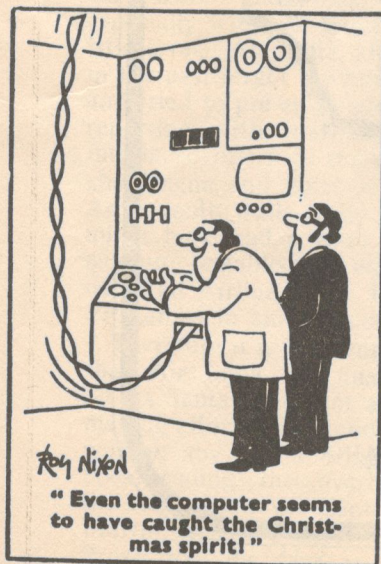


"Sometimes I believe that he believes that we believe in him!"



"Hello ambulance service? - will you send one round to..."

CHRISTMAS CARTOONS



"How did you persuade him to stop banging his drum?"



"Hurry up and carve the turkey, Daddy—I want to try my new outfit."