

SAI BABA: "Miracles are my calling-cards"

The Sai Baba controversy is utterly irrelevant and merely proves that Indian newspapers and magazines are hard put to finding topics worthy of discussion. An article on the occasion of Satya Sai Baba's 50th birthday which was celebrated on November 23.



By CHAITANYA KALBAG

"I WONDER," remarked a Professor of Political Science at an American university when I met him recently, "whether all this heat and dust that is being raised over the godmen (or the fraudmen, as Dr Kovoor would have it) is going to get India anywhere." The Satya Sai Baba controversy is symptomatic of a day when newspapers and magazines in India are hard put to finding topics to discuss. How else can one explain the recent spate of articles on the pros and cons of the whole question? How else can one explain exclusive interviews with the Puttaparthi Phenomenon, which seeks to justify his halo on the basis of whether he is wearing a headpiece or not? How else can one explain the editorial invectives that have been exchanged between two competing weeklies over the last three months?

What is indubitable is the sheer weightage of rhetoric that is being bandied about on the subject. To the charge of Dr H Narasimhaiah (the chairman of the Bangalore University investigative committee) that Satya Sai Baba's charisma is built around his miracles, and that "You know the moment your miracle is proved to be a myth you will become an ordinary person," the accused party retorted with "Let dogs bay at the moon" analogies. What everyone overlooks is the fact that after so much of mud-slinging, neither has Dr Kovoor been taken up on his offer of Rs 100,000 to the first godman who scientifically substantiates his miracles, nor has Dr Narasimhaiah succeeded in dismantling the "main switch at Puttaparthi".

The moon has passed through many an *amavasya*, the dogs have developed hoarse barks, the hairpiece has been proved to be genuine (or, as Coca Cola would put it, "The Real Thing"), and on the 23rd of November, thousands of transported devotees hailed the 50th birthday of Satyanarayana Raju, the Andhra boy who grew up into Sri Satya Sai Baba, the Saint of the Four Virtues — Satya (truth), Dharma (the spiritual law of living), Shanti (peace) and Prema (divine love).

It is time therefore, to reflect on the futility of witch-hunts. Inquisitions went out with the Spaniards. Yet sane, adult men and women find it honourable to indulge in such religious trivia. "To every man his faith" ought to be the motto, but what is being sought to be inculcated

in the public mind today is "To every man his disbelief."

The Satya Sai Baba story can be seen in a more justifiable light if we stop to consider the need that every human being has for some sort of a supra-human prop — be it a framed picture on his mantelpiece, or a flesh-and-blood ash-producer. "Miracles are my calling cards," says Satya Sai Baba. "Doubt is my nameplate," retorts Dr Narasimhaiah. While the other godmen, wroth at being left out of all this fun, discourse on the 'Sublimation of Sexual Energy', or the 'Advantages of Letting One's Hair Down' in Pune, or, bereft of such imagination, go and marry a demure secretary.

Let us not forget that in a situation where material reality is rarely comforting, the Indian who is not so well to do, finds solace in his belief that there is some 'extra-terrestrial goal to be achieved. We might otherwise succeed in bringing about a Saint Drain — a la the Khoranas — a situation in which the Datta Bals and Sai Babas and Rajneeshs and Maharishis follow in the Jumbo-chartering footsteps of Muktananda and Guru Maharaj-ji in the United States. Let us restrict religious frenzy to Puttaparthi and Pune, and not drive the Yanks around the bend by perpetuating Guru Maharaj-ji's Astrodome Antic.

Hindu mythology has it that we are passing through the Kali Yuga, the age of evil, when godlessness is overwhelming virtue. Perhaps the Satya Sai Baba controversy is an off-shoot of this theory.

After all, mythology and superstition are entrenched in the mental primitivity of the average Indian. While the masses continue to sway in raptures at bhajan sessions, the "intellectuals" attempt to prove Orwell right in his "All men are equal, but some men are more equal than others" dictum. Education, or laboratory upbringing, can hardly call for subjecting every mental idiosyncrasy to the harsh glare of scientific perusal. Every religion in the world today is based on the interpretations of a human medium — be it Christ, or Mohammed, or the Buddha. Why then ignore the fact that each generation instinctively searches for its own pontiffs?

We therefore come to the moot point — is belief itself a fallacy? Ovid says in *Art of Love*: "Expediit esse deos, et, ut expediit, esse putemus" (It is expedient that there should be gods, and as it is expedient, let us believe that they exist.) Or else one ought to subscribe to the point of view of total alienation from the "religious crutch" theory, and echo Michel de Montaigne's statement in *Essays*: "Man is certainly stark mad. He cannot make a flea, and yet he will be making gods by the dozen."