

HEART 2 HEART

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

<u>Page No.</u>	<u>Section</u>
03	BETWEEN YOU AND US
	SPIRITUAL BLOSSOMS
05	SATHYA SAI SPEAKS: Purity – The Path of The Buddha
08	CONVERSATIONS WITH SAI: SATHYOPANISHAD - Part 4
14	<i>CHINNA KATHA</i> – Worldly Pleasures Are Like a Serpent's Grip
	<u>COVER STORY:</u>
15	<u>SHIVAM – SAI HRUDAYAM...THE HEART OF SAI</u>
	FEATURE ARTICLES
48	SCIENCE, SOCIETY AND SPIRITUALITY: THE SATHYA SAI SYNERGY
53	HEAVENLY GANGA, THE FARAKKA BARRAGE AND ITS ATROCIOUS AFTERMATH
70	THE WIN-WIN-WIN FORMULA
	SERIAL ARTICLES
75	THE DIVINE STORY OF SHIRDI SAI PARTHI SAI - Part 41
82	MUSINGS ON THE AVATARS – Part 3
	WINDOW TO SAI SEVA
91	TRANSFORMING THE TRIBALS - A TALE OF ONLY LOVE
101	PRASHANTI DIARY
	SWAMI AND ME
116	MOTHER EASWARAMMA – THE EPITOME OF COMPASSION
118	THE SWAMI I GREW UP WITH – Part 1
130	BEING A BLESSED INSTRUMENT

H2H SPECIAL

- 136** MESMERIZING MOMENTS WITH THE DIVINE MASTER – Part
2

GET INSPIRED

- 142** THE RENTED ROOM
144 JUST KEEP PLANTING
146 WHAT'S IN A GIRL'S PAPER BAG

TEST YOUR SPIRITUAL QUOTIENT

- 148** MULTI-FAITH QUIZ
157 A QUIZ ON DIVINE DISCOURSES DELIVERED ON
EASWARAMMA DAY
165 QUIZ ON HEART 2 HEART

THE HEALING TOUCH

- 169** FAROOKH'S TRIALS... AND THE TOUCH OF ALLAH

- 173** YOUR SAY

BETWEEN YOU AND US

Somebody said God is a surprise wrapped in an enigma inside a puzzle. But this is surely a gross understatement, for God is not shrouded with mystery; He is, in fact, mystery itself. He is the very embodiment of every enigma that ever was, is or will be in this cosmos – mystery multiplied by infinity. Since the beginning of time, man has been trying to understand trees and typhoons, waves and flowers, stars and sand, and the human body, but the drama of life on this Earth is so inscrutable that, when an iota of knowledge is gained, the journey extends by another million miles. And this whole process of understanding the creation becomes most fascinating when the Creator Himself descends, and decides to play a physical part in this greatest drama of the universe. Mankind then gets a very real taste of the cosmic unfathomable that is the Divine.

Why was Lord Rama born only when an angel arose from the sacrificial fire and offered the bowl of porridge? How could his second mother, Kaikeyi, who loved Him more than she loved her own son, Bharatha, turn against Him overnight and send Him to exile for fourteen years? Why did Rama accede to the request of Sita and run after a golden deer when such a thing did not exist on Earth? Why did Lord Rama Himself worship Lord Shiva in the form of a *linga* before proceeding to Lanka for the battle with the demon king Ravana? And then, why did Rama, who left no stone unturned, however mighty it might be, to rescue his consort Sita, finally, after winning her back, want her to go through fire to prove her chastity, before accepting her again? [Read the complete story with explanations in our serial articles section]. These and many others from the life of Lord Rama have been deliberated and debated upon for centuries. Manifold mysteries abound within each Divine Incarnation.

Take the Avatar of Lord Krishna. Why did He choose to be born inside a jail and then be miraculously carried by storm and rain to Gokulam? [See the serial article on Avatars]. Why did He steal butter from every home with His friends when there was enough and more in His own house? Later, though He was a peace maker, why did He inspire Arjuna to lift his bow and fight the great Mahabharata War? At the same time, why didn't He ever hold a weapon during the deadly battle? And then, in the end, why did He accept the curse of Gandhari and allow the entire Yadava clan, to which He belonged, to be destroyed? Aeons have gone and volumes have been written, and maybe many more will be penned in the centuries to come, but these set of queries will still remain just that – impregnable mysteries.

It is the same with the life of Jesus too. Out of the thousands, why the Lord chose Mary and Joseph is a divine secret. Similarly, the whole episode of the Crucifixion and Resurrection is so complex and profound that no amount of literature can ever help us to understand the real Truth comprehensively. Where there is Divinity, there is mystery. And this is exactly what is happening in the present time too.

In this modern age, why did the Lord choose a tiny obscure and poor hamlet to be born again? Why did the drums, bells and other instruments in the

house of Easwaramma create music on their own when Sathya was born? Why was a coiled serpent found under the Divine Baby's bed? How could He gift His friends with apples and oranges, guavas and grapes from a tamarind tree? And then, how was He seen inside the *lingam* in the Virupaksha shrine as well as outside the Temple? [Read this story in the serial 'Shirdi Sai Parthi Sai]. Again, why did He submit Himself to terrible torture in the hands of an exorcist who thought He was possessed?

If we observe, every single event in the life of the Avatar is so full of mystery and meaning. In fact, not a second of glance or look, word or pat, happens by accident; everything has a definite purpose. It is a cosmic programme that is unfolding during every moment of the Divine on Earth.

Sixty years ago, who would have thought Puttaparthi, which was described by Hollywood director Schulman who came to Puttaparthi in 1968, as: "160 km from Bangalore and ten minutes past the Stone Age!" would one day become the spiritual powerhouse of the whole world. Even people in the close proximity of Bhagavan, who had complete faith in His Divinity, never imagined His words to be so powerful and prophetic. The story of how the Prasanthi Mandir was built is most amazing, which Prof. Kasturi describes in Baba's biography 'Sathyam Shivam Sundaram'. He says, "Heavy girders for the central prayer-hall came from near Trichinopoly by train to Penukonda all right, but, how on earth could they be brought over the District Board Road, sixteen miles long, with a sandy stream on the seventh mile? How can any lorry with those long bars sticking out negotiate the acute angled corners of the village of Locherla, on the ninth mile? And, after Bukkapatnam is reached, there were three miles of a track that can be referred to, only by courtesy, as a road, and then, the broad expanse of sand which the Chitravathi River spreads across a distance of three furlongs, between Puttaparthi and Karnatanagapalli!"

But this seemingly insurmountable obstacle was overcome when an out-of-action crane suddenly appeared in front of the house of the engineer at Anantapur. And Baba made this mammoth of a machine work by asking the engineer to scatter on its metallic body the Vibhuti that He created and gave him (!). The machine roared to life! Still, it could not travel the whole distance. Then, most amazingly, Swami sat next to the driver and handled the wheel so that the crane loaded all the girders perfectly at the work spot. Through such acts of Divine intervention and hours of selfless work of dedicated volunteers was the Mandir and Ashram of Prasanthi Nilayam built. Truly, its very name evokes cool breeze and quiet solitude, meant especially for the spiritual aspirant.

But according to Swami's Master Plan, this 'Prasanthi Nilayam' did not stop in Puttaparthi. It has multiplied itself in many places, under His direct Divine guidance and manifested in the same manner - through His grace and selfless service. In 1968, Swami inaugurated Sathyadeep and Dharmaskehta in Mumbai. Much later in 1981, 'Sundaram' in Chennai was consecrated by Bhagavan to be His abode and the centre of the Sai Movement in that metropolis. [In the March 2006 issue of H2H, we brought you the detailed

story of this beautiful edifice]. While we have preserved the scintillating story of 'Sathyadeep' for a future issue, in this month we have the revealing account of 'Shivam', the epicenter of auspiciousness, serenity and service for thousands of devotees, which also serves as Bhagavan's abode whenever He visits Hyderabad, the capital of Andhra Pradesh.

When you read this story, which is woven with the threads of the startling experiences of more than a dozen devotees, apart from other stories and facts, you will know why, for many, visiting Shivam is as good as having Swami's physical *darshan*! In fact, some of them feel His presence more in Shivam than in Prasanthi Nilayam! Such is the glory of this sacred site. But how did this enigma of an edifice, shaped in the form of a Shiva *lingam*, come into being? What is the secret behind its sublimity and spiritual magic? Who were the chosen instruments in this Divine Mission? And what is the principal motive of Bhagavan for its existence? You will find answers to all these and more, through a series of eye-opening tales of Divine Grace and Power, Love and Care when you read this comprehensive cover story.

You will find that if there is one important message that rings loud and clear throughout this enlightening article on Shivam, it is the message of Selfless Service. Speaking on Ugadi, the Telugu New Year Day, in 1979 in Shivam, Swami said, "Launch a new movement to mark the New Year. People in the villages have no medical and educational facilities. They have no drinking water or sanitary arrangements. They have no food to eat. Provide these facilities for them and thereby realise Divinity. The need of the hour is the man of action, not the one who only talks."

Dear reader, in this month, falls the sacred "Easwaramma Day", the death anniversary of the one who gave us our beloved Bhagavan. Swami has any number of times narrated how the Divine Mother was the real inspiration behind all the mega service projects of the Sri Sathya Sai Central Trust. Compassion came as naturally to her as fragrance comes to rose. [Read about her in the Swami and Me section]. Therefore, as we offer our obeisance to her on May 6, let us decide to spare at least a little of our time and energy in making the lives of our brothers and sisters, the poor and the forlorn, the needy and the neglected, better. Swami says, "When you serve the poor, make no mistake to think that you are helping the other. Be grateful to them, because, actually, they are aiding you to redeem your life."

Let serving others be the only reason why we breathe and live.

Loving regards,
H2H Team

SPIRITUAL BLOSSOMS

SATHYA SAI SPEAKS

Purity – The Path of The Buddha

On May 19, 2008 falls Buddha Poornima – the day celebrating the birth, enlightenment as well as nirvana of The Buddha. Here is what Bhagavan Baba said on this sacred day more than a decade ago.

True wisdom consists in the awareness of the rarity of the individual and the *Samashti* (collective whole). How can a man who is not aware of his humanness recognize the Divinity within him? Hence the first requisite is the recognition by everyone of his human essence. Basing on this truth, Buddha declared that everyone should cultivate at the outset *Samyak Dhrishti* (a pure vision). It is only when a person has pure vision that he/she can get rid of impurities in the body, speech and mind. It is this purity that can protect one from invasion of impurities through the eyes and the ears. Hence the first requirement for every man is *Samyak Dhrishti*.

The second quality that is needed is *Samyak Sankalpa* (pure thoughts). Only the person who has developed purity in vision can have purity in thoughts. The third requirement for every individual, along with purity in vision and thought, is *Samyak Karma* (pure deeds). Through pure deeds man is able to recognise his human essence. Man is not merely an embodied being. By his capacity for developing good vision, entertaining good thoughts and performing good deeds, he has the power to transform humanness into Divinity.

A fourth requirement for every individual is *Samyak Shruthi* (listening to sacred words). When one listens to unsacred words he can have only unsacred thoughts. The fifth quality prescribed by Buddha is *Samyak Jeevanam* (living a pure life). What is meant by "living"? It is not leading a worldly life attached to worldly pursuits. True living means making one's life meaningful by ideal actions. Man's life must be governed by idealism in action.

Real Sadhana is to Remove all Impurities from Mind

Next, Buddha declared that everyone should aim at *Samyak Sadhana* (Achievement of the highest good.). *Sadhana* means elimination of the evil tendencies in man and acquiring good and sacred qualities. True *sadhana* is the eradication of all evil in a man. Study of sacred texts, meditation and penance do not constitute the whole of *sadhana* (spiritual exercise). To remove all the impurities in the mind is real *Sadhana*.

True Samadhi and Nirvana

After this comes what Buddha called – *Samya Samaadhi* or *Nirvana* (Pure Realisation or Liberation). What is meant by *Samadhi*? It means treating

pleasure and pain, gain and loss alike. *Sama - dhi* (equal mindedness) is "*Samadhi*". To look upon light and darkness, pleasure and pain, profit and loss, fame and censure, with an equal mind is *Samadhi*. Buddha termed this equal mindedness as *Nirvana*. It is the recognition of the sacredness of the qualities of all the senses in man that constitutes real humanness. At the very outset, one has to keep the tongue pure. This was referred to as *Samyak Vaak* (purity in speech). The tongue has to be sanctified by refraining from falsehood, slander and abusive speech...

Happiness is not to be found in any of the things of the world. Everything is fleeting. Man is wasting his life in the pursuit of petty ephemeral pleasures. *Nirvaana* is the only Truth; it is the sense of oneness with all life. To turn the mind towards that which is permanent is *Nirvaana*.

It is not enough to read the lives of *avatars* and messiahs. Their teachings should be put into practice as much as possible. People must gradually outgrow their material attachments and develop Divine Love. Shuddhodhana tried to protect his son (Buddha) from all external worldly influences by keeping him in the palace and not even sending him to school. What happened ultimately? Buddha decided to renounce everything in quest of the Truth about human existence and he declared *Ahimsa* (non-harming) as the supreme good.

Three Qualities Essential for Every Individual

What is it that people need today? These are three things: A heart, pure and white, like the moon; speech that is soft and sweet like butter; and a face that is loving and kind. These are lacking in the world today. The entire atmosphere is frightening. There is harshness in speech. The heart should be pure and soft like butter. Today, on the contrary, people are hardhearted. Fill your hearts with compassion. Let your speech be sweet and truthful. You will then be truly human.

We are celebrating today Buddha Poornima or Buddha Jayanthi. What does *Poornima* (full moon) signify? It signifies wholeness. When the mind is filled with love, it achieves fullness. As long as the mind is filled with darkness (evil thoughts) there is no meaning in celebrating Buddha Poornima. Get rid of this darkness. Without the light of love in the heart, what use is there in having illuminations outside? Light the lamp of the Divine in your minds. Banish hatred and envy from your hearts. Man is the victim of two evil planets: attachment and hatred. To escape from their grip, the only way is to cultivate love.

- *Divine Discourse in Sai Ramesh Hall, Brindavan, on May 15, 1997.*

CONVERSATIONS WITH SAI

Satyopanishad - Part 4: Direct Directions from the Divine

Dear reader, responding to positive responses from many readers to this section in H2H, where we have a dialogue with the Divine, after we completed serializing Dr. John Hislop's "Conversations with Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba" in January 2008, we started Prof. Anil Kumar's "Satyopanishad" from the next month.

This too is in the "question-answer" format that many devotees prefer, and has answers from Bhagavan on topics as wide-ranging as the origin of evil, the goals of human life, aspects of God – embodied and formless, to price hikes, women's liberation, vegetarianism and the generation gap of the present times.

Published in two parts by the author, these volumes have 270 questions in all, which are neatly grouped under separate chapters. In this issue, we begin chapter two, called 'Trends in Society'.

Chapter II - Trends in Society

(Continued from the previous issue)

Anil Kumar (AK): Swami! Man is not behaving in the way expected of him. He is losing his very human nature. How should he transform himself at this juncture? What happens to society if he remains like this?

Bhagavan: You do not know that you are using certain words without knowing their meaning. If you understand the words that you utter, you will notice that they are self explanatory and convey their meaning in unambiguous terms. What is the meaning of this word *manava*, man? 'Ma' means *maya* or illusion; 'na', means *daati* (Telugu) or crossing over; 'va', means *vartincu* (Telugu) or to conduct oneself. In other words, 'manava' means 'the one who crosses *maya* and conducts himself accordingly', and definitely not one who is enslaved by *maya*. It can also be interpreted in another way. The word 'manava' means, 'ma', which means 'not', and 'nava', which means 'new'. Thus 'manava' means 'not new'. Man had many births earlier and the present one is 'not new'.

Man is also called *narah* (Sanskrit). 'Na' means 'not', and 'rah' means 'perishable'. Thus, *narah*, means 'not perishable'. Obviously, the one, which is imperishable, is eternal, that is, immortal, or *atma*, Truth. There is another word *vanara* (Sanskrit) denoting a 'monkey'. 'Va' denotes *vala* or tail. So 'nara' should be viewed as man without *vala* or tail. Man is *saksara*: 'sa', divine and *aksara*, undiminshable or permanent. Thus, *saksara* is one who is undiminshable, permanent or eternal, *Atma*. He, who has the awareness of such *Atma*, is *saksara*. But alas! Man today is behaving as *raksasa*, demon.

Man is expected to have *dama*, control of senses, but he is full of *mada*, pride and conceit. So, when we understand the meaning of these words, we shall know that man or *vyakti*, the individual, should exhibit and express the quality of *Atma*, which he truly is.

A community or a group of individuals makes a society. A single tree cannot make a forest. A single house cannot make a village. What is the meaning of *samaja*, or society? *Sama*, which means 'equality or equanimity', 'ja', is 'born out of'. Thus *samaja*, is that which maintains equality and equanimity. What are needed for ideal society? They are *samaikyata*, unity; *samagrata*, coordination; *samarasa*, integration; *saubhratrata*, fraternity; and *samanata*, equality. These are the features of an ideal society.

We hear people saying that society should change. However, in my opinion, it is wrong. If the individual changes, society will automatically change. A small example: A father presented a map of India to his young son. The boy, by mistake, tore it to pieces and was reprimanded by his father. After some time, the son brought the map intact. When asked by the father how he could do it, the boy replied that on the reverse side of the map there was the picture of a man. He said the only thing he did was to correctly assemble the torn pieces of the man to make it into the original picture. Then the original map formed itself automatically.

Thus, when individuals reform, society will automatically get reformed. Every person should know that the happiness of the individual depends on that of society. Man's welfare, progress and prosperity depend on society. This truth must be fully understood by everyone. For example, when there is a fire in the neighbourhood, you make an attempt to extinguish it. Why? If you do not, your house will not be safe. When all the other houses in the neighbourhood are burnt down by the fire, your house too will be burnt. When there are epidemics like cholera, you will be extra careful; otherwise, you will also become one of the victims. Similar is the relationship between an individual and the society he lives in.

AK: Swami! Maybe due to the impact of the Age of Kali, we don't find in these days, any understanding among the members of a family. Instead, we find differences in many families, even conflicts, complexes, competitions; and sometimes matters become so bad as to drag a family to the courts. Please suggest a way out of this sad plight, Swami!

Bhagavan: In this world though diversity is apparent, there is an inherent unity. Multiplicity may be patent; but the underlying unity is latent. The whole of nature shows both these aspects.

Take the earth; it is not the same throughout. There are hills, mountains, and valleys. However, in our experience we clearly visualise unity. Are the five fingers of the same hand identical? No. Similarly, the members of one and the same family are not alike or uniform. They are not stereotypes. All the same, there cannot be any valid reason for the absence of fraternity, unity, and love among the members of the family.

A good example from our epics maybe cited in this context. You analyse 'the family our Lord Siva'. Siva has Ganga water over his head, and fire on his forehead between the two eyes. He is, therefore, *Trinetra* or 'the three-eyed' God'. 'Water' and 'Fire' are also opposed to each other in their nature and don't coexist. Siva is *pannagadhara*, *nagabhusana* for He has venomous serpents around His neck. The vehicle of his elder son, Lord Subrahmanya, is a peacock. Snakes and peacocks are enemies. The vehicle of Goddess Parvati, consort of Siva, is a lion; she is *simhavahini*. The very face of Siva's second son is that of an elephant. Ganesh is called Gajanana for this reason. An elephant can't even dream of the sight of a lion. Parvati has all the jewels, but Her Lord, Siva is *digambara*, with minimum attire, and *bhasma bhusitanga* that is, vibhuti smeared all over His body. Though Siva's family is full of opposites and contradictions, there is integration, coordination, harmony and unity.

Similarly, in your families, the members may differ from each other, yet you should be able to live in perfect harmony like Siva's family. This is the lesson that over the ages Lord Siva has been teaching the world.

AK: Swami! Today the whole world is strife torn. We hear of racial discrimination, class conflict, bloodshed, war, and so on. Kindly give some message to the present day world.

Bhagavan: Today we have many intellectuals who find diversity in unity. There are only a few who notice unity in diversity. This is the reason for the present day troubles, turmoil, conflicts, wars, and so on in the world. *Manava*, man is behaving like a *danava*, demon. So we find violent, demonic, bestial, and inhuman tendencies among people. The moment man recognises and experiences unity in diversity, peace, comfort, safety, security, and happiness are ensured.

The composition of human blood is the same all over the world; everybody breathes oxygen. All tread the same ground. Hunger is one, be that of a rich man who may dine in a five star hotel or of a beggar who appeases his hunger with mere starch. Thirst is one and the same, be that of a rich man who will have a cool drink or of a poor man who drinks tap water in the street. Both feel happy in moments of joy and both grieve in times of difficulties.

The human body is composed of the five elements: earth, water, air, fire, and space. The body is inert. We breathe air into it. There is also fire within, keeping the body warm and helping us in digesting food. There is space within accommodating all parts of the human body. There is plenty of water in the body. So the five elements outside are also inside you. Everyone has them in the same proportion. All that you have is also present in everybody else. Then, why do you stretch your hand begging from everyone? What for? What is it that you don't have which the other man has? Basically nothing! This is the philosophy of unity in diversity. This unity is divinity.

The experience of this sort of spiritual unity is liberation, whereas the feeling of multiplicity, plurality and diversity is bondage, dualism, and attachment.

Flowers are many, but worship is one; Cows are many, but milk is one. Jewels are many, but gold is one; paths are many, but the goal is one; stars are many, but the sky is one; beings are many, but breath is one; names and forms are many, but God is one.

This is oneness or unity. Yarn is multiple, but when interwoven, it becomes a piece of cloth. This is how you should find out and experience unity in order to realise divinity. People fight in the name of religion. What a shame it is! No religion tells you to speak lies, to harm or kill others or do any such things. All religions lay emphasis on love, brotherhood, sacrifice, peace, truth, and so on. So, it is ridiculous to fight in the name of religion. In fact, *matulu mancivainamatamedi ceddadi*, (Telugu) 'if your mind is good, which religion is bad'?

There is only one religion, the religion of love. To have differences based on language or race is bad. It is a sign of narrow mindedness. There is only one language, the language of the heart. It is very mean to have differences on grounds of caste. You are not born with a signboard indicating your caste. What is the caste of the air? To which caste does water belong? What is the caste of fire and earth? Therefore, there is only one caste, the caste of humanity. Wars are fought in the name of God. Don't you know that there aren't many Gods? God is one without a second. You may call Him by any name. There is one God who is Omnipresent.

Ekam sat viprah bahudha vadanti, 'Truth is one, but interpreted in many ways by scholars'. There are no differences in divinity. With *cittasuddhi*, purity of heart, you can experience the principle of unity or oneness, which is the path to divinity. First, develop purity. That helps you to achieve unity and attain Divinity.

AK: Swami! In reality, the entire human race is one and the same, its basic core being divinity. Why then do we not react in the same way? Why do we think and act differently?

Bhagavan: Humanity may be one, but people act in different ways. No two are alike. This is the law of nature. Thought, words and actions depend on time and circumstances. Here is an example. A tender fruit is sour in its taste; an unripe fruit is astringent, while a ripe fruit is sweet. All the three are the stages of the same fruit, aren't they! It is sour, then astringent and finally sweet. How does it happen? Why? The change of taste is due to the passage of time. No one has filled the ripe fruit with sugar. So, I say *yetti matiyo, atti gati; yetti sthitio, atti sampatti* (Telugu verse). 'As is the mind, so is the destiny; as is the position, so is the affluence.'

In human life, there are three important aspects, 'doing', body; 'thinking', mind; 'being', Atma. Body desires, mind thinks and *atma* experiences. You should have broadmindedness. You should never be narrow-minded. When examination results are published, why don't you feel happy that so many have passed the examinations? If in the spirit of a large heart, you look for your result, you will definitely find your number in the newspaper along with

those of other candidates. It is but narrow-mindedness if you look only for your own number unmindful of others.

Another example: Suppose you feel happy that in a group photo everyone has figured nicely. If you then look at your own figure, you will be known to be broadminded.

Human life is a combination of three attributes, *trigunas*. The three work in perfect union as the three wings of a fan. Just as a chutney is made of tamarind, salt and chillies well ground, so also human life has *trigunas*, well mixed. You also must have known *pan*, which Indians chew. It has three ingredients, betel leaf, betel nut and lime, of green, brown and white colours respectively. When the ingredients of three different colours are chewed, you get the red colour.

Similarly, in human life all the three *gunas* are intermixed. But spiritually, basically and fundamentally, the core of the human being is *sat*, 'being', *cit*, 'awareness' and *ananda*, 'bliss'. *Sat* and *cit* together confer *ananda*.

An example: Here are two separate things, water and sugar. When you mix the two it is neither sugar nor water, but syrup. So also water is *sat*, sugar is *cit*, forming the syrup *ananda*. The triune *trigunas* (three attributes) and the basic nature of *sat*, *cit*, and *ananda* mixed with *deha*, body, *manas* mind, and *buddhi* intellect, interacting with *pravrtti*, the external world, lead to *anekatva*, that is diversity or multiplicity or plurality.

AK: Swami! We hear the words, *rajaniti* and *rajakiyam*. Are these, in fact, one and the same? How should we name what we see around us?

Bhagavan: *Rajaniti* and *rajakiyam* can never be the same. Look at *Rajayoga*. Among the *yogas*, the one most highly revered which stands king-like is given that name. Similarly, the very greatest among moral codes, equal in status to a king among men, is called *rajaniti*. The king of animals is the lion, you know. *Rajaniti* is conjoined with *Satya*, bound by *Dharma*, and confers all welfare. What you have today are not *rajaniti* or *rajakiyam* political strategies, at all, but *rajakayams* - battles royal, born of malice, envy, and hatred. All these are *kayams*, bitter fights. Therefore, they are *rajaki yams*.

AK: Swami! We have people of varied temperaments, views, ideas, outlooks, ambitions and interests. Conflict becomes inevitable. Each one wants things to happen in their own way. What should we do then?

Bhagavan: *Munde munde matirbhinna*, heads vary. No two people look alike: no two think in the same way. It is quite natural that ideas differ. Each one feels that he is correct. But you should maintain the spirit of unity, equality and equanimity.

A small example: Once upon a time all the five fingers of the palm started claiming superiority over one another. First, the little finger said to the others, "Look! As you do *namaskar*, I come first. Therefore, I am important". The ring

finger then said, "What! Don't you know my value? Costly diamond and gold rings are worn round me!" Then, the middle finger said, "Very funny! What are you talking about? I am ready to wear costly rings. Why not? Some do that way also. Further, don't you see me, who am taller than all of you? Isn't that enough to say that I am superior to all of you?" The forefinger started saying, "If you want to direct anybody, I come first. People show me to direct people. Further, even to warn or caution others, I come first. Don't you see this?" Then, last but not the least, the thumb smiling said, "I have been watching so long all that is happening! Unless I join, even if the four of you stand united, you cannot function. While eating anything, can you manage without me? Why go to that extent? When you shoot an arrow, I have to pull the string backwards with force. Else, the arrow will never go far. So mine is the highest position among us".

This is how we find people staking their claims for superiority over one other. You should always be ready to receive the good from anybody. You should work in cooperation and harmony with one another. No one should feel superior to anyone. Otherwise, because of the domination of one over another, groups, factions, rivalries, controversies and conflicts arise. As a result, the spirit of love totally vanishes from the scene. Unless all the five fingers join, you cannot do anything, you see! Society can never progress if there is no cooperation, integration and unity among its members.

(To be continued)

CHINNA KATHA

Worldly Pleasures Are Like A Serpent's Grip

One person came to Me about twenty years ago and prayed that he should meet with success in his examination and secure a high first class. I told him that there will have to be effort and the result will be according to God's will. I gave him My blessings and sent him away. He did secure a high first class and came to Me again after passing his examination and asked for My blessings so that he might get a job.

He did get a job within a month. He again came to Me after a few months. He said he got a job, that he was happy, and he also said he wanted to marry a typist girl in his own office. I told him that if it is agreeable to his father and mother, he may do so but they may not like it. He was not inclined to listen to Me. He said that even if it meant transgressing the wishes of his parents, he was determined to marry that girl. He, in fact, suggested that he would even give up his life if this marriage was not possible. I told him that he must convince his parents before entering into such an alliance. He brought a lot of pressure on his parents and they, finding no other alternative, agreed to the marriage.

The marriage was over and after a year, both of them came to me again and said they wanted a son. After the birth of a son his expenses multiplied, his wife gave up her job, and he came to Me desiring a promotion. By his good luck, he got a promotion. Although he was somewhat foolish in regard to worldly matters, he had great faith in regard to matters relating to Swami. I gave him My blessings and he got a promotion. He did not turn up thereafter for over five years. He was quite happy and in the next five years, they had four children. He came again to Me after five years and said that he was fed up with the family, said that he cannot bear the burden of the family and that he was looking for relief from all the mess. He said that he wanted a small job in the ashram itself and said that his family has now got a hold over him like a big serpent. I asked him if the serpent caught him on its own or whether he let the serpent come to him and catch him.

- Baba

COVER STORY

SHIVAM – SAI HRUDAYAM...THE HEART OF SAI

THE SPIRITUAL MAGIC OF SHIVAM

Shivam, literally, means 'auspiciousness'. The story of Shivam, the Abode of Sri Sathya Sai, at Hyderabad, the capital of Andhra Pradesh (the state that is also home to Prasanthi Nilayam), therefore, can only be a tale of supreme sublimity and Divine efflorescence. "I have been coming to Shivam for more than 30 years," says the bespectacled and beaming septuagenarian, Mr. Sitarama Rao. "Whenever I come here, I feel like Swami is in Hyderabad; the experience is similar to seeing Swami in Puttaparthi!" He is excited, energetic and so full of life standing in the Shivam corridor. "A glorious chapter in my life unfolded once I started visiting this Holy Temple," he continues. "The photo in the shrine seems so alive! I feel Swami is looking at me all the time. Today, because of Shivam, I am blessed with God's company. I am never worried about my health or any other problems; my life is so full of fulfillment and peace." The simple and humble Mr. Sitarama Rao, is now past 75, but exudes the enthusiasm of someone half his age.

Shivam – the Seat of Peace, nay Supreme Peace

Mr. Ankama Rao, has been an ardent devotee of Lord Shiva since his childhood. Twenty years back, he had no clue what his favourite deity had in store for him. He says, "This happened more than two decades ago. I was traveling by the Shivam Road one day, and I saw this magnificent Lingam shaped building. It drew me towards it. I could not resist the temptation of stepping inside the premises, and then, a never-before-experienced feeling of sublime peace enveloped me. Within a few months, all my problems – health and otherwise – vanished. I then knew that this was Lord's Shiva gift to me. Since then, whenever I am confronted with any problems or dilemmas in my life, I just sit in Shivam silently, all by myself, and then I feel as if Swami is whispering into my ears beautiful ideas and solutions to all my worries." Now, cutting through the air with both his hands to emphasise his point, Mr. Ankama states, "From the time I started visiting Shivam, I do not know any failure in my life. Shivam, to me, means 'energy', 'courage', 'peace', nay, 'supreme peace'," he adds with an aura of great joy and satisfaction. "That is why I come to Shivam every single day, and in fact, every event in my life has manifested itself like a miracle since I knew Sai and Shivam. In spite of many ailments - some small and others serious - I have never seen a doctor in the last two decades. Shivam is suffused with Sai. Even now, I have the same feeling of awe and ecstasy that I had when I first entered these premises; in fact, it is only increasing and intensifying everyday like an upward curve." His hand sketching the rising graph in the air, Mr. Ankama Rao, is as emphatic as he is ecstatic.

Shivam Signifies Sweetness of Sai

Prod any devotee, who has ever visited Shivam, just a tiny bit, and a soul-stirring narration flows, quite effortlessly, and more importantly, accompanied with jubilation. The mention of Shivam fills them with sweet memories and satisfied smiles, even if it is a place they visit every single day. "Since I have known Shivam, I go nowhere else," says Mr. M. M. Mohan Rao. "In the early seventies, I was in Vishakapatnam..." he starts his story. "I used to attend Sai *bhajans* and at the end of these sessions, there were announcements about the progress of the construction of the Shivam building in Hyderabad. I longed to be in Hyderabad, but there was no way I could move there. I was stuck with my job in Vishakapatnam and was beset with many problems in my personal and professional life.

Journey to Sai is Journey to Shivam

One day, in October 1972, I decided I would go to Puttaparthi. I wanted relief from my tribulations; but I did not know the way to reach there. Nevertheless, I started and with great difficulty reached Prasanthi Nilayam. Once there, I went and sat in the veranda. It was in the afternoon, and I remember, when Swami came out for *Darshan*, He came straight to me and said, 'You, get up.' I did not know what that meant; the concept of interview then was new to me. I imagined that interviews were probably governed by tokens, recommendations or some such procedure. The next moment, I was inside the interview room, and even before I could say anything, Swami, in one continuous flow, narrated every troubling twist of my life in great detail. I was in awe; I sat there perplexed. Then, casting His Loving Looks on me, He comforted me, and then said, 'You do not have to worry. I am there. Your current job hardly fetches you any money; moreover, you get no promotion. Do not worry; apply for another job and you will get it.'

"It happened, just as He had said. I found a new job, yes, but the best part is that it transferred me to Hyderabad! My dream of living near Shivam came true! And this was followed by more such unexpected boons. I was awarded quick promotions, and soon I became the Assistant Director in the Directorate of School Education. I did not own a house, and amazingly, I won a property in a lottery! What has Swami not done for me? My youngest son suffered from epileptic fits. In spite of that I used to come to Shivam to serve. My son was a year old infant then. One day, *Akhanda Bhajan* was organized and Swami was on His visit to Shivam. We decided to attend the *bhajans* taking our sick son with us. To our horror, he developed fever while in Shivam. We got very panicky as we knew the next thing that would happen was seizures. My wife was desperate. When Swami came out of the inner chambers of Shivam, and happened to pass by where she was sitting, she got up and loudly prayed, 'Swami, please bless my son so that he does not have fits. Please protect him and shower Your Grace.' Swami just turned and looked once, and believe me, from that day, my son has not had another instance of fits! Now, he is. I can go on and on. His Blessings are innumerable. In 1991, when Swami granted another interview to me, I prayed that this son who was at that time holding a top position in United India Insurance, in the state of Maharashtra, be

transferred to Hyderabad. Again, incredibly, the seemingly impossible happened. He was moved in a few days; this had never happened in the history of that organisation.

Shivam: Hyderabad's very own Prashanthi Nilayam

"Truly, in Shivam, I see Sai, I feel Sai. I experience the same feeling of visiting Prashanthi Nilayam; in fact, to tell you the truth, the feeling is much stronger for me in Shivam! Before undertaking any task, I first prostrate in Shivam; so much so that even when I plan a trip to Prashanthi Nilayam, I first bow down at His Feet in Shivam. That is why my every endeavour is a success. No task has ever become a casualty when I had started with offering myself at the Shivam shrine. For me, Shivam is synonymous with Sai, success, and His Grace."

What is it that makes Shivam so special? What is the 'Shivam secret'? Why is it that anybody who steps inside Shivam feels serene within and without?

The Secret behind Shivam's Success

The answer lies in every particle of its sand and brick, wall and pillar, step and stone. It lies in its name and its form. The secret is that it is the epitome of unsullied auspiciousness that it embodies in its every element. Simply put, Shivam is not a human creation; the Divine willed it and built it. From the very conception of the structure, the selection of the site, laying of the foundation stone, supervising the construction, to the inauguration of this architectural marvel – all aspects were directly ordained, orchestrated and executed by Sai in person. There were, of course, many who were chosen and chiseled by Him to be instruments in this Divine mission.

EARLY DIVINE VISITS TO HYDERABAD

Creating Shivam Consciousness before It was born – Divine Visits to Hyderabad

Though Sai breathed life into Shivam on April 4, 1973, the inauguration day, He was working splendidly and silently for decades awakening the minds and energizing the souls of many in Hyderabad. He was preparing a critical group of inspired individuals who would embody the spirit of Shivam and ensure that this marvel of a Temple in the heart of Hyderabad becomes the epicenter of auspiciousness and peace for thousands.

Swami's first visit to Hyderabad dates back to as early as 1958. It was August 26, 1958 to be precise, when Swami blessed the house warming ceremony at Kausalya Bhavan, a devotee's home, and also delivered a discourse at the same venue. This was followed by numerous Divine visits in the sixties. In 1964, Swami chose Hyderabad to host the conference of Prashanthi Vidwan Mahasabha – an organization that Bhagavan had founded in 1962, not only to revive the ancient scriptures of the sacred land of India, but also to restore the respect due to scholars of these sublime texts in the eyes of the modern man.

Speaking on the first day of this conference on December 7, 1964, which was attended by the Governor of Andhra Pradesh among other distinguished officials, Bhagavan said:

“The body is the tabernacle of God, the chariot in which He is seated in all majesty. Do not identify yourself with it and its modifications and transformations. You are the *Atma*, and so, you are above these affections of the body. Cleanse your mind of the temptations and tenets of ignorance; make it free from dust, so that God may be reflected therein. God cares more for the motive behind the deed, the ideal that prompts the effort – the *bhaava* (depth of feeling), not the *baahya* (outer pomp). The goldsmith who is purchasing the golden idol offers equal sums for every gram of gold, whether the gold is the crown, the foot or the head of the idol. God too says, ‘I care for the depth of your thirst for Me. I do not care what Form you select for your adoration.’ This Prashanthi Vidwan Mahasabha has been formed to teach men this path and this endeavour, and revive this pilgrimage which is fast being overwhelmed by the pressure of paltry journeys into the wasteland....God and the constant remembrance of His Grace will remove all anxiety. There is no other support in times of dire need than God. To know Him, cling to Him, and merge in His immeasurable splendour – that is the highest goal of man.”

On the second day of this conference, Swami stressed on the process of purifying one’s mind and blessed everyone with the words:

“Let your thoughts be concentrated on God, His Name and His Form; you will then find that you are always with the Pure and the Permanent; you will then derive perennial joy. That is the reason why I attach so much importance to *naamasmarana*, the chanting of His Name, as a *Sadhana* (spiritual practice).”

DRAWING PEOPLE FOR THE SHIVAM MISSION

Personal Crisis Draws His Instrument to Him

The year 1964, was also the time Swami had decided in His Master Plan to bring to His fold a pious and precious devotee of the Lord, who in the years to come, would contribute to this *namasmarana* movement in the Sai Mission like few have done. Mr. Rama Brahma Sastry was as deeply spiritually inclined as he was religious, and at the same time gifted with great literary talent. In the fifties, he heard a discourse of Swami where He said, “To whichever God you may worship, all prayers reach Me.” “This cannot be true!” he said to himself. Being a devotee of Lord Krishna since his childhood, any other concept of God was difficult for him to digest. But destiny has its own ways, and in 1964, his job shifted him to Hyderabad. It was also the time when he was struck with a tragedy – his third son, Krishna Mohan, became a victim of polio. He lost his ability to walk completely; Rama Brahma Sastry’s family was devastated. For three months, treatment went on in Gandhi Hospital, but with little hope. It was at this time that a well-wisher alerted him, “It seems Swami would soon be coming to Hyderabad, why don’t you take your son to Him? With His Blessings, He will become fine.”

Rama Brahma Sastry also learnt that Swami would be staying in the house of Mr. Burugula Ramakrishna Rao, the first elected Chief Minister of the erstwhile Hyderabad State. He said to himself, "These Swamis bless only those who can fly them in planes and house them in palatial homes. Why would He bother about me?" Nevertheless, hoping for the best, he went for *darshan* to the house of Mr. Ramakrishna Rao and sat in the crowd carrying his son along with him. He saw Swami coming from the interview room, and he was reminded of a verse from Bhagavad Gita which described God. He thought to himself: "If Swami is really God, He should bless the common people in the same way He blesses the rich. For, God knows no difference between the two."

Gratitude Translates into Devotion and Service

Swami had by now passed by him, but then, He suddenly stopped, retraced His steps, looked into his eyes, glanced at his son on his lap, waved His Hand and materialized *Vibhuti*, the sacred ash. Next, He lovingly poured it into the mouth of the toddler. Now, He again looked at Rama Brahma Sastry, proffered a mischievous smile and moved on. From that day, Krishna Mohan's health began to improve and in a few days he started walking again! Today, 44 years later, he is a Branch Manager at the State Bank of India, Hyderabad.

Rama Brahma Sastry's faith received a boost and in the days to come, though He would test the Lord more than once, finally he would be lost in his love for Him, writing many beautiful *shlokas* while his wife and son composed *bhajans* to be sung in Shivam. Some of these like *Parthieswara Sathya Sai Saieswara*, *Sri Ram Jaya Rama Jaya Jaya Rama*, *Sai Ram Bolo* and so on are sung in the Prasanthi Mandir even today. From their initial days, his family has been instrumental in not only enriching *bhajans* in Shivam, but also in a variety of activities concerning the spiritual wing of the Sai Organisation.

If that was the fascinating story of a man whose son, Mr. Ravi Teja, even today, plays the flute during every single *bhajan* session in Prasanthi Mandir, the tale of how Swami drew to His Feet another diadem of a devotee who would contribute immensely to the service movement in the soon-to-be Shivam, is even more incredible.

The Transforming Touch

"It was during the 50s. I was ten years old then," recalls Mr. S. V. L. N. Narasimha Rao gladly. "Swami used to often visit Rajahmundry those days and during one such visit, our neighbour, an 85 year old lady, Mrs. Lakshmi Kanthamma, asked us to accompany her to have Baba's *darshan*. When Swami came near us, this octogenarian woman bowed down and touched the Feet of Baba who was only 25! This baffled me and I immediately expressed my reservations to my mother who was with me. Nevertheless, she took my head and gently shoved it onto His Feet as He stood in front of us. The moment I touched Him, I felt so tranquil and at peace. It made me motionless.

I was fixed staring at Him even though He had moved away. I could not take my eyes off of Him.”

Revealing the Ears Behind His Hair

Well, this was only the beginning; in the subsequent years, Mr. Narasimha Rao was a witness to many amazing acts of the Divine. On another occasion in Rajahmundry, while addressing a gathering of about 600 people, Swami suddenly stopped and sent word for two youngsters sitting in an obscure corner of the crowd, giving complete details of their names, village, etc. When the two were discovered, they refused to come to the dais. “Why should He call us? We do not know Him...” they went on. Finally, with a lot of persuasion when they were brought to Swami’s Presence, Bhagavan lovingly asked them, “How are you?” and then gently ran His fingers through His hair pushing it behind His face, and said, “See, there is nothing wrong with My ears. They are where they are supposed to be.” Next, Swami looked at the devotees and revealed, “Since My hair falls on My Shoulders, these two had decided that I do not have ears, and that I am using My hair to conceal this fact.” The teenagers were too shocked to react; they fell at His Feet seeking pardon.

Divine Control Over the Elements

Similarly, during one summer season, Swami had come to Rajahmundry to perform a *yagnam*. As the ritual reached its conclusion, on the request of the priests, Swami materialized *navadanyas* and *navaratnas* (nine types of grains and nine gems) and cast them into the ceremonial fire-pit. Next, Swami sprinkled sacred water on all present. After this, the priests prayed to Swami saying “A slight shower of rain would bring joy to all.” Swami then enquired if there was a temple nearby, and He was informed that a Krishna Temple stood a few meters away. Swami then said, “In ten minutes, it is going to rain. You can all disperse.” People from far off places stayed in the Temple and in the houses nearby. “I could see no cloud in the vicinity,” narrates Mr. Narasimha Rao. “Eight minutes had passed and nothing happened. Suddenly in the next two minutes, dark clouds enveloped the sky and it did begin to rain! It poured from 12.30 to 3.30 pm; I was soaked in the downpour. But by 4.30 it was sunny again, and there was nothing to hint that it had rained just a few minutes ago.”

It is such supernormal feats that placed the faith of Mr. Narasimha Rao on a firm foundation. He, later, dedicated himself completely serving for His Mission in Shivam. In the years prior to Shivam’s existence, Swami used to often stay in the houses of devotees. If it was the mansion of Chincholi Rani Saheb during one visit, at another time, it was the house of Dr. Boorgula Ramakrishna Rao or Raja Umapathi Rao or Mr. V. D. Prasada Rao. The latter’s son, Dr. V. V. S. Sharma, who used to drive Swami around in Hyderabad, has many interesting anecdotes of His visits. “Once when we were on our way to a place located at a distance of 40 kilometres, half way into our journey, our car suddenly stopped; we had run out of petrol. There were only three of us inside the vehicle – Swami, my father and I. Just then a villager appeared on a bicycle carrying country liquor in a pot. Swami asked

me to fill the petrol tank with that liquid and the car started running! Swami used to visit our house frequently till 1969, and in those days we never realized what a great opportunity it was!”

Power-Packed Speeches of the 1960s

While such fascinating instances of His Power were commonplace in the sixties and seventies, equally prevalent were His powerful discourses. The Prasanthi Vidwan Mahasabha continued to be held in Hyderabad for many years, and speaking in one such assembly in March 5, 1968, Swami said,

“The seeker elevates the stone image into a replica of God, he/she does not reduce God into a stone. The idol is just a container, prompter, a base, a reminder, a residence which God is invited to occupy. The Supreme is not squeezed into the small; the small is recognised as symbolic of the Supreme. Through the seen to the unseen, from the drop to the sea, from the patent to the latent – that is how idol-worship helps the aspirant. In fact, no one can conceive of the Almighty without picturing it as Power, Light, Mercy, Wisdom, Energy, Intelligence, Purity....

“The goal is to enlarge your vision, your sympathy, your love to the extent that God has spread His Love, His Compassion and His Grace. So, be ever watchful to see that you strive to take in more and more of God into you. Blood has to circulate from head to foot; Love has to circulate from high to low, only then can health and happiness be ensured, for the individual and the community. This is God's World; all beings are His. He loves them all, as the Moon sheds coolness on all. Do not get attached to worldly objects and pursuits. Be in the world but, do not let the world be in you. Work disinterestedly, content to do your duty as best as you can. Have no desires to place before God, for, whatever He does with you, however He treats you, is the gift He likes best to give you!”

March 1968 - the Army of Virtuous Volunteers is Born

Thus exhorted Sai to the hundreds gathered in Hyderabad. It was an emphatic call to the devotees to expand their love from narrow boundaries of their own families and friends to the community and the needy. This was for a very definite reason in the Divine Master Plan. It was in this year, 1968, that Swami unfolded the single most crucial facet of the Sai Organisation which has today made the worldwide Sai Movement vibrant and absolutely unique, and that is - the Sri Sathya Sai Sevadals or volunteers who epitomize selfless service.

THE BIRTH OF SRI SATHYA SAI SEVADALS

One prophetic evening in Hyderabad, in March 1968, Swami had it announced that soon the ‘Sathya Sai Sevalal’ would be formed and interested participants could fill in the application forms. The next day, from all the forms submitted, Swami Himself selected the first batch of candidates.

That was how the first group of Sai sevadal volunteers came into being on March 17, 1968. Swami personally coached this chosen group in the principles and practices of rendering selfless service, and even posed with them later for a group photograph, with Him sitting at the centre. Since then, His attention on this group was continuous and copious. Swami called upon this group whenever there was a crucial need in His Mission.

Avatar's Messengers Swing into Spiritual Activism

It was this group that swung into action during the foundation stone laying ceremony of the Sri Sathya Sai College for Women in Anantapur, in June 1968. Out of the 50 who had traveled for this service, Swami selected 20 after the conclusion of the function there, and asked them to proceed to Puttaparthi. They were assigned various duties in the devotees' canteen personally by Him.

Similarly, during the construction of the college in Bangalore in 1969, Swami again called for this batch of fortunate sevadal volunteers. The group started at 5 pm from Hyderabad one evening, and after traveling a small distance, their journey came to a sad halt as the bus broke down. For five hours they were stuck, while the driver commuted to the nearby town to fetch spare parts. Finally, at 10 pm their journey resumed. In those days, the Telangana Movement (demand for a separate state within Andhra Pradesh) was fierce and there were riots at many places. When the bus passed through the town, Jagithyala, the sevadals noticed destroyed shops and raging bonfires on the road. Fortunately, no untoward incident happened with them, and they reached Brindavan the next morning without any further delay. That day, during *darshan*, Swami came to them and asked, "How is it that none of you are wearing any bandages on your heads and hands?" Everybody looked confused. Swami, then, revealed, "There were riots in Jagithyala last evening. Had I not delayed your journey in the form of that bus repair, you would all have been hurt."

Service to Fellow Beings - Passport to Divine Grace

Selfless service is closest to Swami's heart and the Lord will go to any extent to rescue those who dedicate their time and energy for others. Like the eyelid takes care of the eye, Sai cares not only for the seva dals, but their entire families.

Once when Mr. B. V. Sathyamurthy, a member of the Hyderabad Sevadal group, had been to Puttaparthi, Swami asked him, "Didn't your brother come?" To this, he replied, "Swami, a new director has been appointed in his office, which has made it difficult for him to get frequent leaves." Swami immediately said, "Tell him, within a week, Raghavendra will come." When Sathyamurthy delivered this message to his brother, he was confused as he knew nobody by that name. But as the week ended, it became clear. A gentleman by name Mr. Raghavendra took over as the new director of the company. And the best part was that he was a Sai devotee.

On another occasion, Mr. Sathyamurthy was again in Puttaparthi in the early 1970s. This time he was accompanied by his brother, Mr. B. V. Chandrashekhar, who had come to inform Swami and take His Blessings before resigning from his current job and accepting a new offer. He waited and tried for three days, but with no success. On the third day, dejected, he walked towards the bus station to return to Hyderabad. Exactly the same time, Swami was returning to Mandir after inspecting the Canteen. He immediately called for Sathyamurthy and said, "Your brother is loading his luggage onto the bus, go and call him!" When he arrived, without hearing anything, Swami said, "Do not quit the current job. Soon there will be hike in your pay; it is going to be good for you. Go back and continue working there till I tell you." At the same time, Swami looked at Sathyamurthy, who was anxious about his pregnant wife's health, and said, "I know, you are concerned about your wife. Have no worries; she will be fine. I am giving you a boy, give this Vibhuti to her, and bring the child to Puttaparthi."

Shaping Instruments of Change with Precision

This is how the Lord took charge of the life of every seva dal who had willingly offered himself to His Work. Still, there were a few who harboured doubts about His Divinity. Mr. S. V. L. N. Narasimha Rao of Rajahmundry was one of them. Though Swami had blessed him with an ethereal experience when he touched His Feet in Rajahmundry, doubts still remained. In 1970, Narasimha Rao made his first visit to Puttaparthi and now wanted to test if Swami was truly God. Recalling that trip wherein he had an exhilarating experience, He says, "I had read in the scriptures that when God walks on Earth, owing to His Power, the Earth's level goes down by 6 inches, and His Feet never really touches the ground. For fifteen days, I observed the sand on which Swami walked during *darshans*. Anything that falls on sand creates an impression. But when Swami walked on those sands nearly ten times a day, I found impressions of not His Feet but only of His Robe! After a fortnight had passed, Swami came and stood in front of me, looked into my eyes, smiled, and then pressed the sand before me with His Right Foot. An impression was formed on the sand of His right foot, but again, there was no mark of His left foot there! I was stupefied, and convinced. I realized Swami, in fact, moves above the earth, not on earth! He is none other than God!"

THE GENESIS OF SRI SATHYA SAI SEVA SAMITHIS

The Divine Announces His Lieutenants of Love

It is these Divine manifestations of Love that pulled more and more into the Sai fold, and soon there were two seva dal groups, one in Hyderabad and the other in its twin city, Secunderabad. In January 27, 1971, Swami clubbed these two into one body – the Sri Sathya Sai Seva Samithi, and appointed Justice V. K. Parthsarathy as the Chairperson, and Mr. V. D. Prasad Rao as the Secretary.

In the next few years, Mr. Prasad Rao, a construction engineer, had a very significant role to play in the making of Shivam, and therefore, the story of his coming into the Sai ambit is a tale which cannot be missed.

Recalling their family's story, Dr. V. V. S. Sharma, the first son of Mr. Prasad Rao, says, "We migrated to Hyderabad from Vijaywada in 1960. My mother suffered from a serious cardiac ailment and my father, in those days, visited every hospital and holy man in search for a cure. In 1966, we heard about Baba, and soon, my father arrived in Puttaparthi along with the then Collector of Anantapur District, Mr. Narayana Rao, and two others. There was no accommodation available in the ashram then. Therefore, the four of them parked their luggage in the police station, and went for *darshan*. Swami came out at four that evening, but did not look at them. Next day, at 7 in the morning, Swami sent word for my father. He was absolutely puzzled, as he had not sent any information to Swami, and nobody in Puttaparthi knew him either. Nevertheless, he went to His Presence, and as soon as Swami saw him, He said, "I will soon be going to Hyderabad. I will stay in Mr. Bhoorgula Ramakrishna Rao's house or in Mr. Umapati Rao's house. You come there. I will see your wife too there." Then Swami allowed him to have lunch with Him and blessed him profusely. The same night, my father returned to Hyderabad.

Paying Off the Karmic Debt

"In a few months, Swami came to Hyderabad as promised, and within a day or two of His arrival, He made a surprise visit to our house. He saw my mother, created medicine and gave it to her. And then, He said, 'One cannot avoid *karmic* results. If you want, I can remove your ailment in a second, but you would have to suffer in the next birth. In this life, you are lucky to be born into a nice family. Therefore, it is better you go through it in this birth itself.' My mother agreed to His advice. Then Swami added, 'I will see to it that your pain and suffering is minimal.' This happened in March 1967. Swami also promised in that visit that He would stay in our house next time He came to Hyderabad. What actually happened was that He visited/stayed in our house not only the next time, but nearly 20 times after that! I had the privilege of driving Swami around in Hyderabad and in each trip, He went to 20 to 30 devotees' homes."

THE SAGA OF THE CONCRETE SHIVAM STARTS....

That is how much Swami had endeared Himself to Mr. Prasad Rao and his family. Quite unknown to them, they were handpicked instruments in His Divine Mission. In 1971, Mr. Prasad Rao had a dream in which Swami appeared to him inside a lingam. He liked the image in the dream very much. Moreover, during Shivarathri that year, the seva dals from Mumbai had worn a badge which had an enamel showing Swami within a lingam, which devotees from Hyderabad found very appealing. So, Mr. Prasad Rao expressed his dream to Swami, and sought His permission to build a structure in the shape of a lingam in Hyderabad. Swami listened to his prayer and said, "Good, develop a model". Soon, a prototype was ready, and Mr. Prasad Rao, along with a few other architects, showed it to Swami for His approval. Swami made many corrections, and finally gave the 'go ahead' to the plan.

Divine Planner Swings into Action

The next important activity was the selection of a suitable site. Swami, along with a few devotees, drove around Hyderabad looking for an appropriate site in a Hillman car and finally, selected the site in Baghamberpet in Vidyanagar. Apparently, Swami had Himself purchased this area a few years ago. It was adjacent to the house of an ardent devotee, Mr. E. J. Sathyamurthy.

Shivam Site is Uniquely Consecrated

Once the site selection was done, Swami had another significant event in His Divine agenda. There were three devotees in Hyderabad whom Swami had specially blessed by giving them for worship the *lingams* that He had manifested from within His Body during *lingodbhavam* on the occasions of Maha Shivarathri in Puttaparthi. Swami directed the three of them – Mr. V. S. Desikichari, Mr. B. V. Ramana Rao and Mr. V. D. Prasad Rao – to bring those *lingams* to the site and perform *Thrilingabhishekam*. All the three Divine manifestations were worshipped elaborately with piety and grandeur, thus suffusing that area with sacred vibrations.

THE FOUNDATION STONE CEREMONY OF SHIVAM

The Epicentre of Truth, Beauty, Goodness

Next, was the grand ceremony of *sankhusthapana* – the foundation stone laying ceremony. Swami Himself supervised every section of this function. The day was most appropriate – it was a Monday, in the month of *Karthika* – the same day and month in which Swami was born! The date according to the English calendar was October 25, 1971. The most sublime aspect of this ceremony was that Lord Sai Shiva in His own Hands laid the first stone for this enigmatic edifice, and then with a wave of His Hand materialized a *yantra* (mystical plate) and placed it at the site. Later in the day, Swami gave a profound discourse in which He said:

“The construction of this Mandir named Shivam is a special *sadhana* for the residents of Bhaagyanagara (Hyderabad). Its appearance is unique, for it is to be built in the shape of a *Linga*, the form most approximate to the conception of the formless, attributeless Absolute. The *Linga* is the form of God, emerging from the *Niraakara* (formless) to the *Saakara* (one with form). Other *Aakaaras* (Forms) are all subsumed in the *Linga* Form. *Prakrithi*, the objective world, is the base; it signifies that the Lord is established in that manifestation of His, which is the concrete presentation of His Play, His Potentiality and His Power. That is why the Lord is described as *Shiva Shakthi Aathmaka Swaruupam* – ‘the Supreme One which became the Shiva and the Shakthi,’ meaning, ‘that which is the latent and the patent.’

“You will notice that the base has a horizontal superstructure, over which the cylindrical *Linga* is placed. The base is *Sathyam* (truth), the structure over it is *Shivam* (Goodness) and the *Linga* is Sundaram (beauty). One is the flower,

the second is the perfume and the third is the wind, the Formless that wafts the fragrance, which is the symbol of *mangalam* (auspiciousness) that is Shivam. Truth is the base on which the Universe and all that it implies rest.

“The message this building will convey is that man is the embodiment of *Sathyam*, *Shivam* and *Sundaram*, and it will call on all to live up to that glory. One has to realise the Truth and demonstrate in thought, word and deed that Truth is the very basis of their existence. Know the Truth, and the Truth shall make you strong and steady, kin with all, and free from the bonds of lust and hate. Man has to learn the lesson of Shivam: swallow the poison of anger and greed, and make it ineffective in its effort to harm the world. Spread consolation and comfort through speech and action.”

Avatar Descends and Lives for the Devotees

After this lofty spiritual objective, Swami also explained the down-the-earth reason for the creation of Shivam. He said: "Why this Temple? You may ask. Is it for My stay whenever I happen to visit Hyderabad? I do not need a huge building, nor the furniture and appliances you propose to collect here. This building will serve more the needs of those who have now to follow Me around from house to house. Since I have no fixed residence, they are hard put to it, women and children, the well and the ill, to know where I will be available. This building will give them a place where they can await Me. Also, it also gives Me another excuse to come to Hyderabad for, I am surely coming to 'open' this Shivam, when it is completed!"

THE STIRRING STORY OF SHIVAM'S CONSTRUCTION

Translating Love into Service

The crowd burst into a thunderous applause, and the enthusiasm among the Sai devotees was at its zenith. Hundreds eagerly joined hands in the construction of this sacred abode of the Lord. Mr. S. V. L. N. Narasimha Rao of Rajahmundry, whose journey to Swami we have described earlier, was one of the active volunteers who participated in the making of Shivam. Recalling those days, he says, "Once the construction started, we used to work from 9 in the morning till 6 in the evening every Sunday; on some days it would stretch till 10 in the night. We did all kinds of labour work - digging the ground and carrying bricks and cement, to cleaning and guarding the premises. Even though we worked, literally like labourers, putting in long hours and enduring physical strain, we never felt tired. The name of Swami was constantly on our lips. If a particular object was heavy to transport, we just uttered the sacred name 'Sai Ram' and the work went on smoothly.

“Even though 200-250 sevadals contributed their might on Sundays, on the weekdays too, many came after their office hours and worked late into the night. As I was staying very near, I used to come every evening. Even during the morning, I used to pass by Shivam and attend to anything that was needed urgently. In fact, once the flooring was done, even before the roof was laid, I started sleeping in Shivam during the nights. Nobody told me to do so,

but I did it because I felt Shivam is Swami's own abode, and this is the place meant for me to serve."

Lingam, a Potent Symbol of Infinity

The most critical part of the construction was getting the shape of *Lingam* right. Swami had, in fact, given detailed instructions to Mr. Prasad Rao on various precautions that have to be taken so that the structure is crack-free and crack-proof. "For giving shape to the *Lingam*, concrete was poured continuously for 4 days, day and night," recalls Mr. Narasimha Rao. "As it had to be completed in one stretch once it is started, we worked non-stop for four consecutive days. There were instances when seva dals worked five hours rigorously, without a break, covering the structure with concrete to arrive at the shape of the *Lingam*. We just chanted His Name and knew no pain."

Mr. K. V. L. N. Sharma, who too played an active role at the time of Shivam construction, recalling the most challenging part of the whole endeavour, says, "One night, at 11 pm, I received a call informing me that the centering work for Shivam's dome would start the next day, and the work for the concrete beam in the circular shape should be finished in 24 hours, so that the centering work could go on. Next day morning, when engineers and labourers came to the site, they were shocked to see the progress in work. They were amazed that such a difficult task could be done so quickly, and that too completely by seva dals."

Another dedicated sevadal for years, Mr. R. M. Krishna Rao, says, "Initially, the plan was to construct three rings for the dome of Shivam. But when Swami came to oversee the progress of work, He suggested that it should be increased to four. There were many modifications like this – major and minor, with respect to choice of colours, creation of rooms, to placement of bulbs – that Swami advised Mr. Prasad Rao whenever He came to the construction site."

When Swami was physically far, He made the devotees in Hyderabad know that He was constantly thinking about them. In fact, on the occasion of the First Anniversary of Sri Sathya Sai Seva Samithi that Swami had formed a year before, He wrote a beautiful letter addressed to all devotees of Hyderabad. It was dated January 21, 1972 and it read:

"Embodiments of the Divine! Accept My Blessings. I received your heartfelt invitation and bliss. Even though I am not present there physically, by residing in your hearts, I am receiving your *Ananda* (bliss). The body is a temple; Man is God. Give up the differences. Come out of ignorance and always be aware that 'You are that' – *Soham Asmi* – 'I am That'.

"The heart with compassion is a valuable treasure. One without compassion is a devil in human form. One with compassion alone is eligible to have Lord's *darshan*. Compassion is the gateway to the Lord. Love that is flowing is called compassion. Love that is restricted is *moham* (attachment). Flowing Love bestows bliss; *moham* leads to misery. One whose heart is filled with love and

compassion will always pray for the welfare of others. He never hates anything; he sees love in all....Sai Organisations have to see to it that this compassion flows in every heart. Compassion alone is the royal way to receive God's Love. Without any hatred, jealousy and pomp, develop compassion and serve the society. The essence of all *sadhana* is Love. Receive My Love and Blessings."

SAI ARRIVES TO INAUGURATE HIS SHIVAM

Divine Inspiration Delivers a Marvel in Record Time

Swami's continuous shower of Love and Benediction only enthused the devotees more, and in 18 months, the construction of Shivam was complete. Swami was in Mumbai then; therefore, five senior devotees went to Mumbai to pray to Him to visit Hyderabad, and inaugurate Shivam. In Mumbai, when Swami saw Mr. Prasad Rao, the main engineer behind the project, He said, "Prasad Rao, so you have finally completed it! Come, let us go!" Thus, Swami descended to Hyderabad from His trip to Mumbai and Goa.

On the auspicious Telugu New Year "Ugadi" day, Swami stepped into His Shivam. It became alive and charged! Swami materialized a *lingam* and installed it in the Shivam Hall so that devotees could worship it and derive benefits. In a beautiful discourse on that occasion, He said,

"May this New Year bring you all happiness. You can get true happiness only by serving the poor and the handicapped, and those working very hard to make their ends meet. I always give importance to service as *sadhana*. All of you take part in these seva activities. Sacrifice your ego. Achieve harmony in thought, word and deed. Offer pure actions, thoughts and words at the Divine Lotus Feet. That is true surrender. When God accepts that surrender, you will have His Grace flowing onto you. That will improve your relationship with God. Never run away as cowards at the time of difficulties.

"Will you be a burden to the One who rules this universe? Where can you go escaping from God? Whatever professions you maybe engaged in, whatever action you perform, offer everything to Him with gratitude. You will thus attain *ananda*, bliss. Disappointment and difficulties will go away. Have patience. Love God and experience His Love."

For the next ten days, till Rama Navami, Swami blessed all with *darshans*, morning and evening. Not only that, He gave a discourse every single day expounding on the significance of the Shiva principle, with examples from the Shiva Puranam. Responding to the negative feelings of agnostics and so called rationalists towards construction in Shivam, in one of His discourses, Swami emphatically answered their frivolous queries. In effect, He said, "Some question the money spent towards the construction of Shivam. They say it could have been utilized for feeding the poor and such other social work. These people do not realize the importance of Shivam. This place will confer mental peace on anyone who steps inside. This is something which cannot be acquired even if one had in possession lakhs of rupees."

For the entire span of Swami's stay, there were cultural programs organized by the Bal Vikas children, and one of them was a drama based on the life of Meera Bai. The girl who acted as the child Meera, was only four and a half years old. Swami blessed her specially and asked, "Are you Meera?" The girl did not respond. Then the Lord smiled and said, "She has come to Me!"

AMAZING MANIFESTATIONS OF HIS POWER AND PRESENCE IN SHIVAM

Shivam: Abode of Lord Sai Shiva

From April 1973, whenever Swami came to Hyderabad, Shivam was where He would reside. For the devotees, Shivam was no different from Kailasa; it was the Holy Home of their Sai Shiva. They felt the unique vibrations that the premises seemed to be subsumed with. In fact, it was here that they were a witness to any number of fantastic and revealing manifestations of His Divine Power, Grace and Omniscience.

Recalling one such experience, Mr. B. V. Ramana Rao, says, "Shivam used to be packed and overflowing whenever Swami came to Hyderabad; there would be people even on the parapet wall and the roads in the front. Once when Bhagavan was delivering a Discourse, suddenly from nowhere dark clouds covered the sky; a downpour looked imminent. Soon, a drizzle starting coming down even as His Discourse was on the course. There was an air of panic among the devotees. Swami then declared, "To quench the thirst of devotees who are tired of waiting for long, Lord Varuna (God of Rain) came down. There won't be any more interruption to this programme." Immediately, the drizzle halted, as if reacting to His Command, and the Lord continued with His Discourse. As the session neared completion, Swami directed all the devotees to return to their houses within an hour. Exactly after sixty minutes, it started pouring cats and dogs."

Beyond the Limitations of Time and Space

Shivam was His own Home and the setting for a few amusing Divine Dramas too. During one visit, Swami asked Sri Karunyananda, whom He had brought along, to stay in a room downstairs in Shivam. One day, early morning at 4, Swami came into that room, woke him up and said, "It is already 4 am, all devotees are awake and getting ready. You too wake up." After saying this, Swami gently asked, "Do you have an extra shaving blade which I can use?"

Karunyananda woke up with a start. He said, "Swami! How could You come in? I had bolted the door from inside. You did not even tap the door!" Nevertheless, he gave a shaving blade to Bhagavan, after which Swami opened the door that was bolted from inside and went out. Such was the *maya* of the Lord that an esteemed devotee like Karunyananda too was deluded.

The Divine Reaffirms a Loving Sacrifice

For Sai, Shivam was an extension of Him. In fact, on one occasion He said, "Shivam is My Heart." Therefore, no activity or incident inside that holy premises ever went unnoticed by Swami, whether He was physically present or not. Narrating a revealing instance, Mr. S. V. L. N. Narasimha Rao says, "During its construction, I used to sleep in Shivam, without any one asking me to do it. I knew the Lord was aware of my service because He used to send many items to Shivam with instructions that they had to be handed over to me. Even though I believed that Swami knew of my contribution, I was keen to get His recognition physically. So after the inauguration, I decided that I will not enter Shivam, until He calls me and takes me along with Him to the Mandir.

"During those ten days after Shivam's opening, I used to serve at the gate selling books and photographs. One day, at 1 pm when I was going for lunch, I saw Swami coming from the opposite direction. I moved to a corner expecting Swami to go in the direction of the interview room. But Swami stopped, and came towards me. He said, "Come, let's go into Shivam." As I was wearing the sevadal badge, I was bound by rule not to walk with Swami, therefore, I followed a few paces behind Him. But Swami stepped back and said, "Come with Me!" Still, I hesitated, and continued to walk behind Him. Again He asked me to walk beside Him. By now, we were at the entrance of the building, and suddenly, a lady with two children rushed to Swami to have His *Darshan*. Swami said, "The poor lady is hungry", and went inside immediately to return with a coconut. I offered to give the fruit to the lady, but He said, "No, you wait, we will go into Shivam" and asked another volunteer to do the job with instructions to tell the poor woman to eat the fruit, drink water and rest under the tree. We were still on the steps of Shivam. Next, He created two rupees and asked that too to be given to the lady. Again, I extended my hand to do the job, but His response was a firm 'no'. He said, "Not you, we will go into Shivam"; this was the fourth time. Like this, Swami practically led me from outside into the chambers of Shivam fulfilling my innermost desire. And I have experienced this Divine Omniscience of Swami any number of times.

The Palpable Presence

"One night, while I was asleep in Shivam, I was woken up by the loud prattle of verbal arguments. I saw a few people around quarrelling with each other. I said to them, "What are you doing? This is Shivam! How can you speak so loudly here where Swami is present?" And as soon as I said this, all the flowers from the garland which adorned Swami's photograph fell down in a second, all over that place! The people who saw this were shocked to their skin; they slept silently from then on. Sai's presence in Shivam is so obvious, if only we have the eyes to see and the heart to feel."

Divine Grace in Shivam flowed in a continuous stream right from the day of its existence. When Mr. B. V. Sathyamurthy was diagnosed with a brain tumour in early 1980s, the doctors advised an operation. Even after the surgery, the

malignant growth persisted and now the doctors were clueless; they didn't expect him to survive beyond a few days. Then, his brother, Mr. B. V. Ramana Rao, presented to Swami their problem, and Swami gracefully materialized Vibhuti, and said, "Give this to your brother, all will be fine." It happened just as He had said. The moment he started taking the Vibhuti, the tumour's growth stopped, and it cured itself completely. Later, when Sathyamurthy went to Puttaparthi, Swami identified him in the huge crowd and created a sugar candy for him saying that he should take that regularly. Similarly, Swami's Vibhuti cured the asthma of his wife and the terrible myopia of his daughter. When his daughter was a few years old, Swami even created a pair of diamond studded ear rings and pierced them into the baby's ears. The girl surprisingly did not even cry!

Choosing Between Gun and God

Instances of such Divine benedictions became common in Shivam. Mr. Rama Raju came to Shivam for the first time in 1975. Out of the blue, Swami created Vibhuti for him and eventually blessed him with an interview. Later, one day, Swami even went to his house. On that particular occasion, Mr. Rama Raju told Swami that although half of his problems were solved, another other half still remained. And then, taking out a gun from the cupboard and he showed it to Swami, and said, "Swami, if all my problems are not solved by the end of the month, then the only option left for me is this gun," (referring to suicide). Swami then laughed aloud and told his wife, "See, he believes more in a mere gun than in Swami!" and went away. But his problems did not abate for weeks. Suddenly, on the last day of the month, all his troubles vanished! Since then Rama Raju became an active participant in all Sai activities in Shivam.

SERVICE WING OF SHIVAM SOARS, THANKS TO HIS CLARION CALL

Ushering the New Year with Divinity

Therefore, as the years rolled on, through different 'calling cards' of Swami, the number of devotees swelled in Shivam. And Swami too made regular visits to Hyderabad between 1973 and 1979. To the delight of the people of Andhra Pradesh, Swami was in Shivam on Ugadi, the Telugu New Year Day, during all these years, as it fell very close or coincided with Shivam Anniversary every year. His constant Message during all these years was always one – Service. On March 21, 1976, He said:

"Members of this Organisation must be examples of the joy that can be derived from 'giving up' rather than from 'accumulating.'....In a world torn by factions based on the flimsy grounds of caste, creed and colour, you have to prove that it is possible to have faith in Sai being the motivator for every living being, and get inspiration for genuine service from that faith. Service to the Sai in the other person must be your daily act of worship. Of all spiritual practices, this is most effective. Seek out the slum dwellers, the poor and the neglected ones in hamlets, and take love and light to them in plenty. Be grateful to them when they welcome you and provide you chances to serve

them. Your happiness depends on their happiness; your health depends on their health....the same Sai resides in them too. The Organisation must promote this high sense of unity and responsibility. It must constantly enthuse and educate members to engage themselves in the *sadhana* of service.”

On the same day, three years later, in 1979, He said:

“Children and students must be trained to serve in rural areas. There are 2,55,00,000 children in our country today. Forty percent among them go about begging. It is not good to keep quiet when there is such hardship in the society around. We should give up meditation and other such spiritual practices, and uplift these people through service and sacrifice....All of you should take the pledge on this New Year Day that you will serve the rural people to the best of your ability.”

Serving the Needy to Please God

Such repeated and powerful exhortations of the Lord spurred the seva dals in Shivam to undertake a host of service projects. The very first initiative was Narayana seva, feeding the poor, every Sunday. Recalling those early days of service, Mr. S. V. L. N. Narasimha Rao Says, “We used to congregate in Shivam by 9 pm on Saturday night and sleep there till mid-night. At 12 am, when Sunday had dawned, we would wake up, shower, wear fresh clothes and begin our work in the kitchen. Making *Pulihora* (a South Indian dish made by mixing rice with turmeric and tamarind) with 100 kgs of rice was our chief chore then. The cooking would be over by 5 am, after which we would clean all the vessels. This would be followed by *Omkaram*, *Suprabhatham* and *Nagara Sankeerthan*. We would then offer the prepared food as *Naivedyam* to Swami, pack it and return to our homes. Again, at 11 am, we would meet at Shivam, load the packets in vehicles, and distribute them personally in certified schools, jails, homes for the aged, houses for the disabled, leprosy colonies and so on.

“After this, we would do ‘Hospital duty’ wherein we would serve the patients – clean their beds and surroundings, talk to them lovingly and cater to their needs – at Osmania Hospital and Gandhi Hospital. In the evening, we would be there for the *bhajans* in Shivam. Our Sundays were spent completely in Shivam and service.

Sai Seeks Simplicity and Sincerity

“I must narrate here an incident which showed how much Swami valued our work. One night, because of work pressure in the office, I reached Shivam only at 10.30 pm. When I stepped inside, I found an elderly man, Mr. Parthasarathy, waiting for me. He said, ‘I have been asked to inform you that you are not permitted to sleep in Shivam from now on.’ Hearing that, I went in, picked up my bedding and before leaving said, ‘I used to sleep here voluntarily, as part of my service to Swami. Since I am not allowed to do this anymore, I will go home. In any case, my mother is alone at home.’

"A few weeks later, there was news of Swami coming to Shivam. Tents were put up and other arrangements made. But Swami did not come! In those days, Sri V. D. Prasada Rao used to accompany Swami wherever He went. So, he asked Him, 'Swami! We arranged everything for You in Shivam, why didn't You come?'

"Swami replied, 'For whom should I come to Hyderabad? Do you know why I come to Shivam? I come there for the sake of sevadals, but they are asked to stop their seva. How can I come then?'"

Loving Service Becomes a Way of Life

That is how much the Lord's Heart went out for the sincere Sai workers. And it is this Love that was the sole inspiration and motivation for the sevadals. The Narayana Seva over the years has grown in magnitude and variety. Now, there are at least 500-600 people fed, not with a single item of *pulihora*, but an elaborate menu of rice, curry, *sambar*, *chutney*, curds, banana or sweet. The unique aspect of this activity is that no person has ever being turned away for shortage of food, and since its inception, it has been carried out without a break, be it summer or winter, rain or sun.

Marrying a Sai Devotee

One of the active sevadals who is responsible for the effective continuance of this service is another person by the same name but different initials, Mr. K. Narasimha Rao. The story of this Sai worker's journey to Sai is interesting. "In 1979, while employed in a private firm, I was approached by a family for a marriage proposal," he says going down memory lane. "When I, along with my elder brother, went to the girl's house, we were taken aback by the number of Sai photos that filled its every wall and corner. We learnt that, by then, that family had been devoted to Baba for nearly 30 years. Watching all this, my brother advised, 'If you marry her, you are sure to become a recluse soon. Do not get into this family.' So I forgot about it. But a year later, somehow my brother changed his mind and said, 'If you are happy with it, you can go ahead and marry that girl'. Then, my would-be father-in-law went to Swami and showed Him my photo. Swami gave him to go ahead with the marriage, and in December 1980, I became a part of this Sai family. Within 6 months, I got a better job in the Government, and nectar, vermillion, etc. used to ooze out of photos in my in-law's house. Still, my faith in Swami was very feeble.

Robber Scared off by Sai's Presence

"One day, around this time, while my in-laws were away at Puttaparthi, a thief broke into their house and ransacked the place. They came to know of this through a telegram sent by a relative, asking them to return as early as possible. The next day, my father-in-law sat for *darshan*, with the telegram in his hand, to seek His permission to return home quickly. When Swami came near him, before he could even open his mouth, Swami said, 'Was there a robbery at home? Do not worry; nothing has been taken away. You do not have to go immediately.' So, the family returned after a few days, and

eventually the thief was caught. When questioned why he did not steal anything, the gangster replied, 'For many days, this house was locked, so I thought it was an easy target. But when I broke in and was searching for valuables, I saw there a "ghost" in orange dress and thick black hair. I was scared, I left without taking anything'.

Outsourcing Parenting to the Divine Mother

"This incident had amazing effect on me; I started believing Him. And so, I joined the Sai Organization with the logic that, 'I lose nothing joining this Organisation, because even if He is not God, this group, in any case, is always engaged in sacred activities. But suppose He is God, and I am not part of it, then I would have missed the opportunity of a lifetime.' Later, I was blessed with a son and Swami lovingly named him "Gunaranjan" saying he would have all *sadgunas* (good qualities). In 1989, when my son joined Swami's school, a devotee came up to me and said, 'Suppose your son was with you, how much time would you be spending for him during the day?' 'Maybe, around 2 hours to teach him and be with him,' I said. 'Then, since Swami is taking care of your child now, from today, spend those two hours serving God by engaging in service activities.' This advice really made me think, and spurred me on to become an active seva dal in His Organization. From then on, I gave all my energy and time to His work, and He, in turn, took care of my family, job, promotions, pay rise - everything.

Commendable Service During Communal Riots

"We jumped at every opportunity to be of help to society. When communal riots erupted in Hyderabad on December 10, 1990, we worked with Osmania Hospital in trying to save lives. We picked up casualties from the road, put them on a stretcher, and within seconds wheeled them into the operation theatre. We were with the patients till they recovered - doing all the tests, taking care of their papers and ensuring their return to their homes. We worked 17 to 18 hours a day, continuously, for 10 days. I can never forget those moments – we forgot our homes, office, everything, immersed completely in trying to save the poor victims. Suddenly we would hear a blast of firing and pathetic cries outside the hospital compound, and the next minute, a batch of bodies would arrive. We tried to do everything we could to keep their hearts beating. This was not easy, and at the same time we had to deal with other challenges too. When we went out, many protestors obstructed us in our work, suspecting us to be part of a particular group, even though we had our seva dal scarfs on. But seeing us rushing to help everybody, irrespective of religion or community, most of them allowed us to do our work. Our only aim was to save as many lives as possible. We did not do it for name or fame. We did it for our Sai. Our clothes used to be soaked with the blood of the victims. We had no time to bother about ourselves."

MEDICAL SERVICE GATHERS MOMENTUM

Medical Relief as Part of Regular Community Outreach

Like this, fired by their love for Sai, the sevadals plunged into several service activities – some sporadic and many ongoing. One of these was Medical Camps for the poor. When Mr. B. V. Ramana Rao sought to get Bhagavan's Blessings and Guidance before embarking on this venture, Swami said, ***“Go to the patients and enquire about their wellbeing. Place your hand on their hearts and pray ardently to the Lord. Divine Energy will flow through your hands.”*** This is the Divine Assurance which propelled the start of “Sri Sathya Sai Free Clinic” in the Shivam annex building more than 25 years ago. Just like the Narayana Seva, it continues till date, without a break, but now on a larger scale and with much sophistication.

A Gentle Touch Expands the Heart

Dr. Raghavachari, who has been part of this endeavour right from its inception, says, “It was 1978, when I had my first *darshan* of Swami in Shivam. He did not call me or speak to me, just looked at me, and later, as He was speaking to other doctors, gently patted my head. That was it! I do not know what happened in the next moment. From that day onwards, I decided to be part of the Sai Organization which has continued till date.”

Motivating Medical Outreach as Spirituality

“It was a similar case with me too,” says Dr. Phani Mohankrishna, who also has been associated with these medical camps from its early years. “My house was 200 yards from Shivam, but I never went inside after its construction for four long years, busy having fun with my friends in my spare time, while I pursued becoming a doctor. In 1978, when Swami had come to Shivam, out of curiosity, I peeped in through the fencing, and said to myself, ‘He looks to be a great man, a good man.’ Later, I heard Him speak and was greatly impressed with the profundity of the Message and the simplicity of His language. Still, I never involved myself with any Sai activities. During this time, one day the relative of one of the seva dals whom I had treated in my clinic, took me to the free clinic in Shivam. He held my hand and introduced me to all the doctors there. I was impressed with their work. I always had a secret love for rural medical camps, and had, in fact, conducted a few during my housemanship in Kurnool. Therefore, like fish to water, I took to this service.”

“Those days we used to see maybe 50-60 people every Sunday, and the regular doctors totaled 5 or 6,” continues Dr. Raghavachari. “It was a small room, hardly 5ft by 6ft, and we somehow managed to do everything needed in that tiny area. The medicines came from the samples we could gather. With Swami's grace, it was sufficient for that period. But soon, the number of patients grew, and we needed a bigger space. At this time, Dr. Kakade donated about Rs. 2-3 lakhs to facilitate a bigger area for the work. In fact, during this interim period of construction, we carried all the medicines in boxes and continued the camp under the trees. Not only that, each one of us

participated in the making of this new structure too; we carried bricks and worked literally like labourers.”

Exemplars of Humility Inspire the Team

As doctors, did it not bother them to do such menial manual work? “Well, actually the example of doctors with far superior credentials changed us,” says Dr. Raghavachari. “Apart from Dr. Kakade, who was well known, there was Dr. Tilak, a reputed ENT specialist; Dr. J Subbarao, who was a Professor at Gandhi Hospital; and such other eminent physicians, who worked like an ordinary daily wage earner. In fact, Dr. Subbarao used to double up as a security guard in the night. We were bowled over with their dedication and humility, and just followed in their footsteps.”

Initial Suspicion Transforms into Sai Samithis

With the new block added, the activities of the camp too increased. More doctors joined and their number now was about a dozen. They not only brought samples from their own clinics, but also persuaded many drug companies to donate towards this service. For these doctors, every Sunday did not mean relaxing with friends or family, but more work; and they enjoyed it. In fact, their workload increased with Sai Samithis deciding to do medical camps outside the city in adopted villages. “I and Dr. Raghavachari went every Sunday to a village named Nanakaramguda,” recalls Dr. Phani Mohankrishna. “At that time, it was a very poor village; the rural folk did not have anything. We used to serve from 8 to 12 am every Sunday, dispensing medicines and educating them about good health. Slowly, another village called Gowladodi got added to our list. Similarly, our colleagues were going to many other adopted areas. But serving in these villages was not easy to begin with. The villagers were reluctant and uncooperative; they thought we were canvassing for a political party. For 3-4 months we just did menial jobs, like sweeping their roads, cleaning their drains, etc. to win their confidence. Seeing our persistent efforts to help them, with no ulterior motives, they finally accepted us; in fact, with time, they became a part of us. Now, in all these villages you find full fledged Sai Samithis doing such good work for themselves and others too.”

While this outreach medical service acquired momentum, simultaneously, the numbers in Shivam Clinic too grew exponentially. Now, the need for a bigger place was felt more than ever before, and this led to the construction of the big rectangular hall behind Shivam which till today serves as the centre for all the medicare initiatives of Shivam.

Thousands Receive Free Sai Medical Care Each Month

Dr. J. B. Venkat Rao, who heads the Medical Service Team at Shivam, says, “We now have a big team of doctors, and offer specialized services to the patients in various disciplines like gynecology, nephrology, oncology, ENT, Ophthalmology, and also for chronic ailments like diabetes and hypertension. Nearly a thousand patients are cared for every month, and every needy

person gets free medicines for two weeks in one visit. By Swami's Grace, since the start of the Sri Sathya Sai Free clinic in Shivam, there was never an occasion when we were short of medicines."

Universe Compensates Generously for Selflessness

Most of these doctors serve not only in Shivam, but also in the temporary medical camps in Prasanthi Nilayam during all major festivals and conferences. But, does spending so much of their time and energy in service not affect their careers and private practice? "Actually, when I had to go to Puttaparthi for service, I closed down my clinic for 3-4 days. I was apprehensive if the number of patients would dwindle, but Swami's Grace was such that when I returned, the number only increased. I saw this happen, not once or twice, but every time I made a visit to Puttaparthi. My old patients never deserted me; they always waited patiently. So, I was convinced that if I did His Work, He would do mine," says Dr. Raghavachari.

Dr. Phani Mohankrishna agrees. "It has been the same experience with me too. In fact, Swami was gracious to bless me with a wife who is also a doctor, who takes care of my clinic in my absence. Swami is always watching over us, I know it for sure. When Swami came to Shivam in 1992, we had a 24 hour free clinic for all devotees converging for His *Darshan*. One evening, Swami suddenly called all the doctors for a meeting, but I could not go immediately as just then a patient had arrived with a four inch deep cut on his head. We had to dress and suture his wound, which took a good 45 minutes. Generally, whenever Swami takes people inside, He locks the door before starting the session. So, we had no hope. Nevertheless, we went inside Shivam, and to our great surprise, found Swami standing at the open door, waiting for us. As soon as He saw us, with joy and pride on His face, He said, "Come, come", and then closed the door. That day we had a beautiful session with Swami, wherein He also delivered for us a special discourse. Such instances of His love and concern are far too many to enumerate."

THE SPIRITUAL ACTIVITIES SOAR IN HIS WINGS

Music as a Means of Spiritual Revival

If that was how the medical service wing of the Sai Organisation in Shivam gathered so much momentum, the story of the spiritual wing, of which *bhajans* forms a major part, is even more fascinating.

Much before Shivam came into being, Swami, during one of His trips to Hyderabad, announced that a few members would be selected to be trained in singing *bhajans*. Later, Swami Himself brought Mr. Panduranga Dixit along with Him to train the chosen candidates. The *bhajan* training sessions were conducted under His personal guidance. In fact, He Himself played the cymbals, while the singers tried to pick up the tune and the rhythm. This was the glorious beginning of the Hyderabad Sevalal Bhajan Group which for years has distinguished itself as a vibrant group of singers who raise the joy of *bhajan* singing to a new level wherever they go. Though this group consists of

enthusiastic young men, quite ironically, *bhajans* in Shivam was started by five ladies. One of these was Mrs. Malathi Subramaniam, endearingly referred to as Malathi Maami, by everyone in the Sai family. Her tryst with Divinity, way back in the 50s and 60s, is unique and most interesting.

Melody Queen Malathi Maami's Reluctant Tryst with Sai

When Bhagavan visited Hyderabad in 1954, Malathi Maami was adamant about not seeing Him, even though a few from her family went for His *darshan*. Shortly after that, her father was to be appointed as the first High Court Judge by the Andhra Pradesh Government. Just three days prior to this event, the same telegraph which delivered this good news, also carried the horrifying message of the sudden death of her father. This was too much of a shock for her; it shook the foundations of her faith in Divinity.

However, her family members continued to visit Swami, and on one occasion, Swami granted all of them an interview, at the end of which He gifted them Vibhuti and photos. One of these pictures was framed and hung in her uncle's room. Malathi Maami avoided looking at that photo to the best of her ability, but somehow it had entered her consciousness, so much so that, after a while, she developed a desire to visit Puttaparthi.

It was Ganesh Chaturthi day, in 1960, when she arrived in Puttaparthi, and Swami greeted her from the upstairs of the Mandir, asking in Tamil, "When did you come?" Malathi Maami was baffled. He seemed to know her through and through, and she never imagined Swami would speak to her in Tamil. "Tomorrow I will give interview, family by family," Swami further added, before disappearing into His room. Malathi's family had actually not come with her, but surprisingly her husband and children landed the next morning in Prasanthi Nilayam. As soon as her family entered the interview room, Swami held the hands of Malathi and her husband, and said, "I will firm up your faith and devotion in Me". Next, He spoke about her lost father and asked, "Where do you think Sunder Ram has gone?" Pointing to His Heart, He continued, "He is very much here." Thus, began Malathi Maami's amazing association with Sai. As promised, the Lord blessed her with many experiences which fortified her faith in Him.

In those days, Swami used to accept *paan* (a kind of digestive made of betel-nuts, lime, calcium, etc. wrapped in betel leaves) from devotees. Therefore, Malathi Maami, in the altar of her home, used to offer a *paan* to Swami everyday. Whenever she came to Puttaparthi, she asked her children to continue the practice. On one such occasion, when she was in Puttaparthi, Swami came to her and said, "I have got an ulcer in my mouth!" She looked back concerned and confused. Swami further added, "I went to your house, and it was full of only calcium!" After three days of stay, when Malathi Maami returned to her home, she found that the *paan* box was full of calcium. This was a revelation to her; she was convinced of Swami's omniscience.

Handpicking Singers for the Bhajan Movement

Once her faith was established, the Lord instilled devotion in her through the medium of *bhajans*. In fact, He chose her as one of His instruments to facilitate this *sadhana* of *bhajan* singing. How this happened is a scintillating story.

Malathi Maami was a student of Carnatic music and was used to singing *krithis*, but did not know to sing *bhajans* when she came to Swami. Once, when Swami gave her an interview, He asked her to lead *bhajans* in the Bhajan Hall. She refused, saying she did not know a single *bhajan*. But Swami insisted, and she objected to it again. The third time, Swami instructed her, rather firmly, to do as He said. Malathi Maami had no choice. She went to the Bhajan Hall and there, met Mrs. Venkamma, Swami's elder sister, who filled her with confidence and directions. "If God has asked you to sing, then sing!" she said. "Once Swami looks at you, start singing, and the moment He stops playing the cymbals or keeping beat in His Hands, stop wherever you are." Malathi Maami now sat in the Bhajan Hall, perplexed.

Divine Bhajan Debut

Bhajans started and Mr. Raja Reddy sang the first *bhajan*. Just as it ended, Swami looked at Malathi Maami (indicating her to sing the next *bhajan*). She was shocked, her mind went blank! But the next moment, she started to sing! Her *bhajan* began, Swami never stopped the beat, and it continued for eight rounds! After the session, Venkamma called her near and said, "Why did you lie to me? You sing so well! Swami enjoyed it very much."

Even now when she recalls those ten minutes of her debut in *bhajan* singing, Malathi Maami becomes speechless. She was completely unaware of her voice or singing that day; it was as if she was taken over by somebody. She did not know what she had sung, until others told her about it. That is how Swami launched her into this sacred spiritual practice, with a bang, so to say. Later, Malathi Maami composed 108 *bhajans* and offered them at His Lotus Feet during the Dasara celebrations that year.

During the next few years, Swami visited her house a couple of times, miraculously gave a new life to her 17 year old son who was at the brink of death from brain fever (the doctors had given him only 48 hours, but now he is a scientist and the Deputy Director at the National Geophysical Research Institute), and instructed her to take classes in *bhajan* singing for gents too, as only a few ladies sang in those days.

Soulful Bhajans Spring from Deep and Abiding Faith

In a similar fashion, Swami turned around Mr. Rama Brahma Sastry, another stalwart of the activities in the spiritual wing of the Organisation. Earlier, in this article we have narrated his first encounter with Swami when He cured his son of polio. That helped to sow the seed of 'faith in Sai' in the heart of this

devout man, but more experiences followed before His surrender to Sai was complete.

When his son went to Puttaparthi in 1976, he sent along with him a few of his poems to be given to Swami, and thought to himself, "If Swami accepts this humble attempt, I will be happy to feel that I belong to Him." "As soon as my son reached Puttaparthi," he says, "Swami came to him and took the poems. I was thrilled; still, not satisfied. I wanted more proofs of His Divinity."

Divine Surgeon Performs Cancer Surgery

At this time, one of his relatives was diagnosed with cancer. "She was in the last chronic stages of cancer," Ram Brahma Sastry narrates. "The doctors gave up; it is the last 10-15 days of her life, they said. Then the woman, who was a devotee, said, if anybody could save her, it is only Swami. Therefore, she, along with her husband, went to Puttaparthi. Swami told her that her cancer would be gone by the next morning. He also added that the operation would be a success. The second part of His statement baffled them, as in those days there was not even a hospital in Puttaparthi. She thought, maybe Swami was referring to her last day on earth.

"That night, in her sleep, she saw Swami in a doctor's apron along with a few other medical assistants. The next moment He was operating on her, and once He finished, He asked her to come for *darshan* the next morning saying He needs to give her some medicines as well. The lady dismissed it to be a mere dream. But to her shock, the next morning she found stitches on her chest! She could not believe she had really been operated on. When she went for *darshan* that morning, Swami enquired with her if she had any pain, and then said He would send her a medicine bottle.

"This incident cleared all cobwebs of doubt within me. Instantly, I knew this was not possible for anyone, except God Himself."

Strengthening of Faith - A Precursor to Uplifting Musical Compositions

In the coming years, Swami blessed Rama Brahma Sastry with only more experiences which made his faith as firm as a rock. In 1985, when he had gone to Puttaparthi for the Birthday celebrations, and was worried about his family's accommodation, Swami mysteriously delayed the coming of relatives of the person in whose house they were lodged. Later, when he was looking for possible alliances for his daughter and wrote a letter to Swami, the then editor of Sanathana Sarathi sent him a reply saying "Swami is calling you here." He immediately reached Puttaparthi, expecting the chance of an interview. But the Lord did not speak to him for three days. Soon, it turned into a week. "Then, one day," he says, "a fellow devotee told me to do 108 circumambulations around the Shiva Temple that stands on the birth place of Swami. This would alleviate my problems, he said. So, I went and just did that. The next day, I was down with fever, as my body could not take in so much strain. When I went for *darshan* the next day, Swami immediately called me for an interview and asked, "Who asked you to do those 108 rounds? Why

did you do so many? How is your fever now?" I wondered how Swami knew all this! Nobody, except my friend, had any idea about this. Swami, once again, proved to me that He is, in fact, the very manifestation of Lord Shiva."

Sai is Moved by Perfected Bhajan Singing

It is this Sai Shiva, who inspired Mr. Ram Brahma Sastry and his son, Krishna Mohan, to compose many beautiful Sai *Bhajans*. *Bhasmabhusthitanga Sai Chandrasekhara*, which is sung by Sai devotees world over, came to his son almost like a revelation. Similar was the case with *Giridhara Bala Hey Nandalala* and *Sheshashaila Vasa Narayana*. "In those days when Swami used to spend time in Shivam, He used to train the Hyderabad Bhajan Group personally. We used to practice *bhajans* in His Presence," says his son, Krishna Mohan. "Even now, His concern and Love for us is not any less. In 2003, He gave us a chance to sing a few songs and *bhajans*, and at the end of the programme, He said 'Sravananandam', 'Nayanandam' 'Manananadam', meaning, 'these *bhajans* have given happiness not only to the ears but also to the mind'. Again, as recent as March 2008, Swami blessed us with another opportunity to sing before Him. On the evening of March 2, Swami sent word from the interview room to start the performance. Soon, Swami took to the stage and sat one whole hour listening to their soulful renderings. While their songs were going on, He called the violinist (who had come for the first time) and blessed him with a chain. After the programme, He called me and asked, 'How many children do you have?' 'Two,' I said, and the next moment, He created another chain, this time for me. I always used to listen to a devotional song which said 'We do not know meditation or penance, the only way to please God is by wearing the garland of *namasmarana* (chanting His Name) on ourselves.' This special blessing only reaffirmed my faith that one can win over the Lord by just chanting His Name."

HOW THE EDUCATION WING ROSE TO GREAT HEIGHTS

Different Strokes for Different Folks

Through various Divine ways and means, the Lord has continuously ensured that the devotees' progress in their chosen path towards their goal. If for some it was service, others it was *bhajans*, and for yet another group, it was a mix of both. As the *bhajan* movement acquired critical mass, the activities in the education wing too continued in parallel.

Spiritual Revival Through Values Education

Here too, Malathi Maami's contribution was immense. She narrated moral stories and taught *slokas* (devotional verses) to the children. Being very talented, she used to have her way easily with children with music, tales and songs. Soon, the initial 45-50 became 500, and Malathi Maami now taught not the children, but the teachers. She coached batches of Bal Vikas teachers, so that Bal Vikas classes could be opened in every locality in Hyderabad. Their

aim was to give every child of the city an opportunity to benefit from this Values Education.

Patience, Persistence and Divine Intervention – Vidya Vihar is born

With time, the number of Bal Vikas children went through the roof and the Sai Organisation contemplated on building a Sai School. To build this 'Sri Sathya Sai Vidya Vihar', the elders decided to acquire the land from the Osmania University campus, which happened to be very near Shivam. Swami wanted that land to be bought, but the university authorities did not accede to that, constricted by their rules; the maximum they offered was a 99 years lease. But Mr. E. J. Sathyamurthy did not lose hope; for three years he tried convincing the university officials to sell the land, but in vain. Dejected, He went to Puttaparthi. Once in His Presence, Swami said, "Those University officials are looking for you to send them the cheque and collect the documents." Sathyamurthy was surprised. The last time he met the Vice Chancellor, he was bluntly told that in future he will not be given an appointment if it concerned about purchase of that land. But Swami gave him an entirely opposite version. He immediately returned to Hyderabad, and hesitantly went to the Vice Chancellor's chamber. "All these years you were running after us, but yesterday we were searching for you. Do you have the cheque?" the Vice Chancellor asked. "Yes, sir," said the jubilant Sathyamurthy, and in the next two minutes, his three years of persistence finally bore fruit, thanks to His Grace. Till this day, Mr. Sathyamurthy has no idea what suddenly turned the tide in their favour.

Soon, Bhagavan Himself consented to lay the foundation stone for this sacred school of learning. It was March 8, 1981, and in His enlightening message on that day, Swami said:

"Raising the standard of living must also mean raising ethical, moral and spiritual standards. Only then can education lead to progress in Human Values and harmony in social life. This is the purpose for which the foundation stone for this school building is laid here today....The idea that a posh bungalow, with costly sofas, dining tables, etc., or a heavy pay packet from a foreign country is the ideal to be worked for should be given up. This ideal breeds evil. The ideal should be – hands dedicated to hard work, heads dedicated to service, and hearts filled with compassion... Attention is now paid solely to the self and its wishes; this must be reversed. Not what we can get from others, but what we can give others – this must be the concern."

TEAM: Together, Everyone Achieves More

During His every visit to Hyderabad, after the start and functioning of Vidya Vihar, Swami spent time with these children and prodded them onto the path of virtues. At the same time, He exhorted the members of various wings of the organization to work as a cohesive unit. He likened each wing to one finger of one's hand, and said, "Each finger must feel that strength lies in working with the rest, and that all are but parts of one hand which they cannot ignore." In an emphatic discourse on May 20, 1984, He said,

“As members of the Sathya Sai Seva Organisation, you have to be an example to others. In whatever service you do, it is the quality that counts, not the quantity. No act of service should be considered trivial or debasing; nor should there be unhealthy rivalry in rendering service. If one State has ‘adopted’ two hundred villages, another should not think it should adopt an equal number or more to produce a better impression... Mere numerical claims have no meaning. It is better to render proper service in two villages than nominal service in two hundred. ... You must be your own judges of the work. Consult your conscience and check if you are rendering proper service. I do not want anything to be done for Swami's sake. My only objective is the promotion or welfare of mankind. When you render service in the villages, you are redeeming your lives...”

NEW DIMENSIONS OF THE SERVICE WING

Qualitative Service Projects by Sai Youth

This only propelled the Sai Youth of the Organisation to take up projects which would make qualitative and sustainable improvement in the lives of the poor and downtrodden. Over the years, a host of service initiatives were undertaken. A year ago, the Youth completed the construction of 9 schools for the children of backward areas. Since many years, the Youth have been doing Blanket Distribution Seva, during the winter months, wherein they go around the city in the middle of night and silently cover the men, women and children, sleeping on the streets and shivering in cold, with thick blankets.

Big Brothers Bring Joy, Evoke Corporate Support

Another moving project, that has been going on for years, is the service being rendered in the two homes for under-privileged kids – the Victoria Memorial Home and Bolaram Boys Hostel. For these kids, the Youth have conducted Bala Vikas classes to medical camps to educational excursions. The children often hug and kiss their Sai brothers, overwhelmed with their love, as the youth look after their physical needs and fill their lives with gifts and happiness. Taking notice of the magnitude and quality of selfless service being rendered by the youth, many corporate offices in the twin cities too have eagerly offered to help. One company, for instance, has donated six month worth of groceries to the hostel kitchen; yet others are sponsoring the higher education of bright students, and the third is paying for their medicines, and so on.

Creative Strategies Mark Sai Youth Projects

In the last decade, the youth have also come up with many innovative service projects like the Pharma Bank, through which they could solve the perennial problem of acquiring medicines for the many medical camps, without spending a penny. Similarly, for the unemployed youth of these cities, they found a solution in organizing a free computer skills training program for over 40 days, at the end of which most of them got absorbed in call centres and

such other jobs. In previous issues of H2H, we have brought you detailed stories of these projects. In the October 2006 issue, we had the story of Chollamaari where the Sai Youth have brought about a silent revolution of rural rejuvenation.

Miraculous Transformation by Sai Youth

Apart from all these activities, which are only a representative sample, the Youth have also adopted Puttoniguda, a highly backward hamlet, as Shivam's adopted village. Five years ago, this was a settlement which reeked with suffering and pain, being a bed of epidemic and chronic diseases. Additionally, there was violence and the people consumed more liquor than food. But with years of continuous hard work and Himalayan patience, this village has today, not only transformed itself into a Sai village where people abstain from bad habits, keep their surroundings clean and help each other, but also have stepped out and helped the nearby tribal units. This is truly an amazing story by itself and we will soon bring you a detailed account of this in a future issue.

Sai Legal-Aid Clinics - Another Feather in Shivam's crown

In 2000, the service activities added new dimension with the inauguration of "Sri Sathya Sai Free Legal Help Centre" being set up with Bhagavan's Blessings. Through this initiative, all the advocates and persons with legal experience, working in Sai Organisations, assist the needy in sorting out their legal battles. Most often, they explore if the issue between the parties could be resolved outside of the court with proper counseling. Encouraged by the success of this venture in Shivam, such centres are now being set up in every district of Andhra Pradesh by the office bearers of the Sai Organisation.

SHIVAM'S GRAND AND GALA BIRTHDAY CELEBRATIONS

Shivam Delivers Sai Teachings in Action

With every wing of the Organisation bursting with activities, Shivam, over the years has become the epicenter of sacred inspiration. People, in hundreds and thousands, throng to its sacred precincts to find peace, goodness and spiritual serenity. Festivals in Shivam have become occasions for grand celebrations, the highlight of them being Bhagavan's Birthday every year. Till Swami's 69th birthday, the celebrations used to be a one-day affair; but after the splendid one week celebration on His 70th Birthday, this festival in Shivam scaled to unprecedented heights.

Divine Advent Marked with Love in Action

The mornings, during the Birthday week, start with special *nagar sankeerthan*, followed by *puja* done by ladies, and then Narayana Seva organized at different orphanages, old age homes, blind schools, leprosy colonies and such other destitute places. The evenings are reserved for cultural feasts wherein maestros in the field of music and dance from the length and breadth

of the country fill the air of Shivam with Sai consciousness. Over the years many esteemed artists have offered their services and they include Pandit Vishwa Mohan Bhatt, Pandit Shiv Kumar Sharma, Ms. Sudha Raghunathan, Sri Kadiri Gopalanathan, Mr. O S Arun, Sri Mandolin Srinivas, Sri Abhijeeth Pahonkar, Mr. Tarun Bhattacharya, Mr. Ronu Mujamdar, Ms. Kavitha Krishnamurthy and L. Subramanyam, Ms. Nithya Sri Mahadevan, to name a few.

Sai Acknowledges Sacredness of Shivam's Celebrations

In fact, on one such occasion, Ms. P. Susheela, the famous Telugu playback singer, was requested to make a devotional performance during the celebrations. Being an ardent devotee, she asked Swami for permission as she did not want to miss the celebrations at Puttaparthi. Swami, then, gave her explicit permission and even went to the extent of instructing her to perform at Shivam. Bhagavan even added that His Birthday celebrations in Shivam are one of the best and she was indeed fortunate to perform there.

Many distinguished artists cancel their earlier commitments for an opportunity to offer their talent in Shivam. In fact, a famous Carnatic Vocalist, Ms. Aruna Sai Ram, was so touched by the celebrations in Shivam that she postponed all her concerts to participate fully in the programmes. To everybody's surprise, the following day, she turned up early in the morning to be in time for the *nagar sankeertan* saying, "I do not want to miss any of this."

Paths are Many, Goal is One

On the glorious day of Swami's Birthday, the Divine euphoria in Shivam is extraordinary. Nearly 1,000 people gather before the dawn for the special *nagar sankeertan*, and the procession is lead by richly decorated chariots, camels, elephants, horses and the Lord's palanquin is adorned with all kinds of paraphernalia. The 'Chariot ceremony' is packed with a multitude of folk dances from all parts of India; it also has Muslim *moulvis* reading out the melodious Quran in Shivam. In the morning, there are also gliders flying high above sprinkling sacred blossoms on Shivam.

There is one devoted lady, Mrs. Sheshamamba, who actually challenges the culinary world of sweets every year on Bhagavan's Birthday, by preparing as many varieties of sweet as is Swami's age that year. On 82nd Birthday, for example, she had 82 different kinds of sweet dishes surround Swami's shrine. In the afternoon, devotees throng to partake a morsel of the sacred *prasadam* of the Narayana Seva carried out for thousands.

Evening is 'Cake Time' when 1,500 kilograms of cake are distributed with joy. The huge Cake is actually divided into 27 parts and tastefully spread across the pathway where Bhagavan usually walks when He resides in Shivam. There are cakes also cut for children who share the same birthday with Swami. The whole atmosphere is one of joy, camaraderie and Divine Oneness, with Love for Swami oozing out of everyone's heart.

The grand finale takes place when all is completely dark. The sky is then lit up with an exciting fanfare of fireworks. The Birthday celebrations in Shivam, in one phrase can be summed up as 'Blessed and Brilliant'. Through unity, joy and common love, the devotees experience Divinity.

THE SHIVAM MULTIPLIER – SAI'S UNIQUE MISSION

At the time of foundation ceremony of Shivam, Swami had said, "Avadhaani (an elder) just now said that such buildings are the landmarks of the Sai Era, and that these should be built all over India. I have no such desire. I do not appreciate or encourage such accumulations of stone and cement, of brick and mortar. I long to reside in your hearts, fragrant with the incense of fine virtues, merciful intentions and compassionate emotions. That is the *Shivam* I desire, the temple that is built of Truth, Beauty and Goodness."

Shivam – a Lighthouse of Spiritual Guidance

It is more than three and half decades since Shivam came into being, and the greatness this enigmatic edifice has achieved is that it has created a semblance of itself in the heart of every individual whoever considered it as their source, strength and sustenance. When Mr. K. Narasimha Rao, is offered bribes, given his influential position in the government, all he says in refusal, is a humble 'Sairam'. And such has been the impact of his strong will that all his junior and sub-junior officers too have changed their ways. They were simply overpowered by his moral charisma, the source of which is, of course, the 'Shivam', that is always reverberating in his heart. When Swami told Malathi Maami that He would bless her with a *gyana putra*, a son of wisdom, she instead prayed to bless her with spiritual wisdom as her son. The Lord was extremely touched. That is what Shivam has done to the inner recesses of everyone who has basked in its sublimity. 'Shivam is the foundation stone for our own spiritual upliftment,' says Dr. Raghavachari. While his colleague, Dr. Phani Mohankrishna asserts, 'Shivam is my life, it has shown me God and taken me to the highest realms of spiritual bliss.'

If the mission of the Sri Sathya Sai Avatar has been the seeding of the human consciousness, creating an awareness about its ultimate truth, revealing the secret behind the true purpose and goal of human life, Bhagavan appears to have carefully chosen select centres to work as extensions of Prasanthi Nilayam, His abode in Puttaparthi that has emerged as the undisputed spiritual capital of the universe. Shivam is one such very vital light house in Southern India that works in synchrony with the Sai will, nourishing the roots of the Sai Spiritual Tree that is bearing a bumper crop of fruits in the form of pure, unconditional, all-accepting Love in its universal sense. This Love touches all who experience it through its loving energy or selfless service, expressing itself in their thoughts as Truth, in their feelings as Peace, in their actions as Right Conduct and in their choices as Non-violence. In the process, everyone involved evolves, as the benefits blow both ways.

Just as the ancient seats of learning played a vital role in reviving the true understanding of the glory of Sanathan Dharma, a way of life based on

perennial values at another time in history, today, Shivam in Hyderabad stands as a sacred powerhouse that is fuelling a revival in the form of spiritual activism that translates the highest spiritual wisdom to meet the challenges of modern life, allowing all who are blessed to come into its fold a chance to live worthy lives.

FEATURE ARTICLES

SCIENCE, SOCIETY AND SPIRITUALITY: THE SATHYA SAI SYNERGY

By Prof. Vishwanath Pandit

Professor Vishwanath Pandit is the Head of the Department of Economics and also Dean of the Faculty of Arts, Sri Sathya Sai University. In a distinguished career at the national level, he served as the Director for the Centre for Development Economics at The Delhi School of Economics, and was elected President of the Indian Econometric Society. In his renowned international career, he has worked at the doctorate level with Prof. Lawrence Klein, Nobel Laureate; taught at reputed universities in UK and USA; served as Economic Advisor to the Government of Sri Lanka; and been Chairman of the Expert Group on Policy Modelling for LDCs (Least Developed Countries), United Nations, New York. More importantly, he has been an ardent devotee for decades and served as a sevadal in the Sai Organisation of Delhi for many years.

Deprivation amidst affluence, knowledge devoid of wisdom, scientific achievements unmatched by moral moorings, and power without compassion, characterize human existence today: because God is no longer at the center of our thoughts, words, or deeds. Thanks to the great leaps that science and technology have made, distances have shrunk enormously as we live in a globalised world. But as we have come closer to one another, our hearts have drifted apart enormously. Strife has overtaken all parts of the world in one form or the other. The limitless greed and penchant for illusory comforts have led to such an irreparable damage to natural resources, leading to ecological imbalances that Mother Nature herself has to teach us hard lessons in the form of disasters like the recent tsunami and Katrina.

More than all this, it is the human mind which has been corrupted by the shallow understanding of science, mindless pursuit of wealth, and misinterpretation of religion itself. While science has been used to cause human suffering, perverted religiosity has led to destructive fanaticism. No wonder God had to incarnate once again at this juncture to lead humanity back to the correct path. The uniqueness of this Avatar is the simple solutions He provides for complex problems. Not merely the declaration of these solutions but actual demonstration of their perfect efficacy by His own Actions. "My Life is My Message" is the exposition of the highest order, which we may ignore only to our misery.

Religion, which was meant to be the civilizing, and thereby, the uniting force for humanity, has steadily become a cause for divisiveness. Having pushed God back-stage, we have failed to rise from religion to spirituality. Religious labels have instead been used as means for social segmentation and egocentric identity. Bhagavan's dictum; "There is only one religion, the religion of Love. There is only one God and He is Omnipresent" is the most effective antidote to the multidimensional problems of humanity today. If we

hark back to India's ancient wisdom we hear: *Ekam Sath Viprah Bahudha Vadanthi* (Truth is one but sages express it in different ways). If that Truth is not understood as God, then, unity, and its cherished fruit, Love, remain elusive. The beautiful mosque Baba built for Muslims of Puttaparthi, so that they do not have to walk several kilometers to Bukkapatnam to offer their daily prayers, enshrines a great message for all of us. Swami's declaration that He had come to confirm every one in his / her own faith rather than to start a new one, was so remarkably brought home to me in Sri Lanka where I had the privilege of interacting with many Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian devotees.

The Unity of Science and Spirituality

At another end, we have the so-called rationalists, who have convinced themselves that science and religion are contradictory. Nothing would be more misleading than this; and nothing would be a greater misinterpretation of the breath-taking scientific achievements of today. The genesis of this mistaken view goes back to the historical hangover of the conflict between science and religion during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in Europe. It has also arisen from a false view of religion as consisting of rituals, fads and superstitions carefully caricatured so as to fit into the false hypothesis of contradiction. There has never been such a conflict in India. While Science is concerned with the manifest world, spirituality is concerned with the inner self - both essential for humanity. In his address during the fourth convocation of Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning in 1985, Dr. E. C. G. Sudarshan described Science and Spirituality as two components of the grand "binocular vision." Going well beyond this, the Vedantic declarations have been loftier as they proclaim them to be indivisible. No wonder India's great achievements in mathematics, medicine, metallurgy and other branches of Science are widely acclaimed today. Where does the question of conflict between Science and Spirituality arise!

Back even in Europe, many renowned scientists from Newton to Einstein were deeply religious and believed in the existence of a higher Power called "God". It is surprising how and why the liberal mindset in the 19th century came to regard faith in the existence of God as irrational and unscientific. The prophet of dialectical materialism, Karl Marx, who must indeed be given his due as a humanist, claimed that religion was an "Opiate" of the masses. If religion is the opiate of the masses, so be it. For it is a good opiate, which has gifted self-respect and self-confidence to the simple folk. "A man without faith in God is worse than an invalid because he is without the vital essence of life," says the celebrated French mathematician Pascal.

The same feeling is expressed by Einstein in *Cosmic Religious Experience*. " . . . Laws of nature reveal a mind so superior that all the intelligence poured by man into his thoughts is, when compared to this mind, naught but a reflection of absolute nothingness..." Yet stubbornly following its unfounded belief in the contradictions between science and religion, the nineteenth century liberals were pretty convinced that with the advancement of scientific knowledge, religion will dwindle and soon disappear as a human concern. Exactly the opposite has, indeed, happened.

Urging scientific knowledge to be harnessed for the service of humanity, the real meaning of religion in relation to science, comes from Baba as He says, "Knowledge without devotion is useless and devotion without knowledge is ineffective." A similar sentiment has been expressed by Capra in *The Tao of Physics*: "Science can do without spirituality and spirituality does not need science. But man needs both." Social scientists, Rodney Sark, Laurence Janna Scone and Roger Finke (*American Economic Review*, Papers and Proceedings, May 1996, pp.433-436) report on the basis of actual survey data that (i) a predominant proportion of people surveyed continue to take religion seriously; (ii) educational achievements and religious faith bear a positive rather than a negative relation to each other; and, (iii) more surprisingly, students and teachers of hard (Physical) sciences are on an average more religious than those of soft (social) sciences.

What Truly Makes Us Happy?

More than all this, their survey data show that religious beliefs and practices are perceived by people to improve self-esteem, life-satisfaction, and ability to withstand stress. It is also seen to actually improve mental and physical health. Why not? Does not Baba say that "You are the children of bliss, of deathlessness. You are God." A devotee once asked Swami, "Bhagavan, You have given me so much. What should I do for You?" Prompt came the reply: "Be happy." All of us are indeed and ultimately in search of happiness. Baba says, "Happiness is your birthright." But how do we secure this ultimate objective of life? Gravely mistaken, we seek it from material prosperity. Even worse, we are many a time deluded into feeling that we have got it. That pleasure is at best only a short-lived illusion, does not take long to dawn on us. What one needs to seek is permanent happiness - Bliss.

It is gratifying that this subject of 'Happiness' is now receiving serious attention from reputed social scientists. Professor Easterlin, who I had the privilege of having as my teacher, had the wisdom to turn to this three decades ago, despite disapproval from many of his peers. However, the fact that many others have subsequently joined him in this line of research speaks for itself. The state of knowledge until recently as summarized by B. S. Frey and A. Stutzer (*Journal of Economic Literature*, June 2002, pp.402-435) gives us remarkable results based on rigorous empirical research. It is instructive to recall some of these. When relatively richer persons were asked whether they were happier than the rest, they answered in the affirmative. However, when people were asked to recall their feelings over a longer life cycle and check if they were happier now when they enjoyed higher real incomes than before, the answer was in the negative. In fact, this is corroborated by the data on Japan for over forty years during which the real per capita income has steeply increased; whereas the carefully constructed happiness index based on survey data for the same period has remained more or less flat. How puzzling! The longer view which goes beyond temporary pleasures, is indeed, a correct indicator of happiness. The clear signal is that, longer and lasting happiness even at the material level cannot be secured from income

and wealth. This brings into focus Baba's prescription of "Ceiling on Desires" as the only way to enjoy true happiness

There is also, in any case, the larger question of how long material wealth per individual can keep on growing and at what cost. The questions of happiness and contentment are closely linked with the ways in which incomes are earned and the style of life one is leading. That income earned by *Satwic* and *Dharmic* ways gives one greater contentment is well borne out by facts. So does a peaceful life style and the extent to which one may endeavour to help others with a feeling of love. Practice of the five Values - Sathya, Dharma, Santhi, Prema and Ahimsa, emphasized by Bhagavan are thus direct inputs for real happiness.

The Sai Way of Spirituality Within Society

Saints and sages from time immemorial have endeavoured to inspire and promote Divinity among their fortunate devotees. But the Mission chosen by an Avatar is much higher and all-embracing. The present Avatar has declared repeatedly that His Mission is the transformation of the entire humanity and to usher in the Golden Age of Love. The uniqueness of His *modus operandi* lies not only in how He translates hard problems into those amenable to simple algorithms, but also in how He has viewed the problems themselves. It is noteworthy that from the earliest days, Bhagavan has not only linked His devotees to God, but equally strongly to Society by emphasizing that everyone is a spark of Divinity. Two of His messages which particularly stand out as unique in this context are: "The Proper study of Mankind is Man" and "Love for God, Fear of Sin, and Morality in Society."

Both of these are essential in understanding how Sai saturates an activist societal viewpoint with spirituality. In fact, it will be no exaggeration even to say that social activism devoid of God-centric morality is empty and logically infirm. The first of these sets out an ideal social structure reminiscent of the French social philosopher Rousseau's concept of "social contract." "The proper study of mankind is Man" may indeed be interpreted in three different ways. First, it may simply be asking us to understand each other as a starting point for a healthy harmonious society; this is akin to the vedic exhortation *Sahanavavatu Sahanau Bhunakthu, Sahaveeryam Karavavahai; Tejaswinavadheetam Asthu ma Vidvishavahai*(May He protect both of us. May He nourish both of us. May we both acquire the capacity (to study and understand the scriptures). May our study be brilliant. May we not argue with each other). A second meaning, that suggests itself, requires us to turn inside so as to understand ourselves. However, I believe the really intended meaning is that every member of the society should adopt the human body as a model of perfect harmony based on concern for each other. Each of us needs to act like a limb of the human body. If one limb is in trouble, another will automatically, in a perfectly programmed manner, as it were, do the needful. This is how members of the society should be sensitive to each other's pain and pleasure. No Avatar has, as far as I am aware, actively fostered this societal attitude among His followers.

The second prescription, namely, 'Love of God, Fear of Sin, and Morality in Society' or *Daiva Preethi, Papa Bheethi, Sangha Neethi* is a follow-up on the first one providing a masterly solution to mundane materialistic as well as the higher (spiritual) problems of today's world. Its real purpose lies in bringing God back to the center stage. Love of God is the prime mover in the process because only those who love God will fear sin. Fear and sin look somewhat misplaced at first sight. But deeper thought gives a real meaning to both of them. Sin is the result of ego and the associated six devils of desire, anger, greed, attachment, pride and conceit. What exactly is the reason for fear? The worst fear is that caused by loss of awareness of the proximity to God. Thus, the fear of sin arises only when the relationship with God is one of love. Fear of sin must therefore prevent one from all evil tendencies, and make one take morally correct stands on all issues relating to the society. This is particularly important today when one is surrounded by corruption, exploitation, oppression and so many other evils. If humanity has to save itself from self-destruction, there is no other way. To ensure this, God has willed to be with us again at this critical juncture. May we practise what He has come to teach us! Jai Sai Ram!

HEAVENLY GANGA, THE FARAKKA BARRAGE AND ITS ATROCIOUS AFTERMATH

Reflections, Lessons, and Questions

By Mr. Jatin H. Desai

Mr. Jatin DeSai is the co-founder and CEO of The DeSai group based in Connecticut, USA. A seasoned business executive, strategic advisor, and a coach for senior leadership teams, he has extensive field experience in the areas of strategy alignment, corporate innovation, talent management, culture development, and information technology. He regularly speaks during conferences and conducts workshops on these areas for corporate executives.

More importantly, he has been a devotee of Bhagavan Baba since 1975 and has been an active office bearer at the local and regional level of the Sai Organisation in the northeast region of USA. Additionally, Jatin also guides young children as a teacher in the Sathya Sai Education program in USA every week.

Originating high up on the snow-capped Himalayas, the holy river of a billion Indians, the relentless Ganga meanders through mountains, hills, dales, plains and a delta, traversing an astounding 2506 kilometers before merging in its final destination - the Bay of Bengal. Today, this ever-flowing and always changing river has come to symbolize a sacred point of constant reference for billions of lives since earliest recorded history.

Along its way, the river Ganga acts as a vital lifeline, a loving and forgiving mother, a cleansing and cathartic agent, a ruthless tormentor in her moments of fury, and a teacher of many profound lessons.

Rechristened as the Ganges by the British, the Ganga flows across the Indian sub-continent, passing through India's highly populous state, its most lawless state, its holiest city, and Kolkata - the country's cultural capital and latest aspiring technology hub that provides sustenance to more people than the population of the entire United States of America!

This feature highlights some lessons the river Ganga offers on the perils of environmentally unsustainable economic development, that overlooks the laws of nature, ignoring the natural rhythm in our ecological system and the devastation such myopic planning extracts on human lives and the delicate cycle of life on the whole.

The discussion strikes a deeply personal chord for the author Mr. Jatin Desai who views it in light of the core teachings of Sri Sathya Sai Baba, emphasizing that the external phenomena is merely a projection of the infinite universe within us.

The pollution of the river Ganga, the violation of its sanctity and pristine nature, and its forced course digression is not disconnected from the processes of inner violation going on within each of us, of our true nature, that Sri Sathya Sai Baba describes as unsullied, infinite and joyful. In this bold, daring and philosophical exposé, Mr. Jatin Desai raises some inconvenient truths that must be faced by humanity both individually and collectively, for the sake of our planet and its health, upon which our very survival is dependent.

The Ganges Valley, or basin, is 322 to 644 km wide (200 to 400 miles). The river starts in an ice cave on the southern slopes of the Himalayas, about 3,140 meters (10,300 feet) above sea level. It flows eastward and empties into the Bay of Bengal. Its mouth forms a vast delta. At the delta, it is joined by the southward-flowing Brahmaputra River. Their combined delta is the largest in the world. The delta begins more than 322 km (200 miles) from the Bay of Bengal and lies mostly in Bangladesh. It is largely a tangled swampland.

Policy makers and engineers have built two major dams on the Ganga. One at Haridwar diverts much of the Himalayan snowmelt into the Upper Ganges Canal, built by the British in 1854 to irrigate the surrounding land. This caused severe deterioration to the water-flow in the Ganga, and is a major cause for the decay of Ganga as an inland waterway.

The other dam, and the more recent one is a hydroelectric installation at Farakka, close to the point where the main flow of the river enters Bangladesh, and the tributary Hooghly (also known as Bhagirathi) continues in West Bengal past Calcutta. This barrage, which feeds the Hooghly branch of the river by a 26 mile long feeder canal and its water flow management, has been a long-lingering source of dispute with neighboring countries.

Bhagavan Baba has said many times that everything is perfect in our physical world. He has also assured us that not even a blade of grass can move without His Divine Will. Let's try to find the deep 'perfections' from this complex story.

The River from Heaven

According to the Indian mythology, King Sagar had 60,000 sons. He defeated all the Asuras (demons) in the earth and wanted to stage an *Ashwamedha Yagya* to declare his supremacy. For this, as was the practice prevalent in ancient times, he sent his horse across the Earth accompanied by his sons.

The King of Heaven, Lord Indra, feared the power of King Sagar and to stop him, he stole the horse and tied it to the ashram of Sage Kapil. When the 60,000 sons saw the horse in Kapil's ashram, they got furious and started to attack the hermitage. Sage Kapil was in deep meditation, and on hearing the disturbance, he opened his eyes in anger. As a result, all the 60,000 sons of King Sagar were reduced to ashes, except for prince Asamanjas.

Anshuman, the grandson of King Sagar, brought the horse back from the Sage and asked for his forgiveness. Sage Kapil told him that the sons can be brought to life only if *Ganga* is brought from heaven to earth. Neither Anshuman nor his son Dilip, were successful in this task. But Dilip's son, Bhagirath, was determined to get this task done by praying to Lord Shiva. He started meditating intensely for several years, and finally Ganga was very pleased and descended to the Earth. To prevent the earth from flooding, Lord Shiva received Ganga on His matted locks. King Bhagirath then worshipped Lord Shiva, and Shiva blessed him and released Ganga from His locks in seven streams. The water of Ganga touched the ashes of King Sagar's sons, who then rose to their eternal rest in heaven.

The seven streams of Ganga are Bhagirathi, Janhvi, Bhilangana, Mandakini, Rishiganga, Saraswati and Alaknanda which merge into Ganga at Devprayag. The rock on which King Bhagirath is believed to have meditated, is called 'Bhagirath Shila' and is located near the temple of Ganga.

The Sacred Significance of Ganga

For Hindus, the river Ganga is very sacred. They believe that bathing in the river (especially on certain occasions) redeems them from their sins and helps attain salvation. People travel from long distances to immerse the ashes of their kin in the waters of the Ganga; this immersion also is believed to send the departed soul to heaven. Several places, sacred to Hindus, lie along the banks of the river Ganga, including Haridwar and Varanasi. People carry sacred water from the Ganges that is sealed in copper pots after making the pilgrimage to Varanasi.

It is believed that drinking water from the Ganga during one's last breath will grant the soul the supreme seat in heaven. This is one of the principal reasons why most Hindu families keep a vial of water from the Ganga in their house, apart from it being a sign of auspiciousness, and also prestige. Hindus also believe life is incomplete without bathing in the Ganga at least once in one's lifetime; it not only cleanses the soul, but also cures many physical ailments. The ancient scriptures mention that the water of the Ganga carries the blessings of Lord Vishnu's Feet; hence Mother Ganges is also known as *Vishnupadi*, which means, "Emanating from the Lotus Feet of Supreme Lord Sri Vishnu – the Eternal Preserver of the Universe."

Ganga – The Glorious Spiritual Heritage

Some of the most important Hindu festivals and religious congregations such as the Kumbh Mela and the Chhat Puja are celebrated on the banks of the River Ganga. For millions of Hindus, the 350 km (200 miles) stretch between the cities of Varanasi and Kanpur is one of the most sacred sections of the river; it serves as the setting for the great epic, Ramayana. A small coastal town of Singhberpur is featured as the place where Lord Rama, Sita and Laxman cross the Ganges on their way into their fourteen year exile.

Despite the river's massive pollution, Hindus come from all over the country to bathe, worship and honor dead relatives in the holy waters. At the city of Allahabad, midway between Kanpur and Varanasi, the Ganges merges with River Yamuna and the mythical River Saraswati. Together, they form the 'Sangam' or sacred confluence. According to the Hindu tradition, it is believed that if one takes a dip or casts the ashes of their dead relatives into the water at this spot, their next life will be better.

Varanasi is an important spiritual center for the Hindus. Much of daily life in this holy city takes place on its 84 *ghats* — stone steps that descend steeply down to the river and stretch two miles northward in a gentle crescent. It would not be unusual to find here people from all walks of life and from all corners of the world as pilgrims to wash away their sins and seek salvation. One can also find many local villagers who seek more immediate blessings — success in exams, better health, birth of a child, hand in marriage, resolution of family conflicts, or help kicking an addiction.

Unique Ecology of Ganga

To this date, the water of holy Ganga is believed to have *Amrit* (nectar) in it. Recently, scientists have uncovered something remarkable. The Ganga water, collected at its origin, is in a pure state and even after being kept for several years, somehow it does not get easily contaminated. These medicinal properties of Ganga waters are attributed to the inherent secretions of herbs and mineral content which get mixed with the water.

As it flows through highly populous areas, the Ganges collects large amounts of human pollutants, e.g., *Schistosoma mansoni* and faecal coliforms, and drinking and bathing in its waters therefore carries a high risk of infection. The combination of bacteria and some x-factor - even though large populations of people bath in the river everyday - have apparently produced a self-purification effect, in which water-borne bacteria such as dysentery and cholera are killed off, preventing large-scale epidemics. The river also has an unusual ability to retain dissolved oxygen, but the reason for this ability is not known – it's a complete mystery.

In the recent past, researchers decided to find these special properties by traveling to the river's source in the Himalayas. They found wild plants, radioactive rocks, and unusually cold, fast-running water, combine to form the river. But since 1854, almost all of the Ganges' water has been siphoned off for irrigation as it leaves the Himalayas.

Dr. Bhargava, who has spent a lifetime performing experiments up and down the Ganges, was asked about this special 'healing' effect. In most rivers, Bhargava says, organic material usually exhausts a river's available oxygen and starts putrefying. But in the Ganges, an unknown substance, or "X-factor" acts as a "disinfectant," on the organic materials and bacteria, and kills them. Bhargava says that the Ganges' self-purifying quality leads to oxygen levels 25 times higher than any other river in the world. This, of course, can be

explained easily by a molecular biologist. What cannot be explained and is most mysterious about the Ganga's ecology and this X-Factor, is why it only exists in Ganga and no other river on Earth.

Ganga Economy

Today, there are hundreds of towns and extensive civilization at the banks of this mighty river. Over 400 million people live near the banks of Ganga. The Ganges Basin, with its fertile soil, is instrumental to the agricultural economies of India and Bangladesh. The Ganges and its tributaries provide a perennial source of irrigation to a large area. Chief crops cultivated in the area include rice, sugarcane, lentils, oil seeds, potatoes, and wheat. Along the banks of the river, the presence of swamps and lakes provide a rich growing area for crops such as legumes, chillies, mustard, sesame, sugarcane, and jute. There are also many fishing opportunities along the river. Tourism is another related activity. Three towns holy to Hinduism – Haridwar, Allahabad, and Varanasi – attract thousands of pilgrims to its waters. The rapids of the Ganges also are popular for river rafting, attracting hundreds of adventure seekers in the summer months.

The river also serves as a drinking source, a bathing hole and a baptism sight. The river is one of the only sources of water for the people of India who cannot afford clean drinking water. On the same note, it is used as a mass-bathing hole; over 10 million people bathe in the river daily. People with diseases and very poor hygiene, cause for the pollution of this river.

The Man and The Ganga

As glorious as Ganga is to the Hindus, there is also a different type of Ganga being experienced by many today. Here, the Mother Ganga is not exactly being revered as most might expect.

To fully understand the magnitude of the story, allow me to take you back a bit to create a 'context' first. Relations between Bangladesh and India have often been difficult. There was considerable hostility on both sides of the border when East Pakistan was established in 1947 in the midst of intense communal struggles among various ethnic groups. As part of Pakistan, East Pakistan was at war with India in 1947 and 1948, and again in 1965.

If we look very closely at the history of why man asserts himself into a national conflict, it is easy to pinpoint character of leaders involved. It is always the individual leaders rather than impersonal objective factors that determine whether nations will go to war and whether they will continue to fight it to an irrationally prolonged and destructive extent.

History also shows that the egos and lack of integrity in the leaders leads to manipulation across the borders, and goes far as creating misconceptions about entire nations and their citizens. This massive shift towards negative consciousness leads to larger conflicts and irrational political decisions.

It is preposterous that everything in the universe should obey physical laws, while a five-foot-tall creature living on the surface of one tiny planet manipulates history through his perceptions and misperceptions. But it happened amongst this regional conflict, as it continues to happen today in many parts of our planet.

In this case, Bangladesh and India who are so closely intertwined--with 2,400 kilometers of border, common river systems, and numerous trans-border cultural or economic contacts--has provided numerous opportunities for bilateral disputes.

Despite considerable progress in expanding contacts between the two countries, a number of serious issues concerning river waters and borders continued to stir up anti-Indian emotions in Bangladesh. The most difficult long-term bilateral problems, between the two countries, revolved around water disputes. These problems surfaced during the 1950s and 1960s, when the port of Calcutta on the Hooghli River experienced siltation problems. The Indian government decided that the solution was to divert the Ganges River water into the Hooghli River during the dry season, from January to June, in order to flush out the accumulating silt. In 1974, Indian government built a major barrage, or dam, across the Ganges at a small town of Farakka, near the Bangladeshi border, about 10 km from the Indian side of the border.

Generally, a barrage is built on flat land for the purpose of diverting water; this is achieved by raising the level of the river so that part of the flow can be diverted into a feeder canal which leads to wherever the water is required. The Farakka Barrage was constructed with the aim of reviving the Port of Calcutta. The diverted water was designed to produce an extra flow that would flush the siltation from the lower reaches of the river. When the Farakka Barrage Plan was announced in 1961, the government of Pakistan responded with concern about the possible effects on East Bengal. They predicted that the reduced quantity of water flowing into East Bengal would be insufficient not only for people who live on the banks, but also for agriculture and ecology that were dependent on the flow of water from the Ganges.

What have been the effects of Farakka Barrage on Bangladesh? Between 1975 and 1976, India withdrew the maximum amount of water from the Ganges. Several studies have been carried out, attempting to determine the agricultural, economical and ecological effect on Bangladesh at that time and the repercussions since. The water levels were at the lowest they had ever been during the dry season of 1976, causing the suction pumps, hand pumps and hand operated tube wells to be incapable of operating in such shallow water. Also, an increase in salinity was discovered, most likely the result of sea water traveling upland because the fresh water downward flow had decreased. For instance, in the town of Khulna, which is situated on the Rhupsa-Pussur and is particularly sensitive to changes in the Ganges flow, the saline intrusion was considered to be the most dramatic. Khulna is a major area of industry in Bangladesh and it appears that the salinity changes have caused industrial losses of millions of U.S. dollars. This is only an estimate, but if we consider the possible occurrences when industries are faced with

unexpected levels of salt in their water, such as production delays, mechanical failure, increased corrosion, then such losses are indeed plausible.

The effect on agriculture in Bangladesh is a source of dispute - Bangladeshis believe the Farakka Barrage is responsible for reduced rice and other crop yields but India rejects this claim. The Sundarbans (world's largest estuarine forest) have also shown signs of deterioration through increased salinity, chlorine levels, and insufficient nutrients in the water. There are mixed conclusions as to the ecological effects of the Farakka Barrage, but there is a strong presumption that the barrage has caused decline in fishing.

People living in the area, claim that the increased salinity is threatening their crops, industry and animal drinking water. It is unlikely that Bangladesh will receive compensation for the losses they claim, since in so many areas, it has been impossible to prove that Farakka is solely responsible. Nevertheless, it is beyond doubt that the people of South Bengal have suffered greatly as a consequence of the Farakka Barrage.

The damage caused to the local agriculture industry due to the lack of availability of water is irreparable, to say the least. It has been calculated that if Bangladesh had access to the same quantity of water as before, the country could have produced 36 lakh tons more crops valued at 2300 crores of Taka (\$335 Million USD). Agriculture being the mainstay of the economy of this tiny south Asian nation, there is no way to recoup this devastating loss. Increase in salinity in the vast south-western region of Bangladesh is having ruinous effect in various ways, from diminished crop-production, fish-catch and power generation to reduced industrial output. Some species of valuable trees in the Sundarbans are also known to be disappearing consequent upon salinity increase.

The damage due to withdrawal of waters at Farakka has been so wide and multidimensional that it is difficult to estimate. However, careful estimates put it to the tune of 11 thousand crores of Taka (almost \$2 Billion USD). This does not include damage to the environment which defies any precise calculation. What is more, if the rate at which the flow in the Ganges is dwindling continues, the river which has been flowing since thousands of years will be reduced only to a gigantic trough without any water therein.

The Implausible Devastation

As inhumane and intolerable as it sounds, this is not the worst. To experience today, how the dam has affected life and livelihoods on the Ganges in this part of the world, one needs to travel to Panchanandapur, a small town in West Bengal. On a map, it appears to lie well inland from the Ganges. But today, something unbelievable has happened to Panchanandapur and the village's approximately 5,000 residents.

In the middle of 2007, it was precariously on the banks of the Ganga instead of its original origin – approximately six miles westward. Kalyan Rudra, a geography professor in Calcutta, explains that the dam forced the Ganges to shift almost six miles eastward over the last 30 years, eroding most of this village. By last year, an indigo factory, sugar mill, hospital, police station and a two-story government building were all swallowed by the river among other settlements, while Ganges was moving towards the small village.

Today, less than ten months later, the Ganges' has completely swallowed Panchanandapur. In fact it has been moving so fast, that now, the original western part of the town which was once underwater has reappeared on the other side of the river bank in Bangladesh. Can you imagine? The local West Bengalese farmers have actually been able to identify their land property on the other side of the river after the river swallowed it few years back.

As envisioned, the Farakka barrage was built at the narrowest point on the Ganges to divert water to Calcutta to the south and flush out the silt that was clogging up its port. But scientists now say the project was ill-conceived from the start: water upstream from the dam carried massive amounts of silt, dropping it directly behind the dam. The buildup — almost 700 million tons annually — has clogged the dam's gates and raised the river bed more than 20 feet. The silt buildup has also forced the river to change its course, swallowing villages and buildings.

So here you are. Imagine you are a West Bengalese who lived all your life in this small village and was the owner of the generational business and the property. Due to the Farakka barrage, your entire life's belongings are gone — literally overnight. Your family is homeless and without shelter. Your children have no future ahead any longer. You cannot just get up and go, because all you know is to either fish, or run a small business for the locals. Your most prized possession is the land property that you can pass down to your children and the future generations. You have nothing left to run with — no single belonging. You are not the only one. Everyone you know is also going through the same tragedy, trying to support each other. You are asking the deep questions - why did the government do this, and why to me and my family? And why did God do this? And what is there to live for any longer? and so on.

Somehow you survive through the wild destruction caused by heavy rains and the trajectory of Ganga - but not everyone you know was lucky enough to save their families. One day, after months of survival instincts and support of the villagers, you discover that pieces of Panchanandapur village are reappearing on the other side of Ganga. With brevity, you take a small boat and cross the river to find your own property. Sure enough, you do. You are able to recognize the landmarks to prove your belongings and that of your neighbors.

Alas, you can feel some divine hand in all this. How could this be? You are shocked. Maybe, you tell your self, this was all due to past *karma*, and it's over. Somehow, you will figure out how to get back on track. You and some of

the villagers are now starting to 'settle' into this newly found land on the other side of Ganga.

As interesting as it sounds, it's not over.

These impacted villagers on the 'new' side of Ganga, still consider themselves part of West Bengal. The shift in geography has opened a territory question; neither West Bengal nor Bangladesh recognizes these displaced villagers. These villagers are country-less as of today.

The Real Insights from Man-made Disasters

Originally, in the early 1960s, the Farakka Barrage was envisioned to revive industrial survival of Calcutta by the Indian government. Here, man (primarily the government officials) decided to change the course of the Goddess Ganga to create materialist benefit for himself. Many men put all of their intellect, spent millions of dollars, poured resources, and muscled his political power to fulfill selfish goals – that of industrial success. All of this was done in the name of 'his country'.

The tide of change that has engulfed humanity in the last two centuries - through the industrial revolution and beyond, has inevitably, and visibly, left its mark on the Ganges. It is true that due to the Farakka Barrage, the city of Calcutta has greatly benefited in numerous categories, including commerce. These same industries as of now, unfortunately, have accelerated discharge into this river as well. Once, Ganga was known for its purity, now it is rendered unsafe for consumption. While it used to be considered meritorious to die and be cremated in Benares, the very belief causes further pollution of the river - given the un-sustainable rate at which partially cremated cadavers are dumped into the river.

The dawn of the information revolution and the internet has brought thoughts from around the world in close contact as never before. As a newly generated affluence generated by the boom in the information industry spreads across the world, life styles across the Indian subcontinent are undergoing a sea change. It is only a matter of time, before a semi-urban style of life will establish itself in hitherto remote areas.

Man will continue to exploit the nature to gain materialistic success. He will justify the decisions without deeper, long term effects they might have. Because, he has armed himself with belief that materialistic growth is the only way to define success – at individual level, at level of society, and at the grander level of political strength, which is, in fact, the ultimate self-deception.

The Self-Deception

In spite of these waves of change, the core of the eastern belief in the interconnectedness of life remains unchanged. The simple act of thanksgiving - through the offering of a clay lamp, on a leaf with a few petals of fresh flowers to the life sustaining waters of the Ganges, at the culmination of the Ganga *Aarti* - carried out even today - night after night at Haridwar, where the

Ganga enters the plains, is a standing testimony to this immutable undercurrent of the religious thought. Here lies the irony.

As explicit and visible the traditions are today, one needs to wonder how deeply rooted are the human unconscious behaviors. It is very easy for us to start blaming the short-sightedness of those who were involved with designing, approving, funding, and building the Farakka Barrage in the early 70s. It is also very easy, now, for us to see the deeper insights of destruction that was not available before the project was undertaken. I wonder if such insights were available, whether the project would have continued. I question myself, if the engineers who built the barrage, knew about the potential design problems that would force Ganga to divert itself, leading to such massive destruction to human lives and uproot streams of villages near by. I wonder if the business community in Calcutta cared about the possible danger the barrage would have on Bangladesh and West Bengal neighbors, before it was built.

What is critically important is for all of us to look around at the large scale decisions that we, the human beings, are passively or actively making everyday around us that may be having a negative impact on others lives. It is not too hard to find other current examples – Afghan war, Iraqi invasion, the unrest in Kashmir, etc. I wonder how many of us are supporting (with voice or without opposing voice) societal projects that may have negative environmental sustainability forecast in the long term.

We, as our beloved Bhagawan lovingly calls us, the monkey minds, spend all of our time living within our small cocoon. We are, generally, too busy to understand or act for anything that does not ‘belong’ to us or our livelihood. We have outsourced our decision making to the ego within – which operates on autopilot. We have convinced ourselves that life needs to be ‘simplified’ by acquiring worldly-pleasures and ignore the ‘dirty headlines’. That is the job of the government, we say, why else do we pay taxes? The self-deception is so strong that we have fully convinced our self that this is the reality and everything is *karma*. We might even say, “Well... the barrage was supposed to happen. It had to occur, because it was meant to be. It was written in the grand plan that those villagers had to pay their karmic debt.” This is the self-absorbed ego with a veil covering the reality.

The Sai Ganga

Our beloved Swami has given us many deeper lessons, insights, and examples to help us fully realize the Truth within this story. I am just a small servant at His Divine Feet. I am sure I do not have the real answers to the role of man-made devastation in the overall goal of spiritual journey and human development towards mergence with the source – the Divine Love, our beloved Bhagawan. I am sure the multi-dimensions and complex issues the Farakka Barrage has caused, can be intellectually discussed from all perspectives without a common end or agreement by all parties involved for as long as we have time.

The opportunity I would like to propose to you, dear reader, is to explore the deeper lessons using Swami's teachings from this story.

There is Ganga flowing within all of us. What is it? It is the divine Sai Love. We have been chosen by Lord Shiva to be on the bank taking a bath in His Physical Presence. How beautiful an opportunity! Only few can live near Mother Ganga – we, the Sai Devotees, are those chosen ones.

Most of us are too busy and have taken this Mother Sai Ganga for granted, even though She is always there to purify our sins and bless us everyday. We have become too busy to recognize the true mission of Sai Ganga – to lead us back to the heavenly origins. We have taken Sai Ganga for granted, as did many when building the barrage. Even though we live on the banks of Sai Ganga, we have lost the vision of the inner beauty and divine power it has – to cleanse and heal all who come. Instead, we have chosen to dump our worldly desires and attachments, in the form of pollution, at the feet of Sai Ganga. We continue to hurt Her, without much regard to what it might be doing to Her 'health' – physically. Regardless of how much we make Her suffer and make Her unhappy, she continues to sing the glorious sound of heavenly Love to all those who take a daily dip in Her thoughts. The Sai Ganga absorbs all of our pollution, bad thoughts words and deeds, everyday. Just as the Ganga River, Sai Ganga does not waiver Her healing power to anybody who comes to Her.

How beautiful is Ganga and Sai Ganga? It never stops its flow to think about Herself, and it only wants to take all who swim in Her glory to help them reach their original source – the ocean of Love. We, as Sai Devotees, are the few chosen who have been blessed to reside at the 'Sai Shore' – where we can bathe in the glory of Mother Sai. The Mother has been taking care of our livelihood everyday as Ganga does for the local villagers on shore. Ganga's pollution is a result of man's complete recklessness to fulfill unending depth of desires without a limit – as our beloved Bhagawan has said – lack of *Ceiling on Desires*.

In the same way, do we really appreciate the grandeur and the beauty of Sai Ganga in our life? Do we truly appreciate the invisible flow of the Sai Ganga being poured upon us? Do we truly welcome the opportunity we have been given, on the shores of Sai Ganga, to finally get out of the life-and-birth cycle which our *Atma* has been longing for?

We continue to exploit our relationship with Sai Ganga by allowing the deep self-deception within us to exist - for the unreal. We might have convinced ourselves that we are Sai Devotees, so we don't have to be perfect, because Swami is in our lives; He will take care of things. If we have problems, we will just 'surrender' them to Swami. We even go far as, singing the glory of Sai Ganga's name, without the beauty and the heritage of each words. Does such self-deception please our beloved Sai Ganga?

Just as the Hindu tradition honors the healing powers of Mother Ganga, for us, we have an opportunity to take a dip in the Love of Mother Sai Ganga. What a blessing!

The Farakka Barrage Within All of Us

The Farakka Barrage's original intent was to divert some of the Ganga's flow from its original direction, instead towards Calcutta. Mother Ganga did not decide that; man decided that. All those who were involved, somehow, were able to 'see' what was at that time. The experience and expertise available was utilized to build the barrage. Decades of intellectual assessment, between governing bodies that lead the final decision to construct the barrage, was strictly designed through 'physical eye' – the mind, the intellect, and the knowledge of humans involved.

As human beings, we build bridges and barrages within us all the time – using the 'physical eye'. We have been trained to 'see' the world at physical and emotional levels, then evaluate what we 'see' against the experiences and lessons from our past, then, using our intellect to rationalize and synthesize, we finally make decisions – generally to serve our self and our ego (or our collective ego). By the way, we make these decisions quickly – especially in today's global business and social cultures, without trying to quiet the mind. Why? Because we don't have time! Again we see the self-deception at its best, running our life, on auto pilot.

We have not been trained to lead our life using our 'spiritual eye'. For many of us, Swami has been guiding us to develop this 'spiritual eye' for last eight decades. Even then, we are struggling, suffering, and spinning.

Bridge or Barrage, Looking Past the Mirage

As was the case with the Farakka Barrage, it can be assumed that, there was lack of authentic decision criteria available at that time. There was lack of 'spiritual eye' available by the parties involved.

I would like to propose the notion that there is a Farakka Barrage being built, or it is already constructed, within all of us at this time. Remarkably on the surface, these 'inner constructions' actually look magnificent (our careers, or businesses, or luxurious homes, or beautiful cars, etc.) as bridges and not as barrages. Without deeper inquiry, we have convinced our self that these bridges, to our future happy life, will give us endless peace and joy. In reality, they are all barrages within. They undoubtedly only give temporary joy. They fix a short-term problem, without our ability to recognize the future negative impact it might have upon us in this journey of life – towards the ultimate goal. Most inner barrages are rooted in the worldly attachments and ambitions. They are built using only the mind and the unregulated ego energy.

As Sai devotees, we have known this as well. But, we continue to keep building these inner barrages every day, not realizing the long term impact it might have upon us and our families.

Swami has told us that the world and our body is our universal classroom towards enlightenment. If that is true, we need to dive deeper into such stories to find real answers for our *Dharmic* growth. We must demand answers from our selves, using our spiritual eye, for our inner growth.

So, let's accept the fact that the story of Farakka barrage is not at all an accident. It is here and now. It has been designed to teach us something. This is true of all that happens to us everyday. There is no point in devoting negative thoughts towards things that have happened already. Our *Dharma* should be to learn from it – in a deeper way, once we have accepted that all that happens in the world, near and far, is not by accident but a Divine Will for our own good.

If nothing is by accident, then there is absolutely no doubt, it has come to us with a deeper meaning and it is ultimately best for all of us. This is very hard to do for most of us. It is hard, because here lies one of our barrages within. We don't like to change. We don't like to get outside of our comfort zone. We don't like to be One (the reminder of Unity, Purity, and Divinity from our Sai) we prefer to stay in the illusion of body consciousness – that we are an individual and others are not part of us. This is one of the most complex and strongest inner barriers.

As Sai devotees and as serious spiritual seekers, we must recognize other such inner barrages, and then we can start asking more pronounced questions such as:

- What must we do for the villagers being impacted today in this part of the world?
- What is our role for other such similar societal projects that might be underway in our own neighborhoods, counties, provinces, states, and countries?
- How can we find the five values of Sathya, Dharma, Shanti, Prema, and Ahimsa in such situations?
- Where is God in such stories?
- What is our own lesson and a message for our inner growth from this story?

We can accelerate our inner growth by recognizing that there are numerous types of inner barrages we must fight:

- **Person vs. Self** is where a person's character is at odds against their own will, confusion, or fears. Person vs. Self can also be where a character tries to find out who they are or comes to a realization or a change in character. Although the struggle is internal, the character can be influenced by external forces. The struggle of the human being to come to an integrity based decision is the basis of Person vs. Self barrage.
- **Person vs. Person** is when there is a conflict of two forms of like beings. An example is the hero's conflicts with the central villain of a work, which may play a large role in the plot and contribute to the development of both characters. There are usually several

confrontations between them before some kind of duel. The conflict is external.

- **Person vs. Society** is the conflict in social traditions or concepts. In this sense, the two parties are: a) the protagonist(s); b) the society in which the protagonist(s) are part of. Society itself is often looked at as a single character, just as an opposing party would be looked at in a *Person vs. Person* conflict.
- **Person vs. Nature/Environment** is the theme in where an individual is against nature and forces of nature. Many films focus on this theme, which is predominant within many survival stories. It is also strong in stories about struggling for survival in remote locales and man-made disasters.
- **Person vs. Higher-self** is where a person is struggling to find answers about the Divinity, the *Atma*, the Universal Source, the Super Conscious, or we can say God.

On surface, the story of Farakka Barrage may seem only to be of Person vs. Nature conflict. But, is it really? It can be argued that it is much more. It actually encompasses all of the above types of inner conflicts.

The Hidden Truths

Question to contemplate upon:

Q: If God is everywhere why is it that we cannot see Him everywhere? Or in the story of Panchanandapur village and the devastation, where is God?

A: Swami says:

The ocean water reflects the sun above. When the water is disturbed, the reflection of the sun is also disturbed. Similarly, God is in every man. But he is not able to see Him because of his disturbed mind. A disturbed and vacillating mind can never reflect God....There is no use of meditation, chanting His name, etc. if the mind is not steady. Once you have the five senses under control, you can experience God. He is not far away from you. He is in you, below you, above you and all around you. God, in fact, is the indweller of man.

- Divine Discourse, May 26,
2002.

R: Reflection to consider:

As human beings we pride ourselves in being 'doers', and our lives are often wasted everyday in continuous series of senseless pyramid of projects. When

do we get a chance to control our mind, which is the source of all the noise that prevents us to see God everywhere? Swami has been telling us to first let go, to free our minds from continuous concentration on things at the outer edge of our life; where there is little hope for true realization and liberation.

Q: Farakka Barrage is not directly impacting us, it is too far away. What can we do from such distance? What is the inner meaning of this man-made disaster? What is our role?

A: Swami says:

Just as the hands, ears, eyes and legs are all *angas* (limbs or organs) of individual human body, the bodies of all human beings are the limbs of society. Again, society itself is a limb of mankind. And humanity is a limb of *Prakrithi* (Nature) and Nature is a limb of Divinity. One should understand this *Anga-Angee-Bhaava* (intimate limb) relationship between Divinity and human beings, in the proper perspective.

- Divine Discourse, May 20, 1993.

R: Reflection to consider:

Ganga is part of our nature, and for many of us, it is Divinity, the Godhead. If we are 'limb' of our society' and society is the limb of mankind, and mankind, nature, and divinity are One, we may be able to come up with the answers easily to such questions and inquiry.

Swami has also said, *"All the limbs [of the body]... are carrying out their respective duties without any concern for their reward. Look at the way the heart functions; the impure blood comes through one channel, it is purified and pumped to all parts of the body through another channel. This is the process by which the body is kept hale and healthy. This is how the Divine works."* (p. 69, *Sathya Sai Speaks Vol. 27*).

Armed with this teaching from our beloved Bhagawan, along with the recognition that we have constructed internal barrages/conflicts, we can conclude that, we must vigilantly take care of our character. When we do, we are directly strengthening our spiritual muscle. No wonder, Swami spends so much time with the young students, and our individual spiritual growth.

Only when we have developed this muscle, can we take care of our family and society. This will help us serve mankind selflessly, which ultimately is advancing the human consciousness and the harmony between Man, Nature, and God.

Q: Why is it that we cannot feel compassion for those impacted by the disaster? Why is it that we cannot feel Love for the homeless in this situation?

A: Swami says:

As long as one is governed by the mind, one continues to be human. Once one goes beyond the mind, one can enjoy the vastness of the limitless expanse of Cosmic Consciousness. Here is an example: Suppose you construct a spacious house with a number of bed rooms, living rooms, dining room and bath room. The house appears divided into a number of small rooms. This is because of the walls put up for partitioning into rooms. If the walls are pulled down, the house will be one vast mansion. Similarly, the body is the *Upaadhi* (wall) which limits one's perception to the narrow confines of the body. Once you get rid of this body consciousness, you will experience the vast expanse of the Universal Cosmic Consciousness which is all-pervasive.

- Divine Discourse, May 20, 1993.

Love and Compassion are inherent in every person. Each one has to share their love with others. Failure to share one's love is gross ingratitude to society, to which one owes everything. One should give one's love freely to others and receive love in return. This is the deep significance of human life.

- Divine Discourse, June 5, 1994.

R: Is it possible that we don't feel the unity consciousness because we have created these narrow 'body walls'? It might be easier, first to simply break down these walls in our own home with our own family members first. When we have achieved mastery in home, we might have the courage and confidence to view the world with Love and Compassion outside into society.

Q: Why were some towns impacted and others were saved? How did Mother Ganga decide to specifically swallow certain villages and not others? Was it an accident or was it part of a divine plan?

A: Swami says:

Suffering entitles you more to the Grace of the Lord. When suffering comes in waves, one behind the other, be glad that the shore is near: bear them bravely; do not like cowards throw the blame on some outside Power or develop dislike for the Lord... Welcome the test because thereafter you are awarded the certificate. It is to measure your progress that tests are imposed. So do not flinch in the face of grief. The Lord bestows a favor when He decides to test you, for He is impressed by your achievement and wants to put upon it the seal of His approval. Rise up to the demands of the test - that is the way to please the Lord.

- Divine Discourse, March 6, 1962.

R: Is it possible that the suffering dawned upon these villagers was actually Grace from Swami? Was it their time to be cradled in the divine arms? Was it a favor from the Lord?

Conclusion

In conclusion, I offer that there are beautiful wisdom teachings all around us everyday – from every corner of our life – near and far. It is only seen when we have developed (through commitment) a ‘spiritual eye’, that such wisdom is visible. Swami has given us an entire ‘playbook’, on how to live every moment of our life. He has given us all that we need to live our life with perfect joy and happiness. It is strictly up to us to utilize them fully, partially, or simply ignore them. We must shift our thinking and become very aware that we have the choice - the final choice to see the ‘real’ or stay in the ‘unreal’.

As Swami beautifully says:

A key performs both the functions of locking and unlocking the lock. When it is turned left, the lock gets locked; when it is turned right, the lock is opened. In man, the heart is the lock; mind is the key. When the mind is turned Godward, the heart develops detachment. When the mind is turned towards the world, the heart develops attachment. Thus both detachment and attachment result from the way the mind functions. When the mind is directed towards *Prakruthi* (Nature or the phenomenal world), bondage ensues. When you turn your mind towards Divinity, you experience *Ananda* (bliss).

- *Divine Discourse, May 6, 1988.*

So, that is the key. All the problems in this world are created by the Mind, but the solution lies, not in the mind and its intellectual capabilities and skills, but in the Heart. A heart filled with compassion and love alone can bring heaven on Earth, just like Sage Bhagiratha did aeons ago.

HARNESSING THE HEART - PART 6

...LIVING UP TO THE CHALLENGE OF CONSCIENCE IN DAILY LIFE

Dear Reader, in this series, we offer you real life stories from contemporary heroes who have demonstrated the courage to follow their conscience when confronted with difficult dilemmas or challenging circumstances in their daily lives. This segment is an ode to the strength of the brave-hearts who chose to listen to the voice of their conscience, thereby abiding to the values of Right Conduct, Truth, Love, Peace and Non-violence, even if the choice appeared the tougher one to follow.

In our previous issues, we brought you inspiring stories of Mrs. Priya Davis, Mr. Dev Taneja, Mr. C. B. S. Mani, Mr. Karthik Ramesh and Mr. Amar Vivek.

In this issue, we carry the enlightening account of Mr. Krish Venkatasubramaniam, a successful accountant who narrates his experiences of how sticking to honest principles despite possible unfavorable reactions only led to enhance his position; how positive pressure applied to colleagues led to better working practices and how promoting discipline only enables harmony in the corporate world.

THE WIN-WIN-WIN FORMULA

By Mr. Krish Venkatasubramaniam

A Chartered Accountant and CISA (USA), with nearly 18 years of experience in Indian and Multi National Companies, Mr. Krish Venkatasubramaniam is the CEO of Anantha Consulting Pvt. Ltd., Chennai. Additionally, he is also currently pursuing a Masters in Psychology and is engaged in research in the field of Human Excellence. More importantly, Krish has been a devotee of Bhagavan for more than three decades and is a member of the Sundaram Bhajan Group, Chennai.

June 2005. It was then almost four years since I had taken up a job in Maldives, a cluster of a thousand tiny islands on the Indian Ocean. Many around the world have been fascinated by that tiny country for its beautiful beaches and coral reefs, no wonder, making it one of the preferred international tourist spots. And I was the Group Financial Controller of a resort group. But to me, it was like living in a spiritual desert.

Being a Sai devotee for more than thirty years, I longed to feel His Presence there. And I did whenever I snorkeled on the beautiful reefs. Who else can create such wide variety of beautiful and colorful fishes, I thought to myself, but I was still missing Him and the company of Sai devotees. I prayed and wished if I could return to India and decided to update my resume.

What Can an Honest Resume Deliver?

As I sat preparing my resume, I felt that I should mention only those details, which were entirely true in all respects. That way I would be pleasing Him and my conscience. It was not that my resume earlier had fabricated facts; but in the quest of making it attractive, I had added 'flavours', which ideally could have been avoided. And so, I deleted, altered and trimmed the document until it was hundred per cent true, and then confidently posted a copy to Bhagavan before circulating it to my friends and contacts.

Within a few days, I received a call from an old friend of mine from India. After confirming my preferences, he said that he would pass on my resume to Deloitte, a leading Multinational Consulting and Auditing Company. He also said, 'You know, your prospective boss's name is the same as your God's name'. This sent a shrill of joy through me, because even though my friend was not a Sai devotee, he did not hesitate in the least to use the word 'God' to refer to Bhagavan.

In any case, I sent my resume by email to Deloitte and expressed my willingness to travel to India for an interview at any time, as is the normal procedure. In the next few days, just after a phone call from a Senior Manager of Deloitte, the Chief (with 'my God's name!'), sent an email stating that he is dispensing with the requirement of a direct interview. He straight away sent the offer through email, agreeing to all terms I had requested.

This was truly a great lesson for me; it convinced me that sticking to values would surely bring the desired benefits. A fellow Chartered Accountant like me would know how difficult it is to shift a career back to India after a four year stint in a country like Maldives. But here was a case where a crucial career shift was made to look as if it were like going to the next room! That is the power of values!

*The wise and moral man
Shines like a fire on a hilltop,
Making money like a bee
Who does not hurt the flower.*

The Pali Canon

My employer at Maldives wanted me to continue for a few more years, and hence refused to give me a relieving letter and the experience certificate. I was in a fix since such a document had to be handed over while taking up the new job. My friend offered to help me by printing a letter head and 'cooking up' the necessary documents for this purpose. Again, I thought of my principles and teachings of Bhagavan, and firmly decided that I would not do such a thing. Instead, if asked, I decided I would honestly tell them the fact. Wonder of wonders, I was not asked for such a letter or certificate! My boss did not even want a reference from any of my previous employers in India, even though I was ready to get the required references.

The True Power of a Corporate

A few months ago, when a Business School invited me to give a lecture, I spontaneously chose '**The Power of Ethics and Governance**' as the topic. I went on to explain during my presentation that following ethics is not just one's duty; neither is it a statutory compulsion. It is, in reality, a Power. Many corporates and individuals have thrived on values, etching a name on the sands of time. While many businesses have failed due to flawed strategies or faulty execution, not a single enterprise in the history of the world has failed because the promoters chose the ethical path!

There are times when a professional takes over new responsibilities in the corporate environment and faces the task of correcting age old unethical practices that have cemented themselves. I have always believed that, the individual should intelligently alter the course, rather than approach the issue emotionally. With confidence in himself and faith in the invisible power of the Divine, he has to smoothly transform people and practices.

*As far as possible, without surrender
be on good terms with all persons.
Speak your truth quietly and clearly;
and listen to others...*

*Exercise caution in your business affairs;
for the world is full of trickery.
But let this not blind you to what virtue there is;*

Max Ehrmann, Desiderata

Positive Pressure – Solution to Corporate Malpractice

When I took over as the Manager, in charge of Corporate Taxation at a Multinational Retail giant in 1999, I faced the above issue. The earlier Head and his team were used to the system of bribing the government departments for almost everything. There was very poor internal documentation of such pay-offs, which were numerous, since it was part of the Shared Services catering to five fairly large Companies.

My first line of action was to act on those areas which could be immediately changed internally, that is, operations that were within our control. I ensured transparency by involving the Treasury Department in such shady deals. Whenever cash was paid to any external person, an employee from the Treasury would accompany the Taxation staff. Internally, the information was candidly documented. My colleagues were unhappy and angry with me. 'Why should we ourselves bring in such tight controls?' they asked me. I calmly went ahead with the proposed improvements. The Management was extremely happy with my voluntary governance initiative.

The point here is, instead of worrying about those things that are beyond one's ambit or which cannot be changed immediately, a professional has to

keep doing the little things which are very well within his control. And more importantly, once he leads by example, he either inspires or at least creates positive pressure on people around him.

The qualities of Assertiveness, Intelligence and Humility are very essential for a professional in the course of ensuring ethical practices around him or her. Isn't it often that an individual faces a situation where he or she is not able to question the unethical act happening in front of their eyes? And what really stops the person from doing anything? It is just the lack of assertiveness.

Taking Stock of the Truth

While auditing leading corporations during the stint with Deloitte, I used to find young professionals having an aversion towards simple tasks like stock counts. They view such activities as too mundane considering their professional qualification. But they fail to notice that these are the opportunities for young professionals to get exposed to situation management, where they can hone their assertiveness and presence of mind. It's very much akin to a young and budding sportsman who is willing to play only in the big league. But there are a lot of things that you learn by playing the smaller games, where you sharpen your skills for the tougher games ahead.

On many occasions, these young auditors would actually not be satisfied with either the arrangement or the segregation of a particular stock. Still, the client would press them to certify, and they would meekly accept the quantity and sign the Stock Sheet (each stock item would value a few lakh rupees or more). Sometimes, it was just the tendency to ignore these issues as trivial. We used to hone their ability to assertively, at the same time humbly, refuse things that were incorrect or unsatisfactory (you need not oblige, but speak obligingly!). With a smile on your face, with softly spoken words, you can still create a powerful impact! And more importantly, unless you are able to exhibit these traits while doing the smaller tasks, you would not be able to do it while performing the 'bigger' tasks.

*The Superior man thinks of virtue;
The smaller man thinks of comfort.*

Confucius

Finding 'Win-Win-Win' Solutions

One needs to apply one's intelligence to decide what stand he or she should take in a given situation. Actually, in difficult situations, a prayer could bring the needed guidance! On one occasion, while inspecting a chemical factory, we noticed one of the Managers using his mobile phone very near the highly sensitive production area. Using a mobile phone was expressly prohibited, with sign boards all around, since it was identified as a 'Very High Risk'

activity. My team member noted it down as one of the critical reportable points.

The Location Head came to me and requested me to remove that from the report, since he felt, the Corporate Office would definitely take serious action, which would most probably result in the termination of the employee. I was in a fix. I thought of his family and did not want him to lose his job. But I was doing my duty of reporting key issues to the Corporate Office, and I thought I would fail in my duty if I did not report such a critical issue.

Therefore, I explained to the Location Head that I cannot remove it from the report, but would talk about this issue personally at the appropriate level in the Corporate Office. I called the concerned person at the Corporate Office and also met him on my return to the City and discussed this issue. He appreciated my gesture and ensured that sufficient warning would be given to the concerned staff, but he would surely not lose his job this time.

Whether it is earning money, or accomplishing one's task, the secret is to look for a Win-Win-Win situation. You win, the other person wins and you win God's Heart in the process! A mere win-win without winning the Lord's Grace is still a failure. When we are tuned to His teachings and follow our conscience steadfastly, there is always a benefiting and beautiful end. It is, actually, the safest and surest path, but unfortunately, more often than not, many take to the more complicated and highly risky path, out of delusion and wrong perceptions.

In the words of B.C. Forbes (founder of the Forbes magazine), 'He is a wise man who seeks by every legitimate means to make all the money he can honestly, for money can do so many worthwhile things in this world, not merely for one's self but for others. But he is an unmitigated fool, who imagines for a moment that it is more important to make money than to make it honestly.'

SERIAL ARTICLES

SHIRDI SAI PARTHI SAI

Part - 41

(Continued from the previous issue)

ACT XV - SCENE 1

Kondama's house

SATHYA: Venkamma, enough. The pain will go off by itself.

SUBBAMMA: Boy, is it paining much? That wicked fellow tortured the poor innocent child and even shaved the head.

EASWARAMMA: Subbamma! I pleaded that Sathya should not be taken to that witch doctor; but no one listened to my words! That evil man has even slashed the scalp. How much my dear boy would have suffered! I don't know how He was able to bear it all.

SISTER: We were under the impression that he would merely chant some incantations and set things right. We did not even dream that he would inflict torture like this.

KONDAMA RAJU: If, instead of treating, he inflicted torture like this, he cannot be a native doctor; rather, he must be the devil itself!

SISTER: Grandpa, all his methods were brutal. That's why, we quietly escaped without anyone's knowledge and came away. If we had not, he would have caused even greater harm to Sathyam.

FATHER: Seshama had at least that much sense!

SUBBAMMA: Easwaramma, right away stop all these crazy treatments. Sathyam is the boon of Lord Sathya Narayana. That God will be the support of Sathyam and protect Him. I will now take your leave, Easwaramma.Sathyam I will be back later.

SATHYA: Alright Subbamma.*[To sister who is trying to apply balm]* No, Venkamma, it would heal on its own.

SISTER: Sathyam, don't say that! Unless some medicine is applied, it cannot heal on its own.

EASWARAMMA: My dear boy, don't say no; allow the medicine to be applied.

SATHYA: No!

KONDAMA: Sathyam my boy, as Your Mother says, if the medicine is applied, the healing would be quicker. After that, You can play with Your friends and sing, or else both of us can go for a walk to the Chitravathi river, OK?

SATHYA: OK, grandpa.

SCENE 2

Kondama's house. Mother combing hair.

KONDAMA RAJU: Look! There is hair on the head! Boy, has the pain subsided completely?

SATHYA: Grandpa, pain can come down only if it was present in the first place!

KONDAMA: Yes, You know not what pain is! Before Your endurance, all pains vanish!

SATHYA: Grandpa, if one has the strength of mind, no pain can come near.

FATHER: Easwari, it appears that Sathyam wants to return to Uravakonda and complete the studies.

EASWARAMMA: Please no! I don't care if Sathyam does not study. For me it is enough if He is with us. I want Him to be in good health, that is all.

FATHER: Easwari, I fully understand your feelings and the anguish. But now that Sathyam's health has improved, we must give thought to His future.

SISTER: Well Sathyam, do You insist on going back to Uravakonda?

SATHYA: Sister, I insist on going back, and nothing can change My decision.

KONDAMA: Alright, let it be according to His wish.

SCENE 3

Seshama's house in Uravakonda.

RAMA RAJU: Seshama Raju!

SESHAMA: Oh, it is you! Please come, come in.

RAMA RAJU: Greetings.

SESHAMA: Sit down.

ALL: Greetings.

SESHAMA: What brings all the elders here? What is the matter?

RAMA RAJU: Seshama Raju, Sathyam may be your brother but to all of us, He is Divine. Everyone is full of praise for the various miracles.

SESHAMA: My brother Sathyam is a young lad. At times, perhaps His behaviour is a bit queer.

MAN: How can you speak so light-heartedly? Being your brother, to you He may seem strange but to all of us, He is God!

LAKSHMI NARAYANA: We have come to reverentially invite Sathyam and also His family, to visit Hampi.

RAMA RAJU: We believe that if Sathyam visits our place, it would be sanctified and become prosperous.

MAN: Kindly accept our invitation and bring Sathyam.

RAMA RAJU: Enjoy the beauty of the sculptures of Hampi and have the *Darshan* of Virupaksha. Also come to Hospet and accept our hospitality.

SESHAMA: Sathyam, shall we go to Hampi and have the *Darshan* of Virupaksha?

SATHYA: As you wish.

SESHAMA: It is not my wish; the elders have all come to invite You and I cannot say yes unless You agree.

SATHYA: I have already told you – as you wish.

SUSEELA: Please! Can You come inside for a minute?

SESHAMA: Excuse me, I'll be back in a minute.

RAMA RAJU: Boy, You must definitely come. Please don't deny our wish. Everyone in our town is eagerly looking forward to receiving You.

SUSEELA: I believe a change of place and a visit to the temples can do a lot of good to Sathya. Please accept their request and do not say no.

SESHAMA: OK.

SESHAMA [to visitors]: How can I say no when you are inviting us with such great affection? We consider it our good fortune to be able to have the *Darshan* of Virupaksha. We will definitely come.

ALL: We are very happy. We will now take our leave and hope to see you soon.

SESHAMA: Very good, gentlemen.

SCENE 4

Hampi

SESHAMA: Brother, look there!

RAMA RAJU: That's Hampi, a wondrous city famous for its sculptures. They say that at one time, diamonds and other precious stones used to be sold here in heaps!

SESHAMA: Yes.

MAN: Seshama Raju, this is the Hall of Thousand Pillars.

SESHAMA: Is this the one?

ELDER: Yes, if you strike the pillar here, the seven musical notes can be heard.

RAMA RAJU: Not merely that. In the days of the Raya Dynasty, this hall reverberated to dance and music by great performers.

SESHAMA: All those glories belong to the past. Those days are gone and so also the kingdoms.

SATHYA: Even so, they have been enshrined in history, and in the beauty of these sculptures.

SESHAMA: My word! These sculptures are beautiful and pulsate with life!This is the thousand-pillared hall, and they say that if the structure is struck here, seven notes can be heard.

MAN: Look at this wonder in stone; it is a chariot and looks beautiful even after exposure for hundreds of years. Every inch of this town, Hampi is beautiful!

SATHYA: You seem to be interested only in Creation and not the Creator!

SESHAMA: Look, these sculptures are so beautiful, and absolutely unaffected by exposure to weather and rain for so many centuries.

SATHYA: The sculptures are beautiful no doubt, but much greater are those who gave life to stone.

SESHAMA: Yes that is true; the Kings of the Vijayanagaram Empire have produced another creation.

SESHAMA: Sathyam, don't you like the beauty of the sculptures of Hampi?

SATHYA: Brother, to me all sculptures are beautiful. Moreover, I see in these figures the great sculptors themselves!

SESHAMA: What? You see the sculptors? Does that mean You do not see sculptures at all?

SATHYA: External beauty is seen by all but internal beauty is visible only to a few. I am able to see not only the sculptures but also those who carved them.

RAMA RAJU: Sathyam identifies the inner aspect of everything.

MAN: If everyone sees the trees, Sathyam can see even the roots!

SATHYA: Without roots, there cannot be a tree. Without a chisel, the stone cannot become a sculpture. Without the hand, the chisel is useless. Without a steady mind, the hand cannot do what it is supposed to do. Without the thought of God, there can be no calm mind. And without the merits of earlier births, there can be no thoughts of the Divine!

SESHAMA: Have you heard the words of our boy? How unusual they sound! Are they what one expects from a boy of that age?

MERCHANT: Seshama Raju, Sathyam is a child philosopher!

SESHAMA RAJU: I wonder. He doesn't speak and act like boys of His age ought to.

RAMA RAJU: This is the temple of Virupaksha. Please come in.

SESHAMA: Brother, You also come inside.

MERCHANT: Come, let's go into the sanctum and have the *Darshan* of Virupaksha.

SESHAMA: Sathyam, why are standing outside, instead of coming into the temple?

SATHYA: You go and have *Darshan*, while I wait here.

RAMA RAJU: Having come to Hampi, how can You go without the *Darshan* of Virupaksha? Come inside!

SESHAMA: I told you earlier that His actions are strange. No one can predict what He will say and what He will do. If He does not want to come, it does not matter. Let us go inside and have *Darshan*. Sathyam, You take charge of this

luggage and sit here. Don't be absent-minded!Come, let's go inside.

Priests chanting.

PRIEST: Name?

SESHAMA: Seshama Raju.

PRIEST: The name is Seshama Raju..... Lineage?

SESHAMA: Bharadwaja Gotram.

Priests chanting.

SESHAMA: Sathyam appears to be visible in the idol of Virupaksha!..... Hey, it really looks like Sathyam! We told Him to take care of the luggage, and how did He come in here?

MAN: Yes it is true! How did He come here?

SESHAMA: I too cannot understand that. Did He come when we were not looking? Let me go out and check; you stay right here.

MAN: OK.

Seshama comes out.

SESHAMA: Sathyam, were You here all the time?

SATHYA: Yes brother, I have been only here.

SESHAMA: You are sure You did not go anywhere?

SATHYA: No.

SESHAMA: OK. Stay right here.

Seshama goes in.

SESHAMA: It is all very surprising. Is it that I alone am able to see Him or is He visible to others also?Sathyam, one minute.....move aside.

Comes out.

SESHAMA: Sathyam, did You come inside?

SATHYA: Inside? What do you mean?

SESHAMA: You mean You were only here all the time?

SATHYA: Yes.

SESHAMA: OK, OK, don't go anywhere. Stay right here and mind the luggage.

SATHYA: Yes.

Goes in.

RAMA RAJU: Seshama, did you go out to check if Sathyam was there or not?

SESHAMA: Yes.

MERCHANT: Was He there?

SESHAMA: Yes, He was there; but He is here also! I just don't understand!

ELDER: We told you! Sathyam is no ordinary boy. There is Divinity in Him, and all these are His miracles.

SESHAMA: To me, it all seems to be imagination!

R.RAJU: Seshama, it is not imagination, but a fact.

SESHAMA: It's all topsy-turvy!

SATHYA: Did you have a good *Darshan* of Virupaksha?

SESHAMA: Very well indeed. I also prayed to Virupaksha to bless You with intelligence and good education.

SATHYA: Brother, God's vision falls equally on all but only those who respond to it earn His Grace. Everyone can see that the rays of the Sun illumine the whole world, but how many are conscious of the blazing fire in the Sun? With a magnifying glass, one can demonstrate the fire in the Sun. Likewise some minds can see God. If we turn to God with intense and pure devotion, then He, in turn, will shower Grace with His vision.

SESHAMA: You all heard what He said! This is an example of His strange behaviour.

RAMA RAJU: Now that the sight-seeing is over, please come to my house and accept my hospitality.

SESHAMA: OK. Come, let's go.

MUSINGS ON AVATARS - Part 3

Loving Sai Ram and greetings from Prashanti Nilayam. We resume the story of the Rama Avatar. If you recall, last time, I brought you up to the point where Hanuman, when asked to search for Sita's whereabouts, makes a big leap across the oceans to Lanka. Let us pick up the story from there.

Hanuman Reassures Sita

Once he landed in Lanka, Hanuman reverted to his normal small size and, after a lengthy search, located Sita who was held captive in a garden named Asokavanam. Hiding on a tree, he was contemplating his next move when he saw Ravana accompanied by his entourage approaching Sita and making advances to her. Spurning the demon king's overtures, Sita plucked a blade of grass and placing it between herself and Ravana said: "You fool, go back to your own wives and covet not that of another. With the power of my chastity, I could reduce you to ashes in a trice, but I shall refrain from doing so because the credit for destroying you should really go to my Husband, Lord Rama. You dare not cross the barrier represented by this blade of grass. Go back where you came from." Ravana retreated, but not before warning Sita that she had just two more months to think it all over, and if after that she still refused to change her mind, well then she would end up as a meal for him!

Sita was now in a turmoil. How long should she wait for Rama? Would He ever come? Had He forgotten her? Tormented by doubts of all sorts, Sita thought that the best course of action for her was to end her life by hanging. And even as she started making preparations for committing suicide, Hanuman, a silent witness thus far, decided that he must now intervene, and did so by gently singing the story and the glory of Rama. And when he had finished, he jumped from the branch to the ground with chants of "Jai Sri Ram, Jai Sita Ram" and prostrated before Sita.

Sita was perplexed - a monkey chanting the story of Rama? Was that possible? Was it another demonic trick like the golden deer? Is it Ravana himself in disguise trying another ploy? Torn with doubts she started cross examining Maruti (another name of Hanuman) and finally became convinced that he was indeed a messenger sent by Rama. In fact, Rama had quite thoughtfully sent through Hanuman a ring of His so that Sita would have no difficulty in identifying Him and accepting His credentials. (On one *Ramanavami* day or the birth anniversary of Rama, Swami who was then in Kodaikanal produced this ring to show it to the boys!) Once Sita saw Rama's ring, all her doubts vanished and the bottled up emotions poured out in a torrent - all of which Hanuman gave a patient hearing. The question now was: "What next?" Hanuman offered to carry Sita on his back, hearing which Sita forgetting her worries laughed. "You are such a tiny fellow," she said, "How can you carry me?" "Mother," replied Hanuman, "I can assume a gigantic form if I wish to," and so saying he grew to enormous proportions. Absolutely stunned, Sita agreed that Hanuman could indeed carry her and jump across the ocean but now she had a new point: "If I were to escape like this, it would

be no credit to my Lord. The proper thing is for Him to come, kill Ravana and rescue me. Right now you should return and convey the news regarding my whereabouts." With this, Hanuman took leave of Sita, but not before accepting from her a jewel of hers as proof of having actually met her.

Hanuman Lights Up Lanka

Mission accomplished, Hanuman was all set to return but a new thought occurred to him: "Now that I am here, why not probe the enemy's strength? That information could prove useful later." With this in mind he started destroying the beautiful garden in which Sita was being held. In the stir that followed, Hanuman allowed himself to be captured, and in this manner he found himself a prisoner tied hand and foot, being produced before Ravana in the latter's court. Once face to face with Ravana, Hanuman advised the demon king to follow the path of righteousness or *Dharma* and return Sita to Rama. But, charged as he was with lust, Ravana was in no mood for sane advice; furious, he ordered that the monkey be killed. At this stage, Vibhishana, the younger brother of Ravana, intervened to say that in spite of all the havoc caused by him, Hanuman was an envoy and the canons of *Dharma* required that envoys should not be killed; they could however be punished. Accepting the suggestion, Ravana ordered that bandages be tied to the tail of Hanuman and then set on fire.

Hanuman allowed the fire to be lit. Breaking loose then, he leapt from building to building setting them all on fire. Soaring high up, he then saw with a smile that the whole of Lanka was burning. Normally when the body comes into contact with fire it gets burnt, but nothing happened to Hanuman because *Agni*, the deity associated with fire, withheld his burning power as far as Hanuman was concerned.

Rama Lovingly Receives His Servant

After an event-free leap back to the mainland, Hanuman was able to report to Rama the success of his mission and also convey the message from Sita. Rama was overwhelmed. Stretching out His arms, He said, "O Hanuman there is so much I would like to give you, but at the moment all I can do is to embrace you. Come!" So saying He held Maruti in close embrace for a long time. It is said that is how Hanuman himself became Divine. Incidentally, it is noteworthy that at the Hill View stadium in Prasanthi Nilayam where there are many statues - Jesus, Krishna, Buddha and so forth - the biggest statue is that of Hanuman; also, it is at the very top of the hill, a reminder to all of us to emulate this great servant of the Lord. The next item of business for Rama was the invasion of Lanka, for which purpose, Rama and Lakshmana, accompanied by Sugriva and his army of monkeys (Vanarasena) headed for the southern tip of the peninsula.

Ravana Ignores Wise Counsel

Meanwhile, back in Lanka, Ravana held a council of war in which the only sane voice to be heard was that of Vibhishana. While all others advised war,

Vibhishana said: "My dear brother, please don't listen to the advice given by your ministers and others. It will harm you. They are your true enemies, and not Rama. You have no idea of Rama's might and capability. Prudence is the better part of valour. Quietly return Sita to Rama and make peace with Him. Then Lanka and all of us would survive. Otherwise we are all doomed."

This was hardly the kind of counsel that Ravana wanted to hear. Flying into a rage, he screamed: "Traitor! I am ashamed you are my brother. Indeed if you were not, I would have had you executed this very minute. You are lucky, and I shall restrain myself to merely banishing you. Now get out of my sight this very minute." For Vibhishana, this was no punishment but a great liberation. Delighted and relieved, he at once headed for Rama's camp, but the reception at the other end was far from what he would have liked! Taken by the guards to be a spy of Ravana, he was promptly apprehended; eventually after a lot of persuasion by him, he was brought before Rama. Many views were expressed about how Vibhishana should be dealt with and all except that of Hanuman were unfavourable; some even said that Vibhishana should straightaway be executed.

Vibhishana *Saranagathi*

This scene known as *Vibhishana Saranagathi* (Vibhishana's surrender) is one of the glorious episodes in the story of Rama, revealing as it does the towering magnanimity of the Lord. After listening to the diverse viewpoints, Rama smiles and says: "I have heard all of you. I am aware that you all mean well. Now please listen to what I have to say. Vibhishana has surrendered to Me and it is My duty to offer him protection under all circumstances. It does not matter if he has feigned surrender; the very fact he said: 'I have surrendered to You', is enough for Me. He need not have come here physically; even if he had surrendered wherever he was, I would still be obliged to protect him. Indeed, even a mere thought of surrender on his part would put Me under obligation - there is no need to express the surrender in words." Is it any wonder then that the Lord is described as *Saranagathavatsala* (One who loves those who surrender)? Thus, it was that Vibhishana was admitted to Rama's camp as a friend.

The Vibhishana affair having been settled, the question arose regarding how to cross the ocean. Clearly everyone could not leap across like Hanuman and some other solution was needed. Eventually it was decided to build a causeway by piling boulders and rocks. Everyone pitched in with great gusto, including a tiny squirrel, which, with great effort, rolled a small pebble to the site and pushed it into the general pile. Rama who was watching was deeply touched and in a loving gesture stroked its back - and that is how the squirrel won its stripes! As Swami repeatedly emphasises, the Lord never cares for quantity; all He is interested in is the quality.

Another touching causeway story is that Hanuman was in the process of lifting a hillock when the announcement was made that the causeway had been completed and that no more stones would be required. Hanuman then promptly placed the hillock down whereupon the hill burst into tears because it

could not be of service to Rama. The Lord consoled the hill by saying, "Don't worry. In the next *Yuga*, I shall use you in an important mission and you will thereafter be remembered for ever." Indeed, in the *Dwapara Yuga*, this very same hill achieved fame as Govardhanagiri lifted by Krishna to protect people from a torrential downpour (that story comes soon).

The Invasion of Lanka Begins

Once the causeway was completed, Rama and party crossed over to Lanka in a trice. Lanka, which Ravana always boasted was impenetrable, had now been actually invaded! At first, Ravana treated the matter lightly and sent his junior warriors to deal with the invaders. None of them returned and soon Ravana found that he was running out of soldiers as well as chiefs. The senior warriors and ministers were then pressed into battle, but they too were promptly annihilated. Ravana was getting increasingly worried and decided that his brother, the mighty Kumbhakarna, had now to be fielded to clinch the battle. But the great Kumbhakarna was, like always, in deep slumber, and it required a Herculean effort to first wake him up, and then get him worked up for battle. Eventually the mighty one did go to war, and as expected wrought much havoc, but in the end he fell to Rama's arrows. When the news of Kumbhakarna's death reached Ravana, he could not believe his ears. Was there a person alive who could kill his mighty brother? Ravana was now greatly worried and there was no alternative, but to send his favourite son, the invincible Indrajit. Alas, Indrajit too fell and finally Ravana was all alone. At last, it was his turn to face Rama and this was in a sense what the Lord had incarnated for. A fierce battle ensued and finally, Ravana was killed.

Rama then advised Vibhishana the only surviving brother of Ravana to perform all the due last rites. He said, "When he was alive, he was your enemy. He is now dead and you must remember more than anything else that he was your brother. And your duty requires that you do what is due to the dead." Again that supreme magnanimity that only the Lord can show!

Sita's Fiery Test

Ravana having been exterminated, Sita was released from captivity and brought to Rama. Instead of the thrilling and joyful reunion that all were looking forward to, all that Sita received was a cold reception from Rama. Curtly Rama told Sita: "I belong to a royal family, and your abduction was a slur cast on our noble family. I have now avenged that insult. As for you, you have lived for nearly a year in the territory of another man. I therefore cannot take you back as My wife. You may go wherever you wish."

Sita felt as if she had been struck by a thunderbolt. Was it for this that she was holding on to dear life in the face of atrocious behaviour by Ravana? Deeply hurt, she ordered Lakshmana to light a fire and when that was done she said: "It is unfortunate that even my Husband is not convinced about my purity. Under the circumstances, I see no reason to continue living." So saying, she entered the fire. But lo and behold, such was her purity that the fire refused to burn her and she emerged unscathed, much to the joy of all present, Rama included. Rama then remarked, "Not for a moment did I

suspect Sita. I only wanted the world to know about her purity, which is why I had to subject her to this ordeal by fire."

The mission to Lanka having been successfully concluded, Rama now became anxious to return to Bharath. Vibhishana, the newly-crowned King of Lanka, placed at Rama's disposal the flying chariot that earlier belonged to Ravana. The entire party boarded the chariot and flew back to the mainland. On the way, Rama and Sita saw familiar places from the air and exchanged fond memories. Back in Bharath, the party landed at the Ashram of Sage Bharadwaja and were given a fitting welcome. Ever conscious of dear Bharatha pining in Nandigram for Rama's return, the Lord thoughtfully sent Hanuman as an advance messenger to alert Bharatha that Rama and party would soon be there. Hanuman arriving at Nandigram discovered that Bharatha was getting rather anxious, since Rama was almost overdue. Hanuman quickly conveyed the good tidings, much to the relief of Bharatha. Soon the long-awaited reunion between Bharatha and Rama took place, and the entire party returned to Ayodhya for a tumultuous welcome by the citizens.

Rama Crowned Triumphant

Shortly after this, on an auspicious day selected by Sage Vasishta, Rama was finally crowned the Emperor, a ceremony that had to wait fourteen years because the Lord had a play to stage. As Emperor, Rama reigned for a very long period. Rama's reign was synonymous with the reign of *Dharma* for Rama was none other than *Dharma* personified. There was unprecedented joy, happiness and prosperity in the kingdom, and even to this day people in India use the word *Ramarajya* to describe a regime where there is righteousness, perfect harmony and joy.

Rama was God, but He lived like man and showed man how he should really live. Never for a moment did Rama reveal His Divinity, nor did He make use of His Divine powers. There would no doubt be a time and place for that in later Avatars, but not in this one.

The above is but a brief narrative of the story of Rama. For a more detailed account, see Swami's *Rama Katha Rasa Vahini* and *Summer Showers in Brindavan*, 1996. As has been said, these are autobiographical accounts!

The Magnificent Story of the Krishna Avatar

The Krishna Avatar is a glorious finale to the sequence of incarnations made necessary (in part) by the indiscretions of Jayan and Vijayan. In the *Dwapara Yuga*, these gatekeepers of the Lord were born as the demon cousins Sishupala and Dantavakra respectively, and when the time was ripe for their destruction, the Lord as usual descended down to earth. Once again He came in a fully human form and with His Divinity in its entirety i.e., as a Poorna Avatar. Although the ostensible purpose of the incarnation was the extermination of the two *Asuras*, the Blessed Lord had a grander objective. Not only did Krishna reveal Himself as God personified, but He also told man

that he (i.e., man) too was God and that in fact, man should endeavour to realise in full measure his Divine nature. As Swami says:

"The Gita is the real purpose for which the Avatar of Krishna was taken."

Skirting the banks of the River Yamuna (Jamuna these days), was the kingdom of Mathura. A famous king named Yadu once ruled the land, and from him descended many tribes, an important one being the Yadavas. One of the Yadava rulers of Mathura was Aahakura who had two sons named Ugrasena and Devaka. Ugrasena's eldest son was Kamsa while Devaka's youngest daughter was Devaki. As he had no sister of his own, Kamsa was very fond of his cousin Devaki. Apart from this streak of affection, Kamsa was otherwise very cruel.

Kamsa Tries to Kill the Infant Krishna

When Devaki came of age, she was duly married with pomp and fanfare to a Yadava named Vasudeva (who belonged to the sub-clan Vrishni). At the conclusion of the wedding ceremonies, an elaborate procession had been arranged to take the newly-married bride to her groom's house. Kamsa himself drove the gaily decorated chariot carrying Vasudeva and Devaki. All of a sudden, an ethereal voice sounded in the sky which said: "Kamsa, your days are numbered. This woman whom you are taking to her husband's place is going to be responsible for your death because her eighth-born son will kill you".

Kamsa was stunned to hear his death warrant being pronounced from heaven. Instantly his affection for Devaki evaporated, and dragging her down by her tresses, he drew his sword to cut her head off. Deeply agitated, Vasudeva fell on his knees and begged Kamsa: "O Kamsa, you belong to a noble race. How is it that your affection for Devaki has vanished in a flash? Devaki is not going to kill you; only her eighth son is supposed to. I promise to surrender to you all her children as soon as they are born. Please do not kill her." Kamsa accepted Vasudeva's offer and spared Devaki her life, but placed her and her husband under house arrest; thus what was to be their home became instead a fortified prison.

In due course, Devaki delivered a child and true to his promise, Vasudeva, though full of anguish, handed the infant over to Kamsa. For a moment, Kamsa was deeply touched and was about to spare the child (as his death was due to come only from the eighth-born) when Sage Narada appeared on the scene. To Kamsa he said: "Kamsa, how could you be so naive? True, the heavenly voice said that you would meet your end from the eighth child. But what does eighth mean? If you count backwards from the number eight, then number one becomes the eighth! If you count backwards from number seven, then number two becomes the eighth and so on. Don't be complacent and take chances!"

Once the seeds of doubt were sown, Kamsa became his usual cruel self. Snatching the baby from Vasudeva's hand, he mercilessly smashed it to the ground. Devaki and Vasudeva both felt shattered, but were absolutely helpless. The senseless destruction of the new-born continued and in due course the count rose to six. Sensing that the time had come for Him to descend to earth, Lord Narayana summoned His Mayashakti and said: "Devi, Adisehsa, who is My *Amsa* (an aspect of Me) has just entered the womb of Devaki as her seventh child. Now Vasudeva has another wife named Rohini. She lives in Gokulam with her brother Nanda, a small chieftain there. Remove the child now in Devaki's womb and place it in the womb of Rohini. The child born to Rohini would, because of his beauty be named Rama and called Balarama on account of his strength. Later, when it is realised that his birth was preceded by a womb-to-womb transfer, people would call him *Sankarshana*. Having completed the womb-to-womb transfer, you shall yourself enter the womb of Nanda's wife, Yasoda and be born to her as her daughter. Around the same time, I shall be born as the eighth son of Devaki. As soon as I take birth, I shall arrange for us to switch places, and you will end up near Devaki and I near Yasoda. Kamsa will try to kill you and you know what you should do then." The wheel had been set in motion for the advent of the Krishna Avatar.

With six children gone, Kamsa was getting more and more jittery. Meanwhile, news reached him that Devaki had conceived for the seventh time and impatiently he waited for the child to be born so that he could kill it. But that was not to be and to his dismay he heard that amazingly and in a most mysterious manner, Devaki's womb had suddenly become empty! Kamsa suspected a trick but there was precious little he could do. Meanwhile, Devaki's seventh child grew safely in the womb of Rohini.

And then Devaki conceived for the eighth time. Kamsa's nervousness now knew no bounds and impatiently he waited for the delivery. Meanwhile, the prison fortifications were intensified. Finally, in the early hours of the morning of an auspicious day, Devaki delivered a beautiful male child - Krishna had arrived! A short while before that Rohini too delivered a baby boy. While Rohini's son was fair, Devaki's was dark.

Lord Krishna Takes Birth

Babies cry when they are born, but Krishna was born smiling. Immediately after birth, Krishna revealed to Devaki and Vasudeva His form as Narayana, complete with four arms, holding the conch, the *Chakra* and other paraphernalia, the jewel *Kausthuba* gleaming around His neck and the mark *Srivatsa* on His chest. To the one fortunate to be His mother, He said: "Devaki, twice before in your earlier births, I have been born as your Son. This is the last time. At the end of this birth you will gain Liberation." Turning to Vasudeva, He said: "Vasudeva, you will carry My infant form in a basket to Gokulam to the house of Nanda. There you will find a newly-born baby girl by the side of Yasoda. Place Me near Yasoda and bring the baby girl back with you to this prison cell. Do precisely as I say. Have no fear, for now I am here!" So saying, the Lord reverted to His baby form.

Suddenly, miracles began to happen one after another. Firstly, the shackles keeping Vasudeva chained became loose of their own accord. Next a padded-basket appeared from nowhere and the massive prison doors silently swung open. Placing the baby in the basket, Vasudeva cautiously peeped outside but to his amazement, all the guards were deep in slumber! Carrying the basket on his head, Vasudeva carefully stepped out and swiftly moved towards the village of Gokulam. Meanwhile a fearsome storm broke out, perhaps with the intention of making everyone remain indoors and not be a privy to the secret mission ordered by the Lord. But what about the Lord Himself? Would He not get wet? No worry, for Adisesha silently came behind with his huge hood spread out to offer protection from both the wind and the rain (Vasudeva of course knew nothing about this!) En route, Vasudeva had to cross the Yamuna River but due to the heavy rain, the river was in spate; however, for him the river miraculously gave way.

Vasudeva Exchanges the Divine Babies

Soon Vasudeva reached Gokulam with the Divine "load" on his head and entered Nanda's house where both Nanda and his wife Yasoda were deep in slumber. Next to Yasoda was a tiny girl, obviously just given birth to, but Yasoda was totally unaware of the event. Vasudeva quietly placed his son by the side of Yasoda, lifted the baby girl and, after putting her in the basket slowly retraced his steps to the prison. Once he reached there and placed the baby girl next to Devaki, the doors automatically snapped shut and the shackles came back on him just as before.

The baby girl now began to cry, as all new-borns do and hearing the cry, the prison guards woke up. They were aghast to discover that they had been sleeping all along in clear violation of Kamsa's strict orders and springing into action, hastened to the chamber where Devaki and her husband were being held captive. Seeing a new born baby, they then rushed to inform Kamsa of the event. Anxious to destroy his enemy, Kamsa hurried to the prison but when he arrived, he was astonished to see a girl rather than the boy which the ethereal voice had warned him to expect. Puzzled he was, but unwilling to take any chances, he promptly seized the girl and lifted her with a view to smash her. But lo and behold, the baby slipped out of his hands, soared into the sky, assumed the gigantic form of Devi and then said: "Kamsa, you fool, I am not the one who is to kill you. He, who will be your nemesis, is already born and is elsewhere. There is no escape for you, no matter how much you try"; so saying, the form vanished. Kamsa stood petrified, and slowly it began to sink into him that his enemy had not only outwitted him but was secure elsewhere.

Yashoda Becomes Krishna's 'Mother'

While this great drama was going on in the prison chambers, Nanda and Yasoda woke up. And when Yasoda saw the worlds most beautiful and charming baby, her joy knew no bounds. "What a wonderful gift the Lord has given me", she thought; little did she know that the "gift" was none other than

the Lord Himself! The news that a son had been born to Nanda spread like wild fire and everyone in the village of Gokulam rejoiced.

Meanwhile, Kamsa continued to worry, wondering whatever happened to the son who was supposed to be born after the eighth conception of Devaki. He had been warned that his nemesis was growing up elsewhere; now where would that be? Panicking, he decided that he would forthwith kill all new-borns in his kingdom and for implementing this vile and demonic plan, he sought the help of a number of demons.

What happened next? That story next time! Till then all the best, and may God be with you always!

Jai Sai Ram.

WINDOW TO SAI SEVA

TRANSFORMING THE TRIBALS - A TALE OF ONLY LOVE

This account stands as a testament to Swami's Sevalal volunteers who chose to put their own comforts second to living out His teachings to bring succor to the needy. These youth from Andhra Pradesh sought out the most isolated and neglected people of society - tribals suffering in desperate conditions – and willingly sacrificed their time, money and energy to make lasting improvements in their lives. It is also a testimonial to Bhagavan's word: God will support any service venture that is moved by sacred intentions. Read on to find out how these previously uncared for people are now finding their lives filled with His light and love, and how the work of the Sevalal volunteers is bringing about real social and spiritual development in their villages, redefining the concept of rural empowerment from within.

When the All India President of Sri Sathya Sai Organisations visited the interior and hidden hilly regions of East and West Godavari districts of Andhra Pradesh in late 2007, he was speechless, overwhelmed with the love of the tribals of the region. They sang and danced in joy on seeing an emissary of Bhagavan Baba in their solemn hamlet. It was their opportunity to express how much they loved their 'Sai Ram', but for whose munificence they would be mired with disease, hunger and helplessness. A 14 year old said, "In our school, we had no water. Because there was no water, we had no school on many days. But now all of us study and are happy. Sai Baba has provided us clean drinking water. We love Him."

A young adult said, "Earlier, the water we got by digging wells, used to be filled with lot of dirt and pollutants. But now we have clean drinking water. It is a boon for us. "Another inspired lady, who is a little prosperous among the tribals, gave away her huge land holding to Sathya Sai Organisation to erect a structure which could house her 'Sai Ram' whenever He visited their village. For all these tribals, who lived in bamboo huts and survived on roots and tubers of the forest, absolutely untouched by civilization, the very fact that a group of people in whites talked to them with love and concern with no other ulterior motive was itself like a sweet dream. But here there was someone who was giving them clean drinking water at their doorstep, unasked. They are clueless how to convey their gratitude. "We will carry 'Sairam' on our shoulders and bring Him to our village," they say with great enthusiasm and love.

Truly, what Bhagavan Baba has done for the 500 villages of East and West Godavari districts so silently, without even an announcement of the launch or the inauguration of the mega service project that proffered much needed pure water to quench the thirst of half a million natives, is as astounding as it is awe-inspiring. In December 2005 issue of H2H, we had a cover story on this mammoth drinking water project, we plan to offer you another comprehensive cover story on this unique project in a couple of months, but now here is

another stirring story inspired by this model and magnificent service initiative of Bhagavan Baba.

When a group of Sai Youth from Vishakapatnam, a coastal town in the eponymous district of Andhra Pradesh, saw the profound impact of Swami's drinking water project in the life of tribals, whose health, life styles and habits have changed dramatically for the better, they too decided that they would undertake a similar project in their region. If these self-motivated youth had any resource worth the mention, it was only their burning passion to make a difference. Otherwise, they had neither money nor material nor huge man power. Some of them were still in college while others had become employees of public or private companies not many years ago.

Searching out Society's Most Disadvantaged

Having decided, they fixed a date to start their noble mission. It was to be December 14, 2007. On this Friday morning, this group of seven set out on their quest to do a survey of the rural areas located away from the Vishakapatnam city, and if possible visit a few tribal areas, and zero in on a few particular villages or hamlets which would be their chosen fields of selfless work in the next few months. Their journey began at 7 am in the morning. At 11 am, they were at Gummukotta, a tribal village at the foot of the Ananthagiri Ghats (which are part of the range of mountains called the Great Eastern Ghats of India). From here, if one wanted to visit the interior tribal villages, it had to be done only on foot. As the youth started talking to the residents of Gummukotta, they met a Vidya Volunteer (teachers deputed to teach in rural areas by the government) who suggested that they visit the tribal hamlet "Sankhuparthi" located in the same Ananthagiri Mandal of Vishakapatnam district. The name "Sankhuparthi" resonated inside every youth because it had in it a part of Bhagavan's birthplace, Puttaparthi. Moreover, it was in the Ananthagiri mandal, just as Puttaparthi is in Ananthapur district. So, the youth decided that their first stop will be this village which had such a unique nomenclature. For them, it was a direction from the Divine.

Though the name of the hamlet was so inviting, the approach way to it was intimidating. The youth had to trek through rocks and boulders, mud and dirt for seven long kilometers with the mid day Sun sapping their depleting energy every second, before they saw any hut or signs of any habitation. Mind you, this trek was not on the plains or on a downward slope, but on a seventy degree upward incline.

Hill Temple Provides Spiritual Sustenance

It was 1 pm now and one village gentleman, Naidu, who was accompanying them from Gummukotta, said, "Before you visit Sankhuparthi, you must visit the temple of Mallanna Swamy (another name of Lord Shiva). It is a very powerful and sacred shrine for all the tribals of these hills." The Youth decided to take his advice. They were in for a surprise when they reached the place. There was no temple as they had imagined; it was just an opening to a cave

that was 50 feet deep from the top of the hill, which is where they were standing. And was there a way to reach there? Yes, but a perilous one. There were no steps of stone or concrete to climb down; only a damaged and risky ladder made from branches of trees lay as the only means to reach the sacred spot. Having come till there, the Youth decided to take the challenge. Stepping carefully on the pieces of wood, they were on all fours as they slid and crawled carefully, holding on to the name of the Lord as tightly as to the dried stems of trees. When they finally reached the bottom, they were in awe. "Oh my God! Here is a beautiful Shiva lingam!" they exclaimed. There were other statues too, one of Lord Ganesha and the other of Mother Parvati. "Nobody knows who installed these statues here," Naidu explained. "They have existed for thousands of years and for all the tribals, Mallanna Swamy is their God."

The Sai Youth too had no second thoughts on the mystifying power of the shrine, because all of them felt energetic once they were in front of the idols. In fact, they were so full of vigour and overcome with such devotion, that in spite of their exasperating journey till then, they collected water from a tiny spring that flowed inside that cave and performed 108 times Abhisekham to the Shiva lingam chanting the sacred hymns from the Vedas. They followed this with enthusiastic bhajans and concluded it with *arathi* (quite surprisingly, they found camphor and other *puja* materials there). To them, the whole episode was another auspicious sign, a blessing, before getting started with their survey of tribal villages.

Shocking Scenes of Deprivation

Feeling rejuvenated, they eagerly trudged along to their destination, Sankhuparthy. By the time they reached this tribal settlement, they had done nearly five hours of trekking on the hilly and difficult terrain. But there was more exasperation in store for them, now not so much physical as much as mental. They were shocked to see the living conditions of the people of the hills – in one phrase, it was 'utterly pathetic'. "The children had hardly any clothes on them, their faces were sunken and dry, while their stomachs were unduly bloated (typical of malnourished children)," recalls Sai Kumar, a Sai Youth. "As houses they had only thatched huts which provided protection from neither sun nor rain, nor insects or wild animals. In fact, it was appalling to see the tribals sleep with cattle and sheep!" he continues, the pain very evident on his face. "The adults, who looked diseased and over-aged, seemed so very docile and disoriented." The Youth tried speaking to the young men, but none would answer; they were as if in a state of stupor, not in this world. The only answer the youth received from every adult was a blank face. They were stupefied and clueless. Then, Naidu explained, "All these tribals are under the intoxicating effect of 'Maddikallu'". Maddikallu apparently was an alcoholic drink which was prepared by allowing the cooked rice to ferment for three days. "But why do all of them consume this? Do they prepare this themselves?"

They were only getting more and more curious. The fact that the tribals consumed such a drink during the day when they should have been engaged

in some activity confounded them. “Well, they have nothing to do,” answered Naidu. “And this Maddikallu helps them sleep long hours and forget all their pains.” The faces of all the adults, the Youth saw, were highly wrinkled and weathered down, having been exposed to the forces of Nature living as it is on the top of the mountain. A woman of forty looked as if she was past eighty, thanks to their poor habitat and highly damaging habits. The Youth were shocked to see one of the aged women puffing in a long country cigar with the lighted end inside her mouth! “Because of this, many of them have throat cancer. Nobody lives beyond 45-50 in this hamlet,” Naidu, again, added.

Not Even a Drop of Pure Water

For the youth, it was a continuous experience of shock, disbelief and sorrow. Their heart bled when they saw one or two tribals trying to dig small holes in a particular area, where a stream flowed few days ago, searching for water. Desperate to quench their thirst, these men of the hills wanted to salvage every little drop they can from under the ground. “The problem of water is perennial here,” Naidu explained to the Youth. “They do not have water to drink, let alone cooking or taking care of their health and hygiene. It is for this reason that almost all of them have skin diseases. They do not have bath for days and months together.”

“If they do not have water, then how do they cook and make Maddikallu?” one of the Youth asked inquisitively. “Oh..they do not prepare Maddikallu themselves,” Naidu answered. “Every Tuesday there is a big market at the foot of the hills and all these tribals go there with their collections of forest produce which could be tamarind or jack fruit, honey or herbs, or some leaves and berries. They barter all their forest products for Maddikallu. After Tuesday, they indulge in it till their drink lasts and do no work.”

School on Permanent Holiday

In that hamlet of 25 families, everybody – men, women, children – drank this deadly potion and whiled away their time. But what surprised the Youth was a school building in one corner of the hamlet. “Do classes go on here?” they asked. “No, the government constructed this building a year ago, but no teachers come here. There is one teacher who comes once in six months,” one of the tribals explained. The school even had a toilet – the only one in the village – but there was no water. Similarly, the hamlet luckily even had an electricity connection and a few bulbs, but power was rare. As a result, all the villagers slept once the Sun set. The only meaningful activity they engaged in was growing a few crops like ragi and other cereals, but since this was dependent on rains, this was an occasional and irregular occupation.

The heart wrenching living conditions of the tribals was an eye-opener for the Youth. They longed to do something for the unfortunate ones, but communicating with the tribals was still an arduous task. Apart from the language barrier, which was because the tribals spoke in a different dialect though it had resemblance to Telugu, the tribals were still very suspicious of their intentions. Having been victimized by many political groups in the past

who sweet talk and promise many things but never deliver, they were very cautious. The Youth concurred that a decent water facility is a must for the region, but at the same time, before they start any project of that nature, they needed to first break the ice and gain the confidence of the tribals.

Another Pitiful Village Greeted the Seva Dal

It was almost 3 in the afternoon now and as the youth were discussing their next plan of action, a tribal from the neighbouring hamlet, requested the Youth to visit their village too. The tribal was insistent; he thought, maybe, the Youth might want to offer something to his village too. In any case, the Youth trekked two kilometers and reached the adjacent hamlet, Boorjuvalasa. Here, the conditions were actually worse. The children were naked, there was no water or no power. Here too, sadly, all the villagers resorted to Maddikallu. But one object in this village bolstered their levels of enthusiasm. Quite unexpectedly, they found a picture of Bhagavan Baba, on the dilapidated doors of one of the huts. When questioned, the tribals said they had no clue how the picture came there. Maybe, the picture came along with the door a few years ago, one tribal said. Whatever be the source of the picture, for the Youth, it was again a positive sign from The Divine. Upon enquiry, the Youth found that the source of water to this village was from a stream located in another hamlet situated much above the hills, but the tribals of that village never released any water for Boorjuvalsa. The youth now wanted to visit this 'highly placed' hamlet called Galipadu.

It was a journey for more challenging than they had done so far. For more than an hour, they climbed through a ninety degree incline which was rocky, dry and rough. By now they had exhausted all the water and other energy supplements they had carried before their start. It was 5 by the time they were in Galipadu.

The only noticeable difference in Galipadu was a stream, but even this was highly contaminated. In small pots, the villagers collected water that was stagnant and polluted, the water pool being a breeding ground for many germs. Sometime ago, there were pipes laid from this stream in Galipadu to the other village below, Boorjuvasala. But the tribals of Galipadu did not release water to any third party. The youth now had a clear picture of the water crisis in these regions. It was almost dusk now and before it became too dark, they trekked down and returned to Vishakapatnam.

Giving Joy with a Christmas Meal

Their survey had been successful. They had identified people who are in dire need of help, especially water. Though a safe drinking water project was the ultimate objective, they decided that they had to go about it stages. First and foremost, they had to build a healthy relationship with the tribals; they needed to just share love. Therefore, their first activity was a grand Narayana Seva. They knew that on Tuesdays, the tribals from all the hamlets converged at the foot of the hills in Gummukotta for the weekly market. So, on December 25, 2007, a Tuesday, they served a delicious meal to all the men of the

mountains. More than 3000 people ate to their hearts content sweet rice, tamarind rice, curd rice and curry. They were overjoyed and grateful. They saw the Sai Youth as a group of people who want to contribute to their health and happiness without expecting anything in return.

After this event, which was a big success, the Youth planned a second activity in the month of January in 2008. Since the month of January is extremely cold and on the mountains, it is only more severe, they decided to distribute blankets to the tribals of all the three hamlets; but they had no resources. Every member of the youth team had contributed already for the Narayana Seva, and none of them were highly prosperous either. Like for every selfless activity, help came quite mysteriously.

Blankets Given with Love

One day as the Youth were discussing this project in the house of one of the elders of the Sai Organisation, the moment they broached this idea, a flower fell from the portrait of Bhagavan. The senior devotee was so thrilled that he immediately offered to sponsor the entire amount needed to purchase blankets, and even advised that the textile should be of high quality. So it was that as divinely ordained, the blanket distribution project too went off like a breeze.

By now, the tribals were convinced that the Sai Youth were their true friends and well-wishers. They knew these young men in whites wanted to help them genuinely. When the Youth now asked them how they could help to make their lives better, the tribals, unanimously, had two requests. First, a solid ladder to go down the cave to worship their God, Malanni Swamy; and second, provision for safe drinking water.

Creating a Staircase to Their Heaven

Their devotion to Malanni Swamy moved the Youth. Proper approach to the cave was a request that every tribal from every hamlet made emphatically. Therefore, while the thought process for the water project was underway, the Youth started with the Temple project. This was all the more important because it was already the month of February, and in another four weeks was the most holy festival for the tribals – Maha Shivarathri.

As a first step, the Youth informed the elders in the Sai Organisation about this project and requested some of them to visit the place. Accordingly, one day, in the second week of February, a few senior members including the Sevalal and Spiritual Coordinator for the state of Andhra Pradesh, set out to visit the area. After they began their journey, the Youth members became very concerned, as that day turned out to be rainy. To reach the cave, one needed to trek seven kilometers and it was impossible to undertake the adventure if it poured from above. The youth prayed as they reached the foothill, Gummukotta, and to their joy and disbelief, just when they reached the village, the rain stopped! It was 10 in the morning. All the elders of the Organisation visited the area and approved their idea of constructing a strong

ladder to the cave for the tribals. "But, it cannot be done in 2-3 weeks, you will need at least a month," said the Spiritual Coordinator, who was by profession a civil engineer. The youth were understandably not happy to hear this. They wanted somehow to offer a good ladder to the tribals before the festival arrived. In any case, they listened to the elders, neither concurred nor disagreed to their views, and at the same time, never gave up their hopes.

The Sacred Work Inspires Tribal Unity

Meanwhile, the Youth took the opinion of other engineers and everybody said that to construct a concrete ladder which is strong and steady, a minimum of four weeks was unavoidable. But the Youth believed that somehow they would be able to build the steps in time for the festival. On February 18, 2008, one youth member's uncle, who was a senior mason with a good deal of experience, reached the area to begin the work, accompanied by another mason. The Youth had decided that they would begin the work with men and material available, and work hard as well as pray hard. All of them did the job of a labourer – carrying bricks, cutting stones, mixing concrete, etc. Mind you, transporting bricks, cement and other material from down under up the seven kilometer rocky terrain, plainly, was a Herculean task, even by the standards of the strong labour men. But seeing the youth sweating it out so selflessly for them, the tribals were only too touched. Soon, an army of men from the hills joined in; hundreds of tribals appeared from all the hamlets. It was a task for their Malanni Swamy and they were prepared to do anything for Him. Instantly, the Youth had united all the tribals and at the same time, become recipients of their love and unstinted support.

This unity and enthusiasm of the tribals did wonders! All the jobs happened in record time, be it cutting the stone, laying bricks or placing concrete. With the help of just two masons and one engineer, the 50 feet staircase was ready in 10 straight days! What is most moving is that during all these 10 days, the Sai youth worked day in and day out, and can you believe it? For nearly two weeks, they stayed in an isolated and dilapidated hut, next to the temple, which was generally used by the tribals as a godown for grains! They drank the water that flowed in the stream at the bottom of the cave and used the same to clean themselves. For the tribals, the Shiva Lingam in the cave was Shiva Himself and the small stream that flowed was the holy River Ganga. The youth too felt the same way. They became completely one among them! And how did the tribals respond? Every night, a group of tribals guarded this hut with guns (given to them by the government for self-protection) to protect the Sai Youth from the attack of wild animals. For the tribals, the Sai Youth were their best friends; a phenomenal bond of love now united both the groups.

Before camping in the hut, the Sai Youth carried provisions for their food for the next 10 days, and everyday they cooked and served all the tribals who were working non-stop for the ladder construction. If one was at the scene, it would have been difficult to spot the Sai youth from the others, as the tribals too were now smiling and wearing nice clothes – all gifted by the Sai Youth.

To the great joy of Sai Youth, three full days before Maha Shivarathri, the construction of concrete steps, was complete. On the day of the festival, the thrill of the tribals was unbelievable. They gathered in hundreds and celebrated with jubilation. "Till now, only male members could go inside the cave, but now our wives, daughters and small children also can go down to worship Malanni Swamy. This is such a great boon for us," said one elderly tribal. The Youth filled the air with sacred Vedic chants and vibrant singing of bhajans. They were, in fact, in tears, out of sheer joy. What seemed impossible had so dramatically materialized as if God was at work at every step. And sure, He was, you will know as you read on.

Seeking His Blessings

After the grand culmination of the Temple project, the Youth now wanted to concentrate completely on the problem of providing drinking water. They did a special survey of the region along with a Hydro Geologist, and even finalized a site for digging a well at Gudipadu. Once this water became available, the water problems of all the villages would be solved, they were sure. They could supplement this with the water from the natural spring near Gudipadu village, and supply, through pipes, to all the three hamlets. Now, suddenly everything seemed doable as the tribals were highly cooperative and receptive everything the Youth did. But before taking up the project, the Sai Youth wanted to have physical blessings of Bhagavan, and so, they planned a trip to Prasanthi Nilayam. They did not come alone; they brought all the tribals too along with them to Bhagavan. They were in Puttaparthi on April 3, 2008.

Swami Recognizes the Tribals' Plight

The next day, as they sat in Sai Kulwant Hall awaiting His Darshan, they were overwhelmed with the grandeur and peace that pervaded the Hall. When Bhagavan came on the gents side, He lovingly accepted letters from all the tribals. He even spoke to one of the villagers, Ashok, enquiring about his village and district. Then He asked, "What do you want?" "Drinking water, Swami," the villager replied. Immediately, the Sai Youth took the opportunity to explain to Swami their plan of action. The Lord listened to everything, saw the specially prepared brochures by the Sai Youth and blessed the project; still, the tribals were not pleased. They wondered why did Swami not take the brochure when He was taking letters from so many devotees. So, they suggested the Sai Youth to write letters to Swami in white papers and offer to Him the next day. The Youth did exactly as the tribals wanted, and sure enough, on the morning of April 5, 2008, when a Sai Youth, Ganesh, offered to Swami the plan for the water project, **Swami said, "I know...I know about this project. Go ahead. You have My Blessings."**

The tribals were now extremely satisfied. Kannayya, one of the tribals said, "When we saw Sai Baba, we felt we have seen God...we know, now all our problems will be solved...the Sai Youth have treated us like their kith and kin, They are so full of love. We always felt God has sent them for us and now we have seen God."

Again, on April 6, 2008, the Sai Youth leader, Sai Kumar, prayed to Swami during Darshan, "Swami, we need Your Blessings for these tribals." The Lord gently smiled and said, "*Manchidi..manchidi* (Good...good)."

Abandoning Bad Habits - Improving Their Community

The tribals were overjoyed to see Bhagavan, no doubt. But the most important aspect of the whole endeavour was the transformatory effect it had on them. When asked if they would still continue their custom of child marriages, where girls get married when they are just 12, another tribal Sriramulu said, "We did not know that this is not right. It has been this way in our community for generations. But now, if the Sai Youth ask us to change the practice, we will do so willingly; because they are the only ones who speak to us with so much love and affection." Ashok, the villager from the foothill, who was very touched when Swami spoke to him the first day, said, "Until I saw the Sai Youth serving, I always thought helping the tribals is somebody else's duty. But now I have seen, learnt and realized. I will try in my own way to educate the tribals and keep them away from bad habits. Additionally, I will arrange for every tribal person to have official papers assigning ownership of their land, so that they are more aware of their rights." Always ecstatic when recalling that special moment, he joyously expressed, "I could not believe Sai Baba was speaking to me! I was thrilled. Now I know I am surely going to lead a happy life because Baba is there to protect us. I have all the strength to accomplish my goals."

That is how much charged up the tribals and villagers were once they had His Darshan. For the Youth, it was another dream come true. April 7, 2008 was Ugadi, the Telugu New Year day, and the Youth had stitched new pairs of white clothes to gift all the tribals on that day. The tribals were moved with their love and gleefully posed for a picture with the Youth in Prasanthi Nilayam as a sweet memory.

The tribals and the Youth returned from Puttaparthi charged with inspiration to complete the project. And now, as you read this article, the works are on to construct an open well at Galipadu, and divert water from the natural spring to Sankhuparthi, Boorjuvalasa and other villages. Additionally, the Youth are also planning to camp in the villages by turns and educate the tribal children. They have also prepared a time table for conducting periodic medical camps in Gummakotta Village. There are also other projects in the offing like teaching handicrafts and other trade skills, so that the tribals are kept busy and can earn a decent livelihood.

We, in H2H, are constantly following these developments and hopefully will be able to tell you the next part of this touching tale of Vishakapatnam tribals soon. If there is one thing that has to be imbibed from this story, it is the power of Self-confidence (please note the capital 'S') and purity of purpose. When one decides to help, all one needs is a pure intention; the rest just follows automatically, just like it happened with the Sai Youth of Vishakapatnam. Swami says, "Where there is Love, there is God." The people

who pour out their love selflessly in trying to reach out the downtrodden and depressed, only know it too well how God, in His Mysterious ways makes His Presence felt through myriad ways. When selfless love shapes itself as service, it is a power that is as powerful as The Supreme Himself.

PRASANTHI DIARY

March 30, 2008 – "Follow the Master" Drama by X Class Students

March 30 is the time when the academic year reaches its fag end in Bhagavan's educational institutions every year, and the hostels are busy with students packing their bags for the summer vacation. As everyone else, the students too would like to end the year on a beautiful note and what "note" can be more enthralling and satisfying than the one that is filled with the Lord's melody and Love! The students of the X class from the Sri Sathya Sai Higher Secondary School had been permitted by Swami to put up a small programme in His presence and they were in high spirits!

So, that evening, the Bhajans did not begin at five o'clock, and a back-drop was erected in the centre of Sai Kulwant Hall, with the title of the drama "Follow the Master". Swami arrived for *darshan* at 5.20 pm. He completed a full round and as He came out of the car in the mandir portico, He went into the Bhajan Hall to interact with the students who were in costumes. This is a unique gift that Swami bestows on the students. Whenever there is a programme to be put up in Sai Kulwant Hall, the students get ready with their costumes in the Bhajan Hall. Swami comes to the "green room" if one may use the term and interacts with the actors. He asks them about the roles they are about to play, scrutinizes the costumes and makes observations on the make up and theme of the programme. On many occasions, Swami has also made modifications in the dialogues to be spoken in the presentations, and the students have in the short span of 15-20 minutes incorporated the changes too! Many times, these interactions assume an importance greater than that of the actual drama itself, for, usually, while the drama carries powerful messages for all, this little drama behind the drama, carries a lot of profundity and significance for the lives of the students. Swami spent a few precious moments with all in the Bhajan Hall and then told the students to go out and begin their programme as soon as they were ready.

The programme got underway just after 5.35 pm, with Swami coming onstage. The storyline was based on the true experiences of four students on how Swami had guided them in various circumstances of their student lives. One of them brings about a change in the mindset and attitude of his "hooligan" friends by sheer dint of his self-confidence and Swami's teachings. The story of Nachiketa was woven into this story of transformation and it depicted the direction that life must take. One student brings in love for one's parents in a lazy and callous friend. Another helps a pickpocket reform himself and gets him a job to support his ailing mother. The drama had songs interspersed aptly.

After the hour long drama, Swami blessed the participants with group photographs. The bonus round came when Swami walked down from the stage for another set of group photographs! Then He also had a group photograph with the school teachers. When all the teachers stood by Swami, a thrill of joy ran through the students who were overwhelmed by the sheer sight itself. They burst out clapping. Swami, then, slowly moved back towards

the car. The boys shouted out, "We Love You Swami!" Swami turned back and seemed to ask how much they loved Him. They shouted louder, "We love You". He turned back completely, and then there was a resounding third shout, "Swami, We Love You". Swami looked at them, smiled and said, "Sing something". The students sang one Bhajan and Swami sat enjoying it. He seems to love the Love that comes in a musical form! Swami then accepted *Arati* and returned to His residence just before seven o'clock.

March 31, 2008 – Mirpuri College of Music Gratitude Programme

Like in every year, on March 31, 2008 started the summer vacations for the students. It is a very different time of the year from the way things generally move on in Puttaparthi. The people, both, within and outside the Prashanti compound are bustling with activity. Outside, the speculation about Swami's plans for the summer is on and numerous versions of many stories are doing the rounds. The shop owners are using all their forecasting methods to predict the crowd strength and therefore the stocks to be ordered, and also of probable dates to have a temporary stop to their establishments. Inside the compound wall too the guessing game is on. The students are planning their itinerary keeping various options in mind. Either they are blessed by Swami to be part of the group if and when He leaves for Kodaikanal, or they leave for their hometowns to be with their parents - in both scenarios they get joy and satisfaction, though one maybe more joyous than the other. All the inmates and residents are having their own preparations for the scorching summer looming large.

In these conditions, the students of the Mirpuri College of Music had come prepared to *mandir* with their gratitude programme. Swami arrived at 5.50 pm. He completed the *darshan* round, and then, after a round of the verandah in His chair, He moved to the stage and sat listening to the Vedas being chanted. Soon, He asked for the programme to commence. Usually when the students of the School or Institute put up a gratitude programme, the general format is that they speak out their feelings which are supported by the songs that they sing. Today it was a simple reversal. All the feelings were expressed in songs and tunes and they were supported by the few words that they spoke!

The fifty minute programme had Hindustani and Carnatic songs as well as a sitar recital. A wide range of *ragas* were explored. The harmonium, keyboard, *tabla*, *mridangam* and other instruments were used to beautiful impact. The sitar recital was also well orchestrated and it picked up gusto and beauty as it progressed. As the programme concluded, Swami blessed the items brought up to Him by the students before accepting *Arati* and returning to His residence at seven o'clock.

April 2 to 4, 2008 – Special Chair Darshans

The sweltering summer had arrived at Puttaparthi. The breeze blowing also seemed to carry heat waves along with it. The summer vacations were

declared and the impact of this declaration was seen very prominently in the Mandir; the students' number had dwindled. This was of some cheer to the devotees as they had the chance to occupy more of the "prominent" places available in the Sai Kulwant Hall. There were still many students who had decided to put away the summer heat and the "heat of the moment" decisions to leave for their home towns at the earliest. Similarly, there were many devotees braving the dry summer to see their Beloved Lord.

In these hot conditions too, Swami made His "warmth" felt to one and all alike! As if as a bonus gift to those who had either cancelled or postponed their summer trips to stay with Him, Swami had been coming on the chair. From April 2nd to 4th, 2008, the *darshans* everyday was same, in terms of the route that Swami took, but there were so many different and touching stories along the way.

Swami generally started from the ladies side and moved down gently. He was in no hurry at all and He seemed to be taking letters from everyone! Letters are so symbolic of desires! The more He takes, the more there seem to remain to be taken! But during those three days, the profusion of letters being given and the overwhelming Love with which they were being accepted was such that on April 4, the letters' number seemed to have reduced. Well, it is also a common practice, especially among the students, to compose letters to their dear Lord whenever there seems to be a good chance to hand it over to Him. So from the students' side, there were always letters flowing. The Primary School block was comparatively so empty. Instead of the twittering and talking thousands, there were only a few tens left. But these tiny tots rushed down towards the rear end of the block during every *darshan* to have a close glimpse of Him as He passed by and then rushed back to their places in the front of the block to get another *darshan* when He came to the front! He knows all this and yet, so sweetly, He, every time, chose to be surprised when He saw them again for the second time. His expression seemed to say, "Hey! Did I not see you there at the back a few minutes ago?" It was a bonanza time for all the devotees too.

When He comes in the car, the people sitting on the driver's side crane their necks to have a glimpse of His Divine Locks, at least. But those three days, it was such a wonderful and fulfilling feeling to see Him in all His grandeur. He looked to both the sides and took letters. Many of the devotees bent and took the opportunity to touch His Feet. The effect of the hot cuddapah slabs below and the scorching roof above seemed to just fade away with the cooling and refreshing Presence of Swami so close. The heat might seem to make it the worst of times, but His warmth made it the best of times. Indeed blessed were those being able to enjoy the bliss of this proximity that He decided to shower.

As He moved through the group of eagerly crowding students, He blessed many - a few words here, a tap on the shoulder there; the acceptance of a letter in one corner or a shower of the holy *akshata* grains at a different end. The final result of all these was the same - a glowing smile on the face. He completed the *darshan* rounds and then extended it into a round in the Bhajan Hall and the veranda too! Everyone was happy and the waves of joy washed

out the sweltering heat. The bhajans began and there was lot of gusto and enthusiasm. It was around 6:15 pm on average when He retired.

April 6, 2008 – "Baala Rama" by Institute Dance Group

The dance group in the Institute and School is growing both in numbers and quality. With a phenomenal performance of the "Saagara Manthanam" dance a few weeks ago, it is definitely true that the nimble student dancers have to do a real quality job each time they step on the big stage, for the expectation levels are just being pushed higher and higher. On April 6, 2008, Swami had permitted them to put up what would be a major milestone in the dancing history of the students. To date, dance has always been like the proverbial "icing on the cake" that the dramas and programmes constitute. That day, an attempt was made to make dancing the "cake" along with the "icing" and the "cherries" on top too! A 40 minute dance entitled, "Baala Rama" depicting the Ramayana story till the marriage between Lord Rama and Mother Sita had been planned in great detail. The songs had been specially written by the students and had also been tuned and recorded by them. It was a fully "in house" production if the term can be used.

Swami arrived at 4:50 pm. And like the last few days, He came on the chair to the delight of everyone. For the devotees, it was really 'summer showers' in the hamlet of peace. Ever since the holidays began on April 1st, it seemed to be holiday time even for Swami's *vahana* (vehicle)! Though Puttaparthi is hot and uncomfortable, the minute Swami comes on the chair, all pains disappear like mist in the sun.

As soon as Swami completed His rounds and reached the interview room area, He saw the students in costumes in the Bhajan Hall. He went in and then began a sweet interaction. He enquired into the role that each student was performing in the drama. When they said that the dance would depict briefly even of *Raghuvamsha* (Raghu clan), He said, "It became *Raghuvamsha* only due to Rama. Then it was Ikshvaaku dynasty." Even as He smiled, everyone nodded sheepishly. He was very particular about "Seeta's" costume. He made 'her' stand and checked 'her' from top to bottom. A piece of string to hold up the saree was being seen and Swami asked for it to be covered. Blessing everyone, He told them that they should start in another 10 minutes time. As He went to the interview room, the stage was set up and the dancers got ready for the performance. A beautiful Rama figurine comprised the backdrop and that too had been crafted by a student!

It was 5:15 pm when Swami came out and sat asking for the programme to begin. The glory of the nectarine story began to unfold and the whole story was scripted as narrated by Swami in the Rama Katha Rasa Vahini. Valmiki writes about Rama as a man would view God, but Swami's narrative gives insight into the feelings of Rama too. Swami was absorbed in the programme right from the start. It began tracing the history of the clan till Dasharatha prepares for the sacrifice to obtain sons. The wonderful childhood of the four brothers was depicted and then the scene where sage Vishwamitra asks for the princes to vanquish the demons came up. The conflict between

Dasharatha's duty as a king versus his attachment as a father was very well portrayed and the music really elicited the flow of emotions from the heart. The graceful movements and soulful music transported the audience back in time to the period of the *Treta Yuga*. Swami's moods seemed to flow along with the moods of the drama. Finally, the princes accompany the sage to the dark forests where their first exploits as super heroes are demonstrated. The climax came when Rama and Lakshmana go to the kingdom of Mithila where the mighty bow of Shiva lay between them and the princess. Lord Rama, as per the Guru's command, breaks the bow and later proves His Divinity to Parashurama. There is a grand celebration for the marriage between Rama and Seeta.

The famous episode, which Swami loves narrating, where Seeta comes to garland Lord Rama was depicted. He is tall and being the Purushottama (perfect man), stands erect without looking down at Seeta. She is unable to garland him. (In the dance however, Rama was not that tall. The problem had been dealt by giving Him a big crown!) Lakshmana falls at Rama's Feet and when Rama bends to raise him, Seeta quickly garlands him. This act elicited great applause. The atmosphere was dramatic and yet so real. One really felt as if the Rama-Seeta *Kalyanam* had been witnessed. The dance concluded with a final formation. Swami immediately said that He would come down. As Rama and Lakshmana went up to receive Him, everyone else prepared to receive Him.

Swami was so sweet as He asked Lakshmana, "Ay Lakshmana! Where is Urmila?" Lakshmana was dumbstruck. "Tell me....Where is she?", Swami persisted! The four princes were actually married all at once and Swami was fully justified with the question. The answer was a blushing smile and Swami seemed to enjoy the redness flushing in Lakshmana's cheeks as He once again asked, "Tell, where is Urmila? *Paapam!* Not there!" Swami showered Love and smiles liberally as He posed for photos. All the students who were part of the drama got a picture with Him. That included even the boys who did the music recording and all the backdrop work. All the programmes put up in front of Swami are like the Taj Mahal. Though they are beautiful to look at, they have a supporting huge foundation. And Swami blesses not only the Taj but also the foundations!

Filling every heart with joy, Swami had *prasadam* distributed and at about 6:40 pm received *Aarthi* and retired.

April 7, 2008 - Ugadi Celebrations

It is that time of the year when the sun's rays are increasing in intensity, going from mellow to hot. The crops have been harvested and the fruits of the harvest are making their way to the marketplaces. Mangoes, called "the king of fruits" in India, are in season once again. The ripe smell of jackfruit is filling the air. Shrubs and trees are bursting into their flowering best. Everything is fresh and new. It looks and smells like spring. The cool springtime breeze is wafting through the air carrying the fragrance of the fluttering flowers. The birds are chirping their charming chants and there is greenery as far as the

eye can see. The sweet scent of the soil, the butterflies fluttering by, the symphony of the birds and bees, the swaying of the flowers and trees - everything around arouses a sense of sublime harmony. Hail the festival of Yugadi - the festival of bounty and Grace.

The Telugu New Year had arrived and the Sai Kulwant Hall had been tastefully decorated on April 7, 2008. The students had gathered in the marble block and the Ugadi programme was ready. Message came from Swami that as soon as He came out, the programme must begin. At about 9 am just at the conclusion of the Rahu Kaalam, Swami arrived, so fresh and beautiful, on the chair. The air was filled with the sacred chants of the Sai Gayathri and the atmosphere was charged to electrifying levels in an instant. As Swami glided down the aisles granting *darshan* and joy, a special song composed to welcome the "Sarvadhari" year filled the hall. The joyous song seemed to fill all the hearts in the hall too. Swami looked so beautiful. A gentle breeze began to blow. The sweet smile on that enchanting face; the curls swirling in the gentle breeze, the Tender Hands swaying to the beat of an ethereal melody, and those Soft Feet that are the refuge of the entire mankind - the Lord is truly incredibly sweet.

Swami was on the rounds when the students got up and began the narration. They explained in English, Telugu, Kannada and Hindi the significance of the day. Apart from being Ugadi, the day was also celebration time as Gudi Padwa and Cheti Chand, the New Year day for Maharastrians and Sindhis respectively. As these were explained, Swami continued to move around and bless everyone who had so eagerly assembled to begin the New Year with a glimpse of their dear Lord. Very appropriately, the song began, *Yenta Bhagyamo*, in Telugu, referring to the great good fortune of gathering at His Feet on the holy occasion. Swami sat enjoying the songs and each time a smile blossomed on His face, it reflected on the faces of everyone assembled. The next part of the programme was the traditional "Panchanga Shravanam" where the almanac is read out to see what the coming year has in store for all. Two students dressed as learned brahmins rose. They discussed the coming year in a very scholarly manner. Much to Swami's amusement, they even began to see what each sign of the almanac portended to the people under its rule! They discussed the meaning of the *Panchangam*. Swami so beautifully has said that if we take care of the *Pancha Angas* (the five limbs and five senses), nothing in the *Panchangam* can affect us. As the discussion progressed on the influence of the planets which were both positive and negative, the significance of the Ugadi 'Pachchadi' was highlighted. This is a kind of soup-like preparation that is taken as sacred *prasadam*. It is very unique in its composition. It is made with jaggery, tamarind, raw mangoes, chillies, salt, neem and water. It has a component of all the 6 tastes namely - salty, sweet, sour, spicy, bitter and pungent. It is symbolic of the fact that whatever the New Year brings, it will be accepted with equality and equanimity. It concluded with the statement, "When we have the God's *Anugraha* (Grace), what can the *Navagraha* (nine planets) ever do to harm us?" There was a very joyous and thunderous applause. Swami called one of the '*pandits*' and created a beautiful gold chain for him and the soul stirring

song, *Karuniso Ranga* (Shower compassion on us Krishna) struck a rich melodious chord.

Being a New Year day, the significance and importance of time was highlighted. An incident was also narrated. Swami, while gifting watches to His students once said, "See, this outer box is the body. The inner plastic cover is the mind and deep within is the watch - the most precious one with Swami in it. Treasure the watch and do not give undue importance to the box and cover. Also 'Watch' has T as the central letter and so it becomes very important to watch over our thoughts. It is our thinking that determines everything.

Many times when we feel that, "bad things" are happening to us, it only shows the weak nature of our faith. For instance, let us consider that something untoward has happened to us. This can mean only two things –

- 1) My God is not powerful enough to protect and shield me from that calamity.
- 2) My God is powerful, but He does not Love me enough to protect me.

If we have that firm faith and conviction that, my God is the most powerful and loves me infinitely everything becomes so simple. In spite of being so loving and powerful, if something that I think is bad for me is happening, then God must want this. Why? Because, though unaware about it, it is for my good. Out of a billion possible events that can occur to us, the sweet and kind Lord handpicks the best possible one for each and every one of us to experience. Like swallowing the Ugadi 'Pachchadi' without a smile or a grimace, we must accept the various experiences of life as God's *prasadam*. That attitude and way of thinking is the correct one for that is the Truth. And when we do that, the much awaited Golden Age will dawn on mankind.

The songs continued and Swami seemed to enjoy every moment of it. In between, Swami called out to one of the boys assisting him and asked him to make some arrangements. Those who saw that were wondering what Swami was saying. Using the traditional art of lip reading, the message understood was as if He seemed to say something about pouring water! A song on the sweetness of His Name and glories was followed by a discussion on the fact that noble deeds make the day holy and not that a holy day is for doing noble deeds. As Swami so beautifully says, "The flow of time can never be stopped. It continues relentlessly and continuously. But it is not correct to keep saying that this is a bad time and we will wait for a good time. The *Yugas* or time periods change only with the change in *dharma*, not with the mere passage of time. The wicked demon Hiranyakasipu and the pure hearted Prahlada both lived in the selfsame chronological *Yuga*; the same *Yuga* saw Dharmaraja, the personification of righteousness and peace, as well as the arch-cheat, Duryodhana. So, *dharma* is what makes the *Yuga* or time into good or bad for each; one can always be in the *Kritha Yuga*, if only one has all the four qualities of *dharma*. It is the conduct of man that makes or mars history and changes the Golden Age to the Iron Age or vice versa.

As seven songs concluded, Swami seemed to tell the programme to stop, but then seemed to change His Mind. It becomes very easy to enjoy the grandeur and the beauty of every action of Swami in retrospect. But as Swami was doing this, all wondered as to what was happening. But the programme continued. There was a beautiful Hindi introduction on the beauty and glory of *namasmarana* or chanting of the Lord's Name. It was followed by a song by saint Mirabai, *Baso More Nainan me Nandalaal*. That song was completed and then what happened next was something so divine and unexpected. And these kinds of uncertainties of the Lord, who will not love?

The song that began was, *Barso Re...* which was a prayer to the Lord to rain His Blessings on all. As it started, Swami asked for a big silver container to be brought from inside. In it was the holy Ganges water! Swami descended from the stage and began to shower the water on the devotees and people assembled in the hall! It was so thrilling. Goose bumps erupted on every inch of the skin and the whole hall erupted in joy. The joy was common but its expression varied from frenzied shouts to serene meditative stances. As the 'summer showers' continued, people were lost in a devotional ecstasy. After a while, symbolically blessing all, Swami told the priest to go around showering the consecrated water on everyone assembled. Then with the smile of an innocent child that had surprised everyone, Swami sat on the stage enjoying the song. He was gently swaying and a smile danced on His Lips. He was radiating happiness all the while and everyone assembled had no choice but to be happy! Surely the people must have thought this to be a coincidence that the song acted as a "theme song" for Swami to shower His bountiful Love and Grace. One of the students immediately rose up with the mike and exulted at this great good fortune wherein Swami, like always, instantly responded to the prayer to shower Grace on all!

For all the people assembled, there could not have been a better way to begin the New Year. They say that the first day of the year determines what the whole year goes on like. If that is true, (and with God, it has to be!), the whole year we have to prepare ourselves to be drenched in His Love and Grace! Glory be to the Lord! Swami then blessed *prasadam* to be distributed to all. Moving into the verandah, Swami received *Aarthi* and it was about 11 am when Swami retired to Yajur Mandir.

April 10, 2008 – Inauguration of Canteen at SSSIHMS, Puttaparthi

In life, food has always occupied a paramount position. In fact, Swami Vivekananda had said, "Feed a man before teaching him spirituality." Food that sustains the "boat to cross this ocean" of life is regarded highly even by Swami as He says, "Annam Brahma". As if in accordance to these dicta, a new, airy, well lit and spacious canteen had been built at the Super Specialty Hospital! And what was more is that Swami had agreed to preside over the inauguration! Though it was scheduled for the morning, Swami had it postponed to the evening.

Colourful *toranams* adorned the Hospital premises. Creative and beautiful *rangolis* (floor drawings) had been made all along the path that was to be

used by Swami as He came - not only in the premises but all along the road. Swami is synonymous with life for millions all around the world as He has touched them in a divine manner. But for thousands of people in the villages around Parthi, Swami has done so much even physically, that they just do not know how to express their profound sense of gratitude to Him. Like the squirrels in the Ramayana, they do whatever little they can with all their Love. All along the road, they make drawings trying to add a little more "colour" to the Lord's journey!

At about 4:10 pm, Swami reached the Hospital premises escorted by motorbike riders. A *vedam* contingent received Him at the entrance with the traditional *Poorna Kumbham*. Lord Ganesha, the one who ensures an obstacle-free path for any endeavour, had been installed at the entrance and a yellow curtain had been drawn in front of Him. As Swami neared the spot, He was given a remote. As He pressed the button, the curtains slowly parted and Swami so sweetly peeped in between the many shoulders that almost obscured His view to see the curtains move! Swami came out of the car at the door and all the various heads at the Hospital offered roses to Him. Swami received them all and bunched them in His hand as a beautiful smile lit up His face and all the faces around. He went into the main hall where all had gathered. As He entered, bhajans began.

He was taken for a tour of the building. There were five different sections to seat people. And that day, all of them were being occupied by various staff of the Hospital. As Swami passed by each room, He seemed to fulfill the aspirations and desires of all seated there. Many of them took the opportunity to fall at His Feet while some offered roses to Him. Swami entered the huge kitchen hall where a vessel of milk had been placed on the huge stoves. With Swami's blessings, the staff placed the vessel on the stove. But then, much to their tension and Swami's amusement, the stove just refused to light. Swami sat watching their efforts to "light" up! Then a photographer nearby opened the gas valve which had been shut! Immediately a flame shot up and the milk boiling began. Swami then blessed the workers and also the pile of clothes to be distributed. The tour continued at the end of which, Swami moved back to the central hall.

He called Mr. Manohar Shetty, who was instrumental in the beautiful building coming up so quickly and nicely, and created a gold chain for him. He also blessed the architect. As Mr. Lakshminarayana "explained" to Swami on the various facets of the Hospital functioning, Swami expressed His desire to speak! A tiny table with an elegant mike was placed before Him. In a short and sweet speech, Swami said that the building was very beautiful, well lit and airy. It was built with a lot of purity and that purity must be maintained. He was very happy and said that soon He would come there again to have either lunch or snacks with all the people! There was a lot of excited chatter as Swami said this. Swami was smiling so wonderfully and He seemed so happy. He called Dr. Neelam Desai and enquired about how things were going on. He spoke to a few more people and then a plate of some of His "favourite" eatables were offered to Him. Swami picked up a groundnut and threw it to His Mouth. The force seemed a little more than needed and it fell hitting His

upper lip. Swami was the first to laugh and there was laughter all around. He so simply teaches great lessons. God is the first to laugh at Himself! When anyone is able to laugh at himself or herself, there is happiness all around!

Swami was then requested to partake of some snacks that had been arranged. He at first seemed to say no, but then smiled as if saying, "It's alright if it makes you happy!" Swami was then taken to a separate section where the "snacks" turned out to be a banquet in silverware! Swami just nibbled at a few fruits. He just wanted to taste a little to please the hosts. But the hosts often feel that the extent to which the heart is filled is proportionate to the extent to which the stomach is filled! When some little fried item was given to Him, He let out a few gentle coughs! Then sipping a little water, so sweetly, like a child that had overeaten, He said, *Chaal* (enough)! He saw a student staff of the Medical Trust. He called him and asked him as to where and how he was working. Then He returned to the main hall. On the way He blessed each and every vessel carrying sweet *prasadam* and apples. Once in the main hall, Swami received *Aarthi* and began to move out. On the way out too, He blessed everyone and spoke to some of the people. He blessed the octagenarian, Dr. Bhat, considered by many as the Father of Urology, with a smile and *abhayahastha*. As He came out, there were hundreds flocking with a thirst to see Him. Swami did not disappoint anyone. As He moved out, He blessed everyone with Raised Hands. As He left, He left behind sweet smiles and momentous memories.

April 13, 2008 – Tamil New Year Day Celebrations

India is a land of rich diversity. As a famous saying goes, "The diversity seen in Bharat covers the diversity that one can see the world over!" According to Census of India of 2001, 29 languages are spoken by more than a million native speakers and 122 languages by more than 10,000! Add to these the dialects and sub-dialects and the array gets bewildering. So it is small wonder that every other day is a "New Year Day" for some section of the people or the other. To ensure that everyday remains a "holy day" and does not convert into a "holiday", the Government has standardised some New Year days! And one of them is the Tamil New Year day which dawned with the sweet chirping of birds in Puttaparthi.

The Tamil Nadu devotees had thronged the precincts of Prashanti Nilayam. The devotees also included thespian Rajnikanth who had arrived quite early. In the eyes of the world, it seems like a big and grand event when people who have achieved much in their worldly life come to Swami. For Swami, each devotee is as dear as the other and there is absolutely no difference between the "common" people and the "achievers". Being at His Feet is the greatest achievement and there cannot be someone who is greater or someone who is lesser anyone once he or she is at His feet! And so, all were ready to greet their New Year with the Lord.

Swami arrived at the decorated Sai Kulwant Hall at 8.45 am to the music of *Nadaswaram* and the Vedic chants. He was looking so bright and brilliant. After a round of Sai Kulwant Hall in His chair, Swami came to the verandah

and went around there before moving to the stage area. Last two weeks have been wonderful in terms of the "nearness" of *darshan* available. Swami goes around every available path among the thin crowds, granting amazing *darshan*. The *vedam* chanting stopped in a few minutes, and Ladies singers from Tamil Nadu began with devotional songs. After a couple of songs, Bhagavan asked the students to continue with Bhajans. One wondered as to why Swami so suddenly had the bhajans started. As the first bhajan began, things became so evident. While the devotees assembled were appreciative of the songs being sung, they could experience the thrill of participation once the bhajans began.

Swami has always exhorted us on the importance of group effort in any field of activity, more so in spiritual activity. The bhajans picked up tempo and gusto as minutes ticked by. Swami sat in a sort of trance for the bhajans. But it was like the "calm before the storm", as the usage goes. And what a storm it turned out to be! One that was saturated with showers divine! About half an hour into the bhajans, Prof. Anil Kumar was asked by Swami to announce that this evening, Bhagavan would bless the gathering with His Divine Message. This was received with thunderous applause. At about 9.45 am Swami accepted *Arati* and returned to Yajur Mandir.

In the evening, Bhagavan arrived for *darshan* in His chair at 4.10 pm. All the devotees were like eager beavers what with Swami promising the spiritual shower of His Divine Discourse. A big backdrop with a beautiful painting of a smiling Swami adorned the back end of the marble block. Children from the Sri Vishwa Vidyalaya, Chennai sat in front in full costumes. Swami's face lit up as He saw the tiny tots and He kept looking at them as He crossed the marble region. After a round of the Hall, Swami came on stage and the proceedings got underway with an introduction by Sri V. Srinivasan, the all-India President of the Sri Sathya Sai Seva Organisations. The speakers to follow him were Justice Ramasubramanyam of the Madras High Court, and Dr. V. Mohan, Convenor of Tamil Nadu State Trust. Both spoke of their experiences in their respective fields where they could feel Swami's presence always conducting - what the world calls - miracles. After their speeches which recollected many Sai experiences, Bhagavan rose to speak.

Swami said that the speakers that preceded Him spoke of experiences, but those were relevant to the world. True *Aadhyatmikam* (spirituality) lay in recognizing one's true Self and that was in the Truth of "I am I" alone. He said it was high time that the divinity present in all be recognised and that alone will confer peace and bliss. He continued by mentioning the greatness of Bharat, with its many perennial rivers. Unfortunately, in spite of all these water resources, men today struggle to fill their bellies and slake their thirst. Feelings of mine and thine are responsible for this unfortunate state of affairs. Selfishness is on the rise. After stressing the oneness of all creation, Bhagavan moved to the Ramayana story to commemorate Ramanavami festival which was just a few hours away. He spoke on His "favourite" portion of the Ramayana - the birth and childhood of Rama culminating in the marriage with Mother Seeta. The stories of bravery of the young princes, the parental devotion of Shravan Kumar and the greatness and goodness of the

three wives, Kausalya, Sumitra and Kaikeyi were brought alive in front of an audience that was lapping up every word spoken. Bringing out the ideals exhibited by the characters in the Ramayana, Bhagavan concluded His hour-long Discourse by mentioning that the Ramanama (sweet name of Lord Rama) was the panacea for everything. And that is why, in every village in India, Rama is revered. As Swami sat down at the conclusion of the hour long discourse, He looked a bit tired but immensely satisfied. He announced, "There is a drama now being put on by children from Tamil Nadu."

Children really have that innocence and hence the ability to win the Lord's heart. Swami had just delivered a discourse and had spent nearly two hours in the hot afternoon, but still He permitted the drama to be staged. No doubt, the sight of those little children sitting with all their costumes and make up on in the hot sun melted His Tender Heart. That was a really 'drama'tic announcement and immediately the marble block area was cleared and space created for the actors to move in. The drama that was to be staged was entitled, "Prema Vahini" and it exuded the fragrance of gratitude the Chennaites felt for the water project that Swami had gifted. It is an inspiration in itself to know the background and the story of the children and the school that was putting up the drama. Read that story of the magic of Swami's Love and His students' devotion in the April 2008 Cover Story from Heart2Heart Archives.

The drama "Prema Vahini" then got underway. It began with the "Burrakatha" - a traditional mode of musical story telling in Telugu, which Swami greatly loves. The drama presented the story of the Chennai Water Project as seen by one of the managers of the construction team. A tiny village in the outskirts of Chennai is struggling with the lack of water. And this is just a tiny dot in the vast landscape of acute water scarcity that is facing the citizens there. The struggle of people to get water was compared as equivalent to the struggle that sage Bhagiratha had to undergo to make the River Ganga descend onto earth. And the depiction of that episode was done crisply, aided with wonderful background music. Swami's face blossomed with smiles a few times when He saw tiny tots in the depiction.

The water problem reaches its heights when people in an old age home almost face death due to lack of pure drinking water. At this point, the powerful statement that Swami made at the inauguration of the Bangalore SSSIHMS (hospital) was played and it was received with thunderous applause. Swami too seemed deeply touched in nostalgia. The hero, Ramesh, is blessed to be a team leader in the construction of the Kandaleru-Poondi canal. The drama was punctuated with a Burra-Katha on Mother Easwaramma which Swami really appreciated and a Tamil song depicting a well choreographed rejoicing of the citizens of Chennai at the joy of receiving pure Sai Ganga Water. The grand finale came with the song, *Gangamma Talli* (meaning, "Oh Lord! You have brought Mother Ganga to our doorstep). As the song was nearing the end, Swami remarked, "Now the drama is about to get over!" As the drama concluded, Swami spontaneously raised both His Hands in Love and Benediction. All were thrilled at this and there was another burst

of applause. After the 45 minute drama, Swami accepted *Arati* and returned to His residence after 6.30 pm.

April 14, 2008 – Vishu Celebrations

A traditional altar had been placed in the centre of Sai Kulwant Hall on the occasion of Vishu, the New Year for the people of Kerala. In the morning, the central marble block had been adorned with the *Pookalam* ('flower art') as it is called. Swami sent a message that bhajans should begin at 9:00 am and as per His instructions, bhajans began. Again at 9:45 am a message was sent that *Aarthi* be taken and the same was done.

Bhagavan arrived for *darshan* at 4.40 pm. He was on the chair and that brought smiles on every face assembled. The summer of 2008 has been bonanza time in Puttaparthi. Except on a solitary occasion, Swami has come out every time in the chair. And more than that, on every single occasion, He has moved through every alleyway and path that exists in Kulwant hall. As the phrase goes, "When it rains, it showers." And today, as the devotees from Kerala packed every inch of available space in the hall, it was no different. A decorative and screened stage had been put up for the drama on Bhadrachala Ramdas that was to be staged in the evening. It was very apt as that day was also the festival day of Rama Navami. Swami went around the entire hall and moving in front of the last few tiny tots of the Primary school, came onstage.

As He came on the dais, He settled on the gents side of the stage. The *vedam* chanting ceased and the programme for the evening got underway. The drama centered mainly around the incident in the saint's life where he uses the money collected as tax to renovate the temple of Lord Rama. Ramdas feels rightly that doing something for the Lord who has done everything for all is no big deal. But the king is furious for he feels that his authority has been undermined. He metes out the harshest treatments to Ramdas and when he sees that Ramdas is absolutely unaffected and blissfully immersed in the Lord, his fury grows even more. Finally, Lord Rama and Lakshmana themselves come to the king and pay off the tax amount.

It was such a touching scene to witness Rama become Ramadasadas (the dasa or servant of Ramadasa!)! And Swami too was apparently very moved by the Love and devotion of Ramadas. As the actors came to their final formation with the Mangalam song, Bhagavan blessed the boy who played Ramdas' role with a chain. And then Sairama too descended down to the stage level at the request and prayers of Ramadas! He came down from the stage and blessed the group with photographs. After He moved back to the stage, He went to the interview room and returned with clothes for the participants. He then asked them to sing a Bhajan. After that, Swami sprung a beautiful surprise. He said, "Rama, Lakshmana and Seeta, come up." The "lords" made their way up the stage. Swami beamed as He posed for special pictures with them. As this was on, He even asked the photographer to ensure that everyone is clearly seen in the frame! After that, Swami received *aarthi* and retired for the day.

Third Week of April, 2008 – Swami's Departure to Brindavan

As the mid April festivities concluded, the speculation of Swami's departure to Kodai got renewed energy and vigour. Soon, it was replaced with "confirmed rumours" (as they are called by inmates of Puttaparthi) that He would be soon leaving for Brindavan. Swami's Brindavan has been undergoing changes for the better and the delayed bridge building activity has only catalysed the intense pining and longing of Brindavan for its Sai Krishna. And after all the Nostradamuses and soothsayers laid down their probable dates for Swami's departure to various places, the only thing that could be said with certainty is that on the 24th morning, Swami is in Puttaparthi! The taxi owners had a field time as many people had already made to and fro trips from Bangalore. The shops and stores used their accumulated knowledge and experience to 'guess'timate the probable date for closure and plausible stocks needed to be ordered. The days were such that if someone was seriously following Swami's advice, "Love my uncertainty", they would have a lot to love! Inside the Sai Kulwant Hall, the crowd was fast dwindling. People from "past" experience and trends were making arrangements and some others, based on "future" predictions had made preparations. Only a few still stayed on at Puttaparthi.

Swami, in spite of the searing heat, appeared so beautiful and bright when He came for *darshan*. There was a freshness about Him and a cherubic smile dancing on His lips. Swami came more often than not on the chair discarding the car. And this is the most thrilling and exciting feature of *darshan* sessions for all. Till about mid April, there were only one or two lines of students bordering the blocks to get close *darshan*. But as the days progressed, the numbers are became so low that the same boys rushed behind forming the "darshan lines" and then returned to the front forming the line there too. Bonus *darshans* and *paadanamaskars* became the order of the day. The devotees too enjoyed the rare privilege of moving right up to Swami to hand over their letters. The car however was not totally discarded. Quite often, Swami went out for drives in the late mornings or early afternoons. The roads were usually deserted, but Swami's presence was a cooling and comforting influence to all who found it very difficult even to traverse to the Mandir in the scorching heat. Swami too in all love and compassion moved so slowly in the car that everyone saw Him to their hearts' content.

Those beautiful days began when He came early into the Bhajan Hall and engaged in "small" talk with the students. Those are the moments that every student cherishes - when his dear Lord becomes his best friend. The subject of the talk ranged from Self-confidence to the probable date when the student is leaving for his vacation. Some of the students were adamant - they said their vacation was best sanctified with Swami. The Lord too played the game and told them, "No..no. Go Home. Parents want you there." "Swami, if I go home, parents will ask me 'why did u come?'. They too want me to be here with you." Swami seemed defeated and enjoyed the defeat. For, when His defeat brings victory to His beloved ones in terms of their growth, He is the first to rejoice. "Aye, when are you going to finish your Ph. D?" He asked another research scholar. "Swami try *chestanu*" (I'll try). "Ay, try *chestanu kaadu, chestanu cheppu*" (Don't say, I'll try; say I'll do!) He then pumped in

enthusiasm and confidence into the startled student. It was such a joy to watch the interactions going on. He asked a few others as to when they were leaving. Some places and dates popped up. And then there were some very poignant moments for a few people. To a member of the staff He asked, "Aye, what were you doing on the road towards Super Speciality Hospital?" "Swami, wife was sick and so I was taking her there." "What happened? Pregnant! Correct. So, some vomiting..." "Yes, Swami!" A gentle tap on his head and there was a smile acknowledging his gratitude at His omnipresence, Swami then turned to another person.

From the primary school side too, only a few representatives remained. They were seen running and frolicking during the *darshans*. They made cards and special items to grab His attention and He too seemed all set and eager to grant them their due! Everyday, a small stop was a compulsory activity at the Primary children's block, it seemed. Well, all these just showed that Swami is the only factor for peace and joy. The place, temperature or any other factor has absolutely no influence once Swami decides to give Himself. It is famously said, "Puttaparthi is Swami's office, Brindavan - his home, while Kodaikanal is His playground." And Swami showed that no rules exist for God. He could be homely and play at Puttaparthi too, and at the same time, keep everybody on tenterhooks to love His next move of uncertainty!

And sure enough, (paradoxically, only His uncertainty is a certainty!), on April 26, news came floating by that Swami was 'really' leaving for Whitefield in Bangalore after all! So the morning saw a huge gathering by current standards in the Sai Kulwant Hall. Somehow, when there is an impending separation, Swami becomes a lot dearer and everyone pines to have that 'last glimpse' before He leaves.

The *bhajans* in the morning started at 9 am and went on with unabated fervour. At about 9:45 am there was a surge of thrill as the favourite orange form on the red chair made an appearance. The decibel levels automatically rose and so did every person assembled in the hall to have a glimpse of dear Swami. He was in an all-fulfilling mood as He went through the Darshan lines accepting letters from everyone and blessing photos, trinkets, *vibhuti* packets and any other objects of devotion and faith that was permitted inside the Hall. He completed a full round and then sat in the Bhajan Hall for a few *bhajans*. He then received *Aarthi* and retired to Yajur Mandir.

By now, it had been confirmed that Swami would be leaving early in the evening. By 2 pm itself everyone gathered in the Sai Kulwant Hall. Activity was seen near the Yajur Mandir at about 3 pm. The sleek grey Mercedes parked itself and everyone sat in heightened alertness as it became evident that Swami would be leaving anytime now. At about 3:20 pm, Swami came into the Sai Kulwant Hall and went straight to the portico. There, receiving the final *Aarthi*, Swami went round the entire hall. As the pining devotees longed to see His face, the Lord sweetly waved to everyone. He then drove out through the Gopuram gate, leaving behind sweet memories of a Grace filled April in everyone's heart.

SWAMI AND ME

MOTHER EASWARAMMA – THE EPITOME OF COMPASSION

By Mrs. K. Vasumathi Devi

A fortunate and ardent devotee of Bhagavan Baba for over four decades, Mrs. K Vasumathi Devi is currently the President of the Ladies Wing of Sri Sathya Sai Seva Organisations, Andhra Pradesh.

I wish to share what I personally experienced with the Divine Mother, Easwaramma. It is not an exaggeration to say that, all the devotees who knew Mother Easwaramma, felt she was more their mother than the Divine Mother of the Avatar. It was because she treated everyone as a member of her family. Very supportive and kind, she empathised with the agony of all. Her heart was so full of compassion that she would gel with everybody without any reservations and distinctions, and would reach out to help anyone who was in need, without any difference of mine and thine.

Here is my favorite account of her love which touched me a lot. This happened many years ago, during the sixties. One of my relative, who was in Prashanti Nilayam, wrote to me informing that Swami was going to create *Amrutham* (nectar) on the “Mukkti Ekadashi” festival day. (Also known as Vaikunta Ekadashi, an auspicious day according to Hindu Mythology which falls generally in late December – January every year). Not only that, I learnt that He would put the divine nectar on to every devotee’s tongue with His own Divine Hands. By the time I received the letter, there was hardly any time left; the festival was just a couple of days away. In those days, there were no telephone lines to help me organize the trip, and travel facilities were minimal.

To reach Puttaparthi, one had to change an array of buses and trains. Because of such trying circumstances, we always had to think twice before making the journey to Prashanti Nilayam, and since I wanted to start immediately, there was no one ready to accompany me on this journey either.

Reposing faith in Bhagavan and picking up courage, I traveled for two days changing seven buses, and finally reached Puttaparthi at 8.45 pm on “Mukkti Ekadashi” day. When I entered the ashram, the residents of Prashanti Nilayam showered sympathy on me saying, “Oh! You have come only now...Swami has just finished distributing the *amrutham* and has retired upstairs.” I was crestfallen, but immediately the thought of the compassionate Mother, Easwaramma, came to my mind.

It was my good fortune that she was residing in a room next door. She used to call me “Eluru papa” meaning ‘the girl from Eluru’. (Eluru is the headquarters of the West Godavari District of Andhra Pradesh, more than 400 kms from Puttaparthi). So, I dropped my luggage in front of my room and went to Mother. Even now, when I recollect that scene, my eyes well up with tears. Mother Eswaramma’s anguish on noticing me was severe. When she

asked, "My child, why have you come so late?" my grief melted; I was so happy that she spoke to me. I related to her my difficult journey, and then she sadly replied, "What a pity, Swami has just gone upstairs." The next moment, she held my hand and hurriedly led me to the first floor of the Mandir!

Swami was sitting at the dining table and was about to take His meals. Mother asked me to wait at the door, and went inside. With great concern in her voice, she said to Swami, "Eluru Papa arrived just now after changing seven buses." I could hear the conversation standing at the doorstep. I was gripped with pain as I felt I had disturbed Mother in that odd hour, and was also apprehensive about Swami's reaction. Swami then mischievously smiled and said, "Did the girl ask you to recommend her situation to Me?" Mother relied, "No, Swami. *Papa* never asked me to do this. I myself took pity and brought her here." Then, with a bewitching twinkle in His eyes, Swami said, "If that is the case...poor girl, take this bottle and give her *Amrutham*." With motherly intimacy and a gentle frown, Mother said, "What! I have to give her, Swami? Did *Papa* come all the way to Parthi, changing seven buses to have *Amrutham* from me? No, I will not give it to her. Swami, You have to give it to her." Bhagavan smiled at this compassionate outpouring of the Mother.

After finishing His meals, Swami was full of smiles and charm, and told Mother: "I, Myself, will give it to her." Then, Swami came to me and asked me to come forward. "Please open your mouth. Just because I asked you to open your mouth does not mean you should swallow the bottle! I will put the *Amrutham*. Swallow it." So saying, Swami joyfully put *Amrutham* in my mouth. My bliss was beyond description.

When I recollect the trouble Mother had taken to get me the *Amrutham*, I understood there are no boundaries for her love and concern. It was my great fortune to enjoy the generosity and zeal with which Mother helped us in all ways possible.

Dear Reader, Eswaramma Day falls on May 6 every year, which is celebrated in different ways by Sai devotees all over the world. Some call it "Children's Day", others "Ladies Day", the third group, "Mother's Day" and so on, because the Divine Mother was an ideal for the woman of this century. She was a perfect picture of a spiritually evolved woman exuding in personality the sublime fragrance of Indian Culture. Love and compassion, forbearance and fortitude, grace and generosity came naturally to her. No wonder, the Avatar chose such a pious one to be the channel of His Descent. Even now, Bhagavan Baba's eyes become teary, the moment the name of the Divine Mother is mentioned – for such is the purity and nobility of this great soul. In an emphatic discourse in May 6, 2001, Swami said, "Easwaramma was the chosen one. I chose her to be My Mother. That is the intimate relationship between Mother Easwaramma and Myself." What was the kind of close bonding that existed between the Divine Son and the Divine Mother? Did she know early in Baba's childhood that her son is actually God on earth? Read the story "Easwaramma – The Crown of Motherhood" from our May 2006 issue.

THE SWAMI I GREW UP WITH – Part 1

By Mrs. Geeta Mohan Ram

Mrs. Geeta Ram comes from a family that has been associated with Swami for the last four generations. She is the daughter of Dr. Padmanabhan, an ardent devotee and a familiar figure in Brindavan, Swami's ashram in Bangalore. Her great grandfather, Mr. Seshagiri Rao, came to Swami in 1943 and was the temple priest of Prashanthi Nilayam for many years. Having come to Swami at a very tender age, Mrs. Geeta Ram's life is full of wonderful Sai experiences and amazing anecdotes which are both interesting and illuminating. Currently, she lives in Washington, DC., in the USA.

This is part one of a transcript of a talk aired on Radio Sai. Unfortunately, we do not know the venue and date of this talk, but we are sure that it was in the USA and from maybe five or six years ago. More parts of this article will follow in the coming issues.

The Beginning of Eternal Bhajans

It's lovely to be here! Especially after the wonderful bhajans that we just had! With so many people singing with such devotion to Swami, it takes me back in time. Some of you may know the story of how the *Akhanda Bhajans* held in November every year was started in 1945 by my grandfather. In 1944, *bhajans* were started in our home by the eight families that first went to Swami from Bangalore. And when they went to Puttaparthi, they used to sing these songs in front of Swami - Meera *bhajans*, Thyagaraja's *kritis*, and other such devotional songs. There were no *bhajans* per se, and Swami would sit with them, in front of His own Picture and sing too!

I remember, as I was growing up - this was in the fifties - Swami would sit with us during *bhajans* and say: "Keep looking at that picture when you sing!" So we knew something was going to happen! And as the *bhajans* were being sung, if it were a Devi *bhajan*, we would see *kumkum* (vermillion) appear on the forehead of Swami's Picture! If it were a Shiva *bhajan*, we would sometimes see the garland detach itself from the Picture and take the shape of a little snake over the Picture! So, we would be so focused on the bhajan, because we knew something would happen on that Picture! He was teaching us to understand the words and focus on the bhajans.

This would happen regularly in those days in Puttaparthi, but when the families returned to Bangalore they would miss Swami so much and all the wonderful experiences from the *bhajans*. So they decided to hold *bhajans* on every Thursday for an hour every evening.

In the 1940's there was a curfew; they were not allowed to go out because of the war (First World War). But somehow or other, they would very quietly take their flashlights in the dark and go to the *bhajans*! When this had gone on for almost a year, they all said: "You know, we have held these *bhajans* every

Thursday in our homes for almost a whole year! Why don't we have a 24-hour *bhajan* to culminate these days of *bhajans* that we started?"

And they wrote a letter to my grandfather, who lived in Puttaparthi, asking for Swami's permission for the 24-hour *bhajans*. My grandfather was privileged to be with Swami and serve Him in those days. So, He asked Swami and replied with these words: "Swami is very happy with this idea! He said to call it: 'The *Akhanda Bhajan*: 24 hours of *Naama Smarana*.' Do it! And not only that, He wants to come too!" So that is how the *Akhanda Bhajan* started!

So Swami came and stayed in my aunt's house. And this went on till 1974. He would come even after the Brindavan building was built. Every year, our eight families would conduct the *Akhanda bhajans*. Even as I grew, I saw that the crowds had grown, but it was still conducted by our eight families.

We pooled whatever resources we had and of course we started to rent halls later and Swami would always come and stay. And at that time, the *bhajans* would go on from Thursday morning till Friday morning. So He would come and stay with us and would arrive on Wednesday sometime during the midday, in time for lunch. And, of course, all the relatives would be at our house, getting the room ready for Swami and making other preparations. Other people would be organising a place outside where the *bhajans* could be conducted because more than 200 people would be attending.

Swami's Love of Play

As soon as Swami came He would have lunch and say: "Where is the *bhajan* hall?" And He would immediately want to go with us to see the *bhajan* hall where we were getting ready. He would come and there would be all the youngsters putting up the altar and decorating it. The women would be sitting and tying the flowers to make beautiful garlands for the pictures; others would be sweeping and mopping.

Swami would make comments such as: "Oh! That's very nice"; He would ask for His Picture to be moved into place and start helping the youngsters to put it up. He would enquire about the lamp we were lighting. And then, of course, everybody would sort of shoo Him away because you can't really do what you are doing with Him so close!

On one occasion, my old aunt, who used to look after Swami when He was a small child, said to Him as if He were a child (but her devotion to Him was immense!): "Swami, will you come away and stop bothering these men who are trying to do the altar! Come and sit over here!" So He said: "Okay, then I will come and sit with you all where you are making the garland."

There was a big pile of jasmine flowers in the middle of these women who were tying these garlands with so much devotion! One for Swami's picture, another for Swami - a full length 4 feet one to garland Him after the *Aarti* - and so on. And Swami told them: "Show me how to do this...show me how to do this!"

It's quite an art to make those garlands I must say! It's not very easy - those of you who know - and He wanted to do it! And they showed Him once or twice and He tried to put the thread around it and the flowers fell off! He kept complaining and the children sat there and we were all laughing because He was saying: "You people don't teach me properly! You're hopeless teachers! Teach me properly!"

He tried to make one and it fell apart! The ladies told Him: "Look! You know what! You are not going to learn it!" And my aunt said: "In this Avatar, garland is not Your thing! Go away! Go do something else!" But Swami did not give up.

He started with one or two flowers and they all became upset with Him because He pulled the thread and it broke the stems! So all the flowers were getting wasted! Here they are trying to manage this whole *Akhand Bhajans* in 200 Rupees - or whatever it was - and He's pulling all the flowers apart! The ladies told Him "You're wasting all the flowers!"

Then my aunt gave Him a little bowl filled with a few flowers telling Swami: "You could try with this! And if You can't do it, then You need to stop!" So He sat there with a steel bowl of flowers in front of Him. And then, suddenly we would turn around and He was holding the longest, most beautiful garland you could imagine! In a minute, there was a 3 feet garland and He would say: "See! I am a quick learner!" This was how He would participate with us! He became a part of us!

Playful Prankster

So this is the Swami I grew up seeing - the Swami that joked with us, played with us. There was very poor lighting in those days, and we children would all eat outside on the sand and sleep there as well - we would just roll out a mat and sleep on the sand whenever we went to Puttaparthi.

The water that we had - to wash the vessels and all that - was carried from the well; where you now have the main Gopuram gate. The men would draw the water, and the women would stand in line and pass the water on so that everybody would have enough to wash their dishes.

The elders would just mix the rice and the *sambhar* in one dish and we would all sit in a circle, and each of us was given a little blob in our hand, and you ate it in your hand! That way they wouldn't have so many plates to wash, the only dish that you had to wash at the end of the meal was your own hands!

We would all sit in a circle and this old lady, her name was Savitri Amma, would serve the food. Swami liked to tease her whenever He had the chance. She would sit in the middle and we would all sit around her. It would be very dark and she would sit there with a lantern and feed us! Swami would have had His dinner before us, and sometimes He would come out quietly from

behind the buildings and sit amongst us youngsters - we were all very young - and He would cover Himself with a long gown!

He would have a little scarf over His head because His hair would give Him away! So He would be so dressed and hide, and this poor lady couldn't see very well! So He would put His Hand out with the children and He would get fed too in the circle! She would be busy dishing out the food so she wouldn't know! We would all be giggling because He would say: "Don't tell her! Don't tell her!" as He was eating! At the end of the meal He would say: "Mmm...Savitri Amma, you prepare better food for the grandchildren! What you sent Me today for dinner was not as good!"

She would get so upset and say: "My goodness Swami! Why did You eat this! This was morning rice! I had sent You fresh food in the evening! This was all the food that was left over here!"

She would go on: "Why did You eat this? How did You hide from me?" And He would take off His scarf and show Himself as her eyes were not good enough to make Him out! (Actually, I have a photo at home where He has got this scarf tied around His head with His hair all flattened!) So, we children thought this was our Swami – He would play with us, pull other's leg and just generally have fun! That was the Swami I grew up with as a child!

A Marriage Truly Made In Heaven

Time passed and I finished my early education and wanted to do a Masters program. And when I asked Swami, He just joked and said: "No MSC...MRS!"

Then He told me to do a Montessori program and as is in many families in India, I had just finished my Bachelors in Science and many family friends and relatives would suggest many alliances to my parents to get me married off, so to speak!

Even Swami was all the time asking my parents: "When are you going to get Geeta married?" And I would always say: "I didn't want to marry anyone unless they are a family of Sai devotees." One day, when Swami had come to our house, He asked me the same question: "Why are you saying 'No' to whoever they suggest to you?" I said: "I only want to marry a Sai devotee, Swami! Otherwise I am fine you know, I will be the way I am!" To that Swami said: "Well, then okay, what if I tell you to marry a lame man or a blind man? What would you do then?" I replied: "That would be fine as long as he is a Sai devotee - if you told me to marry him and I presume that you would have my best interest at heart, and you know that I would do it!" Then He said: "Okay, since you said that, then I promise you that I will get you married only to a Sai devotee."

Then I said: "Well, I have one more condition and that is I want to live in Bangalore." (When He is in a good mood, you know, why not put in a few things!) He said: "Alright!" And that conversation ended!

After some time, a letter came from my aunt who lived in Delhi who wrote: "We know a family here in Delhi who are Sai devotees, and their son is in Bangalore. If you want, I will find out more about the family and the boy."

My father said: "Well, I am going to ask Swami about this." So, we went to Whitefield that day - it was a Thursday - and my father in the car said: "I am going to ask Swami about this, and so is it okay with you?" So I told my father: "Since I am the person who's getting married, I think He should be telling me and not you!"

My father got angry with me, and said: "You are turning out to be a real brat! Swami has no time to come and sit and discuss all of this with you! There are hundreds of people waiting in the *darshan* line to see Him! Secondly, marriage isn't an issue that He will come and discuss with the youngster - with the person He is supposed to! He would discuss the issue with the parents as per the tradition; not with the girl who is going to get married! So He doesn't have time to come and listen to all this!"

So I replied, rather upset, "Well, you know, how Swami manages His time is not my problem really! He is God; He should know how to manage it better! I am very limited! He is not!"

My father got angrier and arrived in Brindavan in a bad mood and my mother said: "You guys are starting this whole thing off on such a negative note! It's never going to happen!"

It was raining heavily and that day Swami decided to give *darshan* in the car, because there were so many people waiting, and He didn't want to disappoint them! He came out and stopped under the Sai Ram shed. Next, He got out and called us across. As soon as we went close by - I can never forget this scene - He caught hold of my ear, you know - like I was a little child! And He said: "Ah! How I manage My own time is My business! I am God! I should learn better!" He repeated the whole conversation that had happened in the car! And then, even before my father could open his mouth, He said: "I know the letter came from Sunanda, your sister. You go back now to Bangalore - back to home. You call the boy's parents and ask them to come." (They were in Delhi) "Ask them to come on Monday, and I'll settle the marriage on Monday!"

My father said: "But Swami, I don't know these people! I don't know who they are! She still has to find out!" So Swami said: "You don't know who they are! But I know who they are! You just go and call them!"

My poor father! The things that he's had to do! So we come back to Bangalore, and he calls his sister and says: "You know, this is what Swami said." And all the way back home, I get a lot of scolding from my father, "All because of your stubbornness! Look at this stuff! I don't even know who this person is! I am going to call him up and say Swami asked me! Swami said: 'Your son is supposed to marry my daughter!' Who's going to believe it?"

"We know they are Sai devotees, but we don't know how long they have been Sai devotees – or whether this was an acceptable thing for them." And I was actually laughing because I thought - well, you know, this isn't going to happen - they are going to say "No". I am happy that I am going to stay this way!

So father calls my aunt and she is shocked! She says: "I just know these people as acquaintances in the bhajan! I just can't call them and say: 'Swami said to marry my niece', you know! How am I going to?" My father said: "Well, you call them and tell them whatever little you can, and then I'll call them after that!"

So he calls them finally. And they are totally flabbergasted! They had never once spoken to Swami; they had never had any interview in their life. They were devotees who come to the bhajans, who had come to know about Swami by reading books and attending *bhajans*.

My husband's father, Dr. Murthy, said: "Well, that's all very nice. But you know, our son lives in Bangalore. We have to ask him! We'll call him and then call you back, maybe in an hour's time."

So, they called us back. And they were even more shocked! Because when they called him and asked him, he said: "Well, if that's what Swami said, I will marry her!" I think they were more shocked by what Swami had said! They said: "Okay." Then my father said: "Swami has asked you to come here on Monday to see you all." They said they will try and take a flight on Sunday.

On Friday, we go in the morning for *darshan*. Swami immediately comes to my mother and says: "So did you contact them? What did they say?" My mother said: "They said they will come on Sunday, Swami. We've talked to them. But, we have a problem! There's a *balvikas* refreshers camp in Mangalore (which is about 200 miles from Bangalore!) she is one of the speakers." We had to go in an overnight bus for the refresher camp and we were all supposed to come back that Monday morning.

So Swami was very sweet! He said: "You go!" to my mother, "But you give Geeta's topic to someone else - one of the other teachers. Let Geeta stay back." And the nice explanation He had for canceling my talk was: "If she comes in the overnight bus she will look very tired when the boy sees her on Monday morning!" So He was protecting my looks and everything! What can I say?

On Monday, the family arrived from Delhi. We don't know how they look and they don't know how we look - we've never met them! My father left a message with the *seva-dal* volunteer saying that: "If a gentleman announces himself as Dr. Murthy, send him over to the interview room." As soon as they arrived, we gathered in front of the interview room and Swami called us in.

My in-laws had never, ever spoken to Swami at all! They had become devotees in the early 70's; they had attended bhajans - my mother-in-law is a

very good singer; she liked music, and that's how they got into it. My husband had never spoken to Swami! And as soon as they walked in, Swami introduced them to my father. And He narrated everything that my father-in-law had ever done in his profession till that day! Where he had worked, how many years he had worked as a professor in IIT, how many years he had started his company; everything! My father-in-law, an intellectual man with a Ph. D, just stood there with his jaws open! And Swami was just narrating everything - which village he was born - everything!

And then, He introduced my father and stated: "You know, Padmanabhan came to Me when he was a young man. I gave Geeta her name and she is like My daughter and I brought her up."

And He gave all this beautiful introduction, playing the mediator between the two families. And then He asked them: "Are you all willing for this marriage? If so, we will talk about it!"

Then He called me and said: "You come with Me" and took me for a little walk down a path next to Trayee Brindavan. And I cannot forget the loving conversation we had that day.

He said: "Look! I know, you've said that you always wanted to marry a Sai devotee. I know, you've said that you will marry whoever I tell you to marry. But, now is the time for you to tell me if you don't want to do it. If you don't want to marry him, tell me now. You don't have to go back and tell the elders that you won't do it because I know; they will get very upset, because I have suggested this. You tell Me, and I will go back and tell them I changed My mind - if you don't want to do it. But this is the time because once we go back there and you say yes, then there's no going back once you give your word. So decide now!"

I replied with my *mantra*: "I will do whatever You say Swami. I will do whatever You say Swami!" And then He told me a very beautiful thing. He said: "You know, when we look at other people, we only see the outside of that person. We see their mannerisms, their clothes, and the way they speak. But, we cannot see what is inside them. But I can see what is inside that person! And I can tell you that he is a very God-fearing and God-loving person."

So, we came back and He fixed our wedding, and we got married. So, that is how when we decide to follow the path and we really have that faith in Him, He will take care of us in every little way that He possibly can!

(To be continued...)

NEVER AWAY FROM THE AVATAR'S EYES

By Ms. Uma Ramakrishnan

An alumna of the Anantapur Campus of the Sri Sathya Sai University, Mrs. Uma Ramakrishnan completed her Bachelors in Sciences (Honours) in 1995 after which she went on to complete her Masters degree. After her marriage, she moved to the USA in 1999. Currently, she is pursuing her second Master's degree, while she raises a young family. Uma is an active member and a SSE teacher at the Thousand Oaks Sai Center, California.

In 1991, exactly a year before I joined Anantapur, my family came to know about the Avatar's presence on earth. When the time is right, nothing can stop one from knowing the truth. Such is the Divine Will. In our case it happened through a lot of personal struggles which have not only drawn us closer to Him, but also strengthened our faith. I was diagnosed with glaucoma, a condition of abnormally high pressure inside both the eyes when I was barely fifteen years old. The doctors who confirmed this diagnosis could hardly believe that with such high intraocular pressure, I had not only escaped from blindness but was still asymptomatic. Since I had to undergo several evaluations and procedures as a result of this condition, I was unable to attend regular school. I was appearing for my 12th standard higher secondary examinations and all hopes of completing high school with flying colors were shattered to the ground because of my health. My surgery was completed and the recovery was uneventful. But what followed the surgery turned out to be a life altering experience.

On the morning of 22nd November 1991, I had this strange, yet wonderful dream. In that dream I saw a man in an orange robe with a big mop of black hair, walking among gathered men and women, who were seated in rows. This man walked up to me and commanded me to take ashes from a burning sacrificial fire near-by and gestured me to apply it onto His forehead. I was confused and unsure if the order was meant for me, as I was seeing Him for the first time. I also wondered if He even knew me! But then, He repeated his order again and this time, I knew it was meant for me. I slowly got up, picking up the burning ash, I tried to apply it on to His forehead as instructed. But He stopped me midway and took my hand in His and applied the ashes onto both my eyes.

I woke up with a jolt. Even in a state of half asleep, I was somehow conscious that this was no ordinary dream. I eagerly shared with my mother all that had occurred. The two of us were racking our brains to comprehend the purpose of this strange dream. Who was this man in an orange dress, what were those men and women doing and given my eye condition, why did He apply the ash on me? Was this some sort of miraculous cure or was it all a simple heart's desire to be normal again? We wondered!

Divinity Revealed

Swami, out of His Compassion and Love, did not make us wait too long. The same night there was a news segment on the regional TV about the inauguration of a hospital in some remote place. It did not catch my attention at first. And then suddenly as I was watching, I could not believe what I saw on that television monitor. I saw the same person in orange robe with the big mop of hair! Breathless and shocked, I called out to my mother. Sensing the urgency in my voice she came running into the room. "Do you see the same thing that I see?" was all that I managed to ask my mother. At that moment we both realized, that the dream was no ordinary one. It was a calling from the divine.

When Swami calls some one to Him, He arranges for the journey as well. It was like flood gates giving way. How I cherish the thoughts of those days of discovery? The fascination never ceased. Everyday we would hear through someone about Swami's leelas. We talked about Him for 24 hours, non-stop! I thank all the good souls who shared their experiences with us and strengthened our faith. Subsequently, we learnt about the local Sai centers, or samithis, as they are called in India. Since we were musically trained we were naturally drawn to singing bhajans. We joined a samithi near our home in Chennai. During Shankranthi of 1992, we had the first darshan of our beloved Swami. The journey from the "man in an orange robe" to "beloved Swami" was incredible, to say the least. And somehow, from there I found myself catapulted into the Divine embrace. It was His will.

It was about three months since I had joined Anantapur. All the girls along with our teachers were asked to come to Puttaparthi for Gurupoornima celebrations. We were blessed with an opportunity to serve in the new Indian canteen. We rolled chapattis, made *laddoos* and cut vegetables amidst bhajan singing, to feed the masses that were anticipated to come from every part of the globe. During that time, I met an old teacher of mine from my home-town of Chennai. We exchanged pleasantries and chit-chatted for a while and as she was taking leave of me she asked me how my father was doing now? "Very well," I said after which she left. It was a busy day and it was not until that night that this simple question put forth by my teacher started to bother me. I had not been receiving mail or phone calls from home regularly. I hoped that things were fine at home and thought that my parents might have been busy.

In a couple of days, I went back to the routine at Anantapur and the mid semester exams were to begin in a couple of weeks. So, I put off worrying about my parents and focused on my exams instead. During the course of our exams, one day I was called to the warden's room to meet a visitor. This came as a big surprise for me as I was not expecting anyone. My mother had called a week ago and she had not mentioned anything about coming to Anantapur. Expecting to see my parents, I rushed down to meet them.

Anguish Over Father's Health

At the front porch of the hostel, a family friend was waiting instead. She told me that my dad was not well and that the warden has given me permission to go home with her. Through out the trip back home my guardian would not divulge anything. Finally, unable to contain myself I asked how grave the situation was and if my father was alive. Relieved to hear that he was alive and afraid to learn more, I kept silent throughout the journey. I reached the hospital in a rather disturbed state of mind. The constant beep of the monitors, the bedpan and the other paraphernalia made me realize how gravely ill my father was. I saw my father at the far end of the room. Even as I approached him I sensed that some thing was not right. He lay still in his bed. His face looked distorted and his arm and legs looked stiff. My mind went blank. I did not know what to do or say. I just stood there and cried silently. My mother at his side looked unusually quiet and peaceful under the circumstances.

I had a lot of unanswered questions. I asked my mother to fill me in on what had happened in my absence. It turned out that about a week ago when she was completing the *Sathyanarayana* puja at home, she heard a loud crash in the kitchen. When my father failed to respond to her call, she got up from the puja and rushed out to see my father having seizures. His arms and legs were fluttering and his face was looked strange. Hearing my mother's cry, a neighbor rushed to help transport my father to a near by hospital. CT scan revealed cerebral hemorrhage with about 95 % cerebral clots. My father had suffered from a paralytic stroke. He had lost speech, vision and the left side of the body was completely paralyzed. My father was shifted to the ICU and was given 24 hrs to live.

My mother was in a state of shock and total disbelief. What would she do if father leaves us? Who will take care of us, the children's studies, and their marriage? With these thoughts tormenting her, she could not even cry she said. It was late into the night when she was allowed to visit my father in the ICU, while my relatives waited outside. Mother picked a corner and sat leaning against the wall drained of all her energy. All she could remember were just these two words: Sai Ram. She started chanting mentally the name of Swami and was crying for His help. He was her sole refuge. She had no one to turn to. She was praying to Him to give her the strength to accept what ever destiny had in store for the family. Unknowingly, she fell asleep.

SaiCare – Supreme Care

All of sudden, she felt a jolt and woke up. But what she saw there startled her even more. She could see a slender hand adorned by an orange cuff gliding along my father's frail body. Physical fatigue and an overwhelming feeling caught up with her and before she even knew she fell asleep again failing to understand fully what she had witnessed.

In the morning, my mother woke up to the sounds of the beeping monitors. She did not know when she had slept. She had spent the whole night leaning against the wall. She went to check on my father and stood by his bed

watching in silence. The maid who swept and cleaned the ICU floors was still asleep. She was the only other person who was allowed to stay in the ICU the previous night. The maid woke up in a short while. She sat there on the floor and as she was tying her open hair into a knot, she spoke to my mom. She told her about a visitor who came to see my father the previous night. The way he was dressed was rather odd, she said. He sat on the stool next to my father's bed and sat there gently stroking his paralyzed arm and leg and was also carrying a conversation with him in a subdued voice. The maid further stated that she asked this stranger, assuming that he might be a family member, if my mother needed to be woken up.

He turned and looked at my mother who was asleep, leaning against the wall. He told the maid not to wake up my mother as she looked very tired. He also told her that he will take leave of my father in a short while and asked her to inform my mother about his visit when she woke up in the morning. Then he left in a short while, she said, finishing her story.

As you can imagine my mother could not believe what she was hearing. The thoughts of the previous night came flooding back. All that my mother could remember was the orange cuff adorned slender hand. Immediately, my mother drowned the maid in a deluge of questions "What was he like, what did he wear when did he come?" The maid became a little irritated. She walked past my father's bed to the night stand. Picking up a photograph from the night stand she showed my mom and said in tone laced with exasperation and finality, "this is the man that came last night." It was a picture of Swami that most of us would have seen around the ashram at Puttaparthi. It is a picture of Swami lovingly and tenderly stroking a calf.

Is it not wonderful how Swami takes care of each and everyone of us and tends to us the same way as He tends the innocent calf? Swami's influence in my life has been significant ever since He took me under His wing. He has nurtured me with love and great care.

My father survived that fateful yet memorable night with Swami as his *Sarathi* or charioteer. Following rehabilitation my father resumed and continued to go to work for five years and got his two daughters married. It has been sixteen years since that wonderful revival and because of Swami's Boundless Grace alone, my father till date continues to enjoy a good life amidst his children and grand children.

SOS – Sai Our Saviour

There are million different ways how Swami calls His devotees to Himself. He painstakingly handcrafts these 'calling cards' for each individual. They remind us about the Unlimited Love that He has for each and every one of us. The greatest gift that these calling cards bring is our knowing the Avatar in this life-time.

He waits patiently for us to finish off with our preoccupations. He fulfils our material mundane needs so that one day we will ask Him for the things that

He has come down to bestow upon us. I am learning slowly but surely, not to fight His Will. Everything that we are blessed with in this sojourn on earth is for our own good and for our growth. However great or small a work might be, it's His work that I am always doing, and not mine. These experiences dictate my current attitude towards the challenges of the world. Why fear when my Lord is here? I never was, never am and will never be away from the Avatar's eyes.

In conclusion, a small poem from Prof. N. Kasturi's "Loving God" conveys it all.

He answers every anguish call,
The S.O.S from ship wrecked voyagers,
Whatever the hour, however faint the cry.
Sai need not travel far. He is ever at your door,
By your side, behind, before!
Doubt; He answers. Lock; He enters.
Decry; He smiles. Deny; He stays.
He knows all we have been and are
And what we yet shall be.

BEING A BLESSED INSTRUMENT

By Dr. A.N. Dubey

Dr. A .N. Dubey led a distinguished scientific career in the field of horticulture, working at the Central Rice Research Institute, Cuttack, and as a Director and consultant in the Ministry of Defense, Government of India. He later gained a research post at the Catholic University, Leuven, Belgium where he stayed for five years and helped to establish the Sai Organisation in that country. His next tenure was at the Sher-e-Kashmir University of Agricultural Sciences and Technology, Jammu and Kashmir, India, where he was active in organizing 124 Service camps, notably along the sensitive Indo-Pak border. Here are extracts from his book "Seva Pushpam Sai Amritham" published in 2005.

Divine Darshan and Grace

1969 was the hallowed year wherein I was blessed with my first *darshan* of the Lord. I was doing my Masters in Sciences (Agriculture) then, in Government Agriculture College, Kanpur. The desire to see Baba after knowing about Him from a Squadron Leader of the Indian Air Force was so intense that I started off on my journey to Puttaparthi. But I had to halt on the way in Hyderabad at the request of a friend of mine and my stay continued there once I heard that Baba was not in Puttaparthi. One afternoon, the weather was dusty and very depressing. I was rather feeling low in spirits. My chain of thoughts was broken by the arrival of a colleague who enquired if I had any plans for the next two days which happened to be holidays. I told him I had none. In fact, I was not even aware of the coming holidays. He noticed my depressed mood and gave a nod of sympathetic understanding. At that very moment, there was a telephone call from a Sai devotee, who told me that Baba had returned to Puttaparthi. My mood soared like a rocket and I started to pulsate with joy at the prospect of having Baba's *Darshan*. That night, I boarded a train to Puttaparthi. By the time I reached there, Baba had already given His morning *Darshan*; I had to wait till the evening, disappointed and anxious.

The clock ticked the time for the evening *Darshan* of the Lord. He emerged from the portico of the *Mandir* looking majestic and great to behold. He moved gracefully, talking to someone, taking a letter from another and showering smiles on the third. Tears started rolling from my eyes; I was filled with bliss and with the awareness that for the first time, I was seeing in front of me, the Living and Loving God. Was this real; or was I day dreaming?

Most unexpectedly, Baba called me for an interview! This call was never sought or anticipated by me. But the merciful Lord knows what to give and when to give to His devotees. During the interview, Baba revealed to me the sequence of events in my life that would be during the next five years. Every word He said came true as the years unfolded. In that interview, He asked me, "What do you want?" I replied, "Baba, may I be devoted to You." Without replying to this prayer, He asked this question four more times during the conversation. Every

time I stuck to the same answer, and felt proud, that I was one with a firm resolve. What a folly, as events revealed shortly later!

As I was coming out, after receiving *Prasadam* from Baba, He asked me that question the fifth time. This time, He spoke so affectionately and sweetly, that I felt as if my mother was speaking to me. Suddenly from within me burst the following words, "Baba, give me a permanent job." He was all smiles and said, "I know, I know. You will have it." Saying so, He blessed me. I immediately realised what I had asked Him! The Lord through His bewitching smile had so subtly deflected me off my course. Nevertheless, after His Darshan and the chance on interaction, I felt I was a new person altogether; I was experiencing very soothing feelings in my heart. I felt like a bird floating effortlessly in the calm air above flying in no particular direction, just on an aimless happy wandering. How long will this feeling last, I wondered!

Grace of Vibhuti

In 1978, my career took me to live in Belgium for five years. My wife was actively involved in Sai activities in Belgium. Once, she fell seriously ill and was admitted in a Leuven Hospital. I was alarmed when her condition deteriorated. I prayed to Bhagavan Baba for help. I wrote a letter to Mr. Curth Orefjard, an ardent devotee of Baba in Sweden, whom Baba had blessed with healing *Vibhuti*. His response was immediate. He asked me to come to Sweden. When I met him at Stockholm, he gave me *Vibhuti* for my wife. From the moment she took *Vibhuti*, her condition improved rapidly and within a week, she wanted to be discharged from the hospital, but the doctors advised her to remain in the hospital for a few more days for observation. I did not disclose to the doctors about the miraculous effect of *Vibhuti* and only prayed to Baba before them which made them realise that with faith in God, one can overcome formidable obstacles easily. It is true that those who repose full faith in God never come to harm. Bhagavan Baba says, "Medicines by themselves can not cure diseases; it is the Divine Grace that cures." So, apart from medicines, one should have Divine Grace too.

Sai Organisation in Belgium

I used to attend various Sai activities in different countries and often visited Amsterdam, Haarlem, Rotterdam and Utrecht in Holland. Occasionally, I was witness to Bhagavan's Omnipresence and protection of His devotees. One on occasion, with a fellow Sai devotee, Mr. Mahadew, we were discussing Swami's miracles that were happening with different devotees in Europe, till 2 o'clock in the night. In spite of my insisting that he and his wife stay overnight with us, he decided to return home. While driving towards Holland, it so happened that both of them had a nap while the car was running at a high speed. **It traveled several kilometers and when Mr. Mahadew suddenly woke up, he felt, as if some one who had been holding both his hands on the steering wheel suddenly disappeared. He then realised that Bhagavan Baba had saved their lives.**

A similar miracle happened with Mr. N. K. Dhir of Rotterdam. Bhagavan gave a new life to his family when his car along with him and his children slipped from

the highway and went down into a deep ditch on a winter morning. They were all saved miraculously. Mr. Dhir had a vision of Swami saving his life. I have seen many such miracles happening with devotees in Holland and Belgium. Bhagavan Baba is always with us to guard, guide and protect.

In Belgium, I used to be busy from the evening of Friday to Sunday during every week traveling to different cities to attend *Bhajans* and other Sai activities. One evening, while I was returning to Leuven after participating in a *Bhajan* session at Aartselaar Sai Centre in Antwerp Province, I suddenly pondered "Why not save the four hundred Belgian francs that I spend every week coming to this Centre. After all it is well established." The same thought crossed my mind repeatedly during the three hours of my journey from Aartselaar to Leuven which I made by train and bus. "Yes," I told myself, "it makes sense to save the money," and I finally decided to discontinue my participation in this Centre from the following Sunday. To my utter surprise, the moment I opened my door, I found new notes of four hundred Belgian francs lying on the floor! I was shocked at this coin-Sai-dence and then I heard a voice coming from my heart which said - 'If you want to discontinue My Mission and save money, why from next Sunday, do so from this very Sunday!'

I was dumbfounded and I started reflecting that coming to Belgium and getting the opportunity to establish Sai Centres in the three provinces of the country was nothing but a rare opportunity given to me. I took it as Bhagavan's design to make me drop the plan of saving money by reducing my participation in Sai activities. I immediately realised my folly. I was full of remorse and decided to continue my participation in all the Sai Centres till my departure from Belgium.

Seva Activities at the Indo-Pak Border

In 1983, after five years in Belgium, I was transported from a developed and sophisticated society to a rural society in Jammu and Kashmir. I could well understand that this change with altogether different dimensions was not without significance. I was glad that Bhagavan wanted me to be His instrument in rendering service to the villagers who needed it most. "What tasks I am to perform here, Oh Bhagavan, lead me on," I prayed. I chose to serve in the Agriculture University in Jammu and Kashmir, and was selected for the post of Associate Professor-cum-Senior Scientist. I was to work in R.S. Pura town near the Indo-Pak border.

I started to move around, in order to locate such centres where Sai activities were being conducted in R.S. Pura. I learnt that there were no such centres, as the people did not know anything about Baba. I recalled that in Europe also I was given an opportunity to be a humble instrument for acquainting the people of Belgium with the *Avatar* of the Age. Now, I was faced with a similar situation in this Northern most state of India.

After some time, I spoke to my colleagues at the research station in R.S. Pura about Baba and a few of them showed interest. Soon we started *Bhajan* sessions every Tuesday in a school in R.S. Pura. Steadily, the number of devotees increased. Bhagavan Baba's Mission had begun to take root. We maintained strict

discipline during the *Bhajan* sessions and advised our friends not to discuss any worldly matters and maintain complete silence in the hall. In the beginning only I used to sing *Bhajans* for an hour as I did in Belgium until new singers were trained. A few select singers were given more time to sing in order to create a deeply devotional atmosphere. This attracted many people to the *Bhajan* sessions.

We adopted the villages of Banota, Railway Line Gagian and Drawate which are very close to R.S. Pura. Later, we shifted our activities to the Indo-Pak border villages. One day I went to see the border which is only 5 kms away from the university campus. After visiting the border, I went into a few border villages and decided to undertake service activities there. My aim was to involve the villagers and motivate them to undertake such sacred work every day in their villages. It is not possible for one to go to the villages every day. Therefore, when we involve the villagers in training camps, they will learn to help themselves and understand the importance of community service. This will also help them in creating a cordial atmosphere in the villages. Slowly, we adopted many villages like Bera, Raipur, Bega, Choga, Leiyen, Baspur, Rangpur, Chanduchak, and another five more. These were all situated along the border from where one could see a few Pakistani villages.

Seva Camps

In the first year of our adopting the border villages, people had many doubts. They raised many questions. I must thank two local newspapers, "Daily Excelsior" and "Kashmir Times," which regularly published news about our camps in these villages. Our motive behind publishing information about these camps was not to get publicity for ourselves, but to spread awareness in these areas. The State and Central Intelligence agencies were watching my movements with suspicion due to the sensitive nature of the area. I came to know about this only at the time of my leaving Jammu and Kashmir to take up a new assignment in New Delhi, in the Ministry of Defense. Unbeknown to me, a local official was closely watching my movements and activities in the border area as part of his duty. He was so much convinced about the selfless nature of the work, that he himself became a part of our Seva activities! After retirement, he became even more involved in them. Bhagavan Baba says, "Always believe that truth will save you in the long run. Stick to it regardless of what might befall you." If we do not stray from truth, our success is assured. This came true in my life and in spite of many hurdles, I succeeded in my mission.

After one year, people realised the real objective of our activities and started extending help. I never felt that I was alone. I knew that Baba was always guiding me. Once I sent a compiled report of a few camps to Prasanthi Nilayam which was presented to Baba by Dr. Pran Nath Kaul, the then President of Sri Sathya Sai Seva Organisation, J and K. Baba said, "Very good work at R.S. Pura." Dr. Kaul conveyed this to me which further strengthened my resolve.

Several camps were organised in the villages. All these camps were conducted under the banner of Sri Sathya Sai Seva Organisation, J and K. Discipline was given utmost importance. At times, we had to walk long distances in the early morning since there used to be no transport available at that time.

We carried out 124 Seva camps, divided under various heads like (1) Agriculture Production camps (2) Medical camps (3) Blood Donation Camps (4) Eye camps (5) Eye Donation Camps (6) Health and Hygiene camps (7) Veterinary camps (8) Horticulture camps and (9) Camps for Education in Human Values.

The response from doctors and compounders of the veterinary hospital, R.S. Pura, was overwhelming. They extended full co-operation in conducting the camps with zest and enthusiasm. Organising four eye-camps at the Primary Health Centre in R.S. Pura in which over 6,000 patients were given outdoor treatment and 337 were successfully operated for cataract was one of our noteworthy achievements.

The zeal and enthusiasm of the local population and the spiritual fervour with which every activity was being conducted, impressed the army authorities, and voluntary contributions to each eye camp in the form of tents, cots, water storage tanks, security guards and several other utilities were made by the Miran Sahib Army Brigade and the Border Security Force of India.

The Health Minister, being an ex-Indian Air Force Officer, was always willing to do everything for the successful conduct of the camps. Invariably, most of the eye camps were graced by the presence of the State Health Minister and the Principal of Jammu Medical College as the chief guests.

Instances of Divine Grace at the Indo-Pak Border

People living in these villages also experienced in many ways the Grace of Bhagavan Baba. Many sick people were cured, simply by taking *Vibhuti*. Many a time, it even baffled the doctors. A very loving friend of mine was once admitted to a Jammu hospital after a paralytic stroke. He got relief after I gave him *Vibhuti* and later he became completely better. Now the whole family is devoted to Bhagavan Baba and has visited Puttaparthi many times to have His *Darshan*. The family has also been participating in *Prasanthi Seva*. An acquaintance of mine was so inspired by the teachings of Bhagavan Baba that he offered his hand of friendship to a person who was his sworn enemy for twenty years. His family also is now devoted to Baba. Bhagavan Baba's Grace was at work changing hearts in so many ways.

Once a snake bit a man while he was cutting grasses for his horse in the field. It happened just an hour before the *Bhajans* were to be conducted in his house as usual on each Tuesday from 6-7 p.m. He decided first to attend *Bhajans* and go thereafter for treatment to the Primary Health Centre. It was his firm belief that Bhagavan Baba will protect him. Nothing happened to him and Bhagavan appeared to him in the night, touched his whole body and disappeared.

One gentleman of Baspur village was so motivated on hearing about Swami that he left liquor for ever and changed to the extent that he contributed daily 27 liters of milk for 100 eye patients in one of the free eye camps for 9 days. This person grew up to become a very rich man. From then on till now, he visits Prasanthi Nilayam every year bringing his friends and relatives with him.

Selfless Service

A very unique transformation, hitherto unknown anywhere in India, took place in the village of Leiyen in the border area of Jammu. The villagers were so motivated towards community service that all of them without exception pledged their eyes. A detailed report on this event was published in newspapers and telecast by Doordarshan from New Delhi. This event goes to prove the power of selfless service is changing the hearts and minds of people in a positive direction.

Let us never lose sight of the fact that it is He who offers us the opportunity to serve, it is He who accepts the Seva and it is He who performs the Seva. In my life, I learnt that Seva is an opportunity given by the Grace of the Lord; for He creates such situations that one gets the inclination to undertake this beautiful sadhana. In life, everything is now, the present moment, tomorrow may never come. Serve today, serve now, and in this way let us sanctify our lives. To be able to serve the needy and forlorn is nothing but Sai *Anugraham*, the blessing from Sai!

H2H SPECIAL

MESMERIZING MOMENTS WITH THE DIVINE MASTER

Interview with Mrs. Rani Subramanian - Part 2

A devout and dedicated devotee for nearly sixty years, Mrs. Rani Subramanian, who originally hails from Tamil Nadu, came to Bhagavan Baba as early as 1950. Eighty five years old now and fondly called 'Rani Maa' by Bhagavan, her life is a treasure-chest of scintillating experiences from yester years. A sincere spiritual seeker, she currently resides in Puttaparthi and shares her elevating memories with eager devotees with deep conviction, insight and faith. This is the second part of her wonderful reminiscences, continued from the previous issue..

Once He told me: “Rani Maa, if you have got My Grace, it is because you have lived that life!” It may not be to perfection. You see, when you come to this path with Baba, it does not mean you will become perfect overnight! We have got many shortcomings, many imperfections, which we have to transcend as human beings. For, spiritual life is completely different from what we were used to; our whole life has to be re-oriented, re-organized; it is a big task. Our thoughts, our words, our deeds, everything has to be spiritualized. It is not easy, because we have formed a habit over many births – thinking one way, talking the other way – not in just one birth! We have been living like human beings for many life times, and now suddenly, we have to live a Divine life!

What It Means to Lead a Spiritual Life

What is spiritual life? It is a Divine life where you are connecting yourself with the Source all the time! That is, thinking, talking and functioning from the level of Divinity. That is what Baba told us: “You must test My Omnipresence.” And He said: “You have earned My Grace only because you have worked with your Self; not that you have achieved it. You start educating yourself, but you have to pass a very big exam – the Ph. D; the last one.” This may take many births for me! But I can’t give up. Even if I have come till the 10th, at least, I have come from 1 to the 10th! That is why Baba said: “Look at one step only! Why do you want to know ‘where will I go?’, or ‘how far I will reach in this birth?’ That is all wrong!” He told us personally: “Don’t look ahead! Just look one step forward!”

Let’s say I have temper, or I have greed or I am not very friendly or I am very selfish; whatever shortcoming I may have - each one has a different one; it could be anything - Baba wants you to be selfless. He said: “That should be your priority; you should put the other person first always. You must forget yourself; that is the Ultimate Realization!”

What is the Ultimate in Self-realization? To forget yourself! We always want this and that only for our own self – this body! That is forbidden in the spiritual path; you have to forget yourself. First see God in yourself; you must be convinced that He resides in you. You can't see God in everybody till you see God in your Guru first; secondly in your Self – as the Indweller!

Testing the Lord

So, Swami said: "Go and test Me." And I tested Swami. What happened was, my husband was a doctor and so, when any illness took place in the family, I could get doctors any time I wanted. Once, when my husband was on a tour - he had to tour the whole of Madhya Pradesh – my son became very ill, and had 103-104 degrees fever for 5 days! One doctor came and saw him, and at first he thought that it was malaria, and then he said it was influenza; he couldn't find the precise cause. So he went on treating, but my son didn't respond to any medicine!

Then, on the 4th day, he came and told me: "I have treated him for malaria, and for flu, then for dengue, and I have been changing medicines, but since he is not responding to my treatment, it's not working. So, I suspect, it could be typhoid." To get a proper diagnosis for typhoid, we have to do a blood test. So he said: "Tomorrow evening, I will come and take his blood, and if it is confirmed after the test, I will start the treatment for typhoid."

My son was maybe 5 or 6 years old, and his fever was not coming down at all! He became delirious! His brain was a muddle. He could not recognize people; he didn't know what was happening. He would say all sorts of irrelevant things! He didn't recognize I was his mother; he just looked at me and was running away from the bed and was babbling! I couldn't understand why he was talking like this! I didn't know; I thought it was a kind of brain-fever or something similar! I was trying to put him into bed, but he wanted to run! I was worried and wondered what had happened to him!

Then immediately, Baba's thought came in my mind: 'I told you to test My Omnipresence! Now is the time for you test! Go and pray to Me.' Not that I heard a Voice or something; it just came into my own mind. I told the maid to somehow manage and look after the child, and I will just go and pray, and return.

So I went to my shrine - it was 9 o'clock - and I talked to Swami: "Swami, You said to test Your Omnipresence. Today I need Your Omnipresence, because this child is behaving so queerly! I can't even understand what is happening! I want Your help! Please come and do something. If You really come and save him, You must fulfill three conditions of mine! One, when I go back now, he should be fast asleep; he shouldn't be running and saying all sorts of things! Then I will know You are Omnipresent.

"The second is, when I get up in the morning, and when I check his temperature, it should be normal – exactly 98.4 – I will not even accept a 99!

The temperature usually goes up again in the afternoon. So when I will test again in the afternoon, and in the evening, it should be continuously 98.4! He should be absolutely normal in every sense! Then I will believe You have helped him.”

Swami had told us that to contact Him, you have to do *japa*, chant His Name. He is *hridayavaasi*, the Indweller and He is listening not just to me, but everybody else too, because He is within everybody. So the message will reach Him. I had a *mantra*, so I started chanting my mantra while I sat for a while in the prayer room.

Then I got up and returned to the bedroom, and I found him fast asleep! Then I asked my maid: “When did he go to sleep?” She said: “*Amma*, a few minutes after you went, he went off to sleep.” And even after I went, he didn’t get up; he was fast asleep! And in the morning too, he got up very normal! None of that babbling was there! He recognized me as he has always been! I took his temperature in the afternoon and evening – it was 98.4! What more did I need?

God’s Firm Answer

At that time, Swami was in Venkatagiri, with the Maharaja of Venkatagiri and He was talking to them at 9 o’clock. He used to stay with Venkatagiri and Kumara Raja (the King’s son) during the festival of Sri Rama Navami. Maharaja used to take Swami by car to Venkatagiri. He was a great devotee of Lord Rama and for him, Baba was his favourite deity.

So at that time, when I prayed at 9 o’clock, Swami was talking to Maharaja of Venkatagiri, and He went into a trance! He just fell back and they couldn’t understand what happened! Kumara Raja, thought Swami had suddenly fallen down as if He was unconscious!

When He came around, they asked Him: “Swami, what happened?” They had heard about trance but had not witnessed one till then. So they asked Him: “Was it a trance? Did You go anywhere?” Swami confirmed this. Then they asked Swami: “What happened? Why did You have to go in a trance?” Swami replied: “One of My devotees, Rani Maa, was in great trouble” - He told them my name! He said, “Her husband has gone on a tour; he is not there, she is alone with her two children. Her boy has got delirium from high fever. She is very worried and troubled. So she prayed to Me: ‘Swami, come and show me Your Omnipresence!’ So, I went and saved the boy. Now the boy is alright.”

Venkatagiri Maharaja happily said: “Oh, very good!” But Kumara Raja, the younger one, said: “Swami, next time this Rani Maa comes, I want to see her. And I also want to see the little boy whom You saved. Will You show them to me?” Maharaja didn’t ask all this because he had accepted Swami totally, but the younger Raja wanted proof. Swami said: “Don’t worry, she comes here every six months.”

Acquiring *Shanti*

I used to come to Puttaparthi every six months, sometimes even 3 times a year. I have to tell you, in those days, His aura was very powerful! He could really transform our whole thinking in a very short time! In the first visit itself, within a few days, I could accept anything! Normally, I wouldn't have accepted rain coming in my own house, I would have reacted! But, I did not react there. He gave us an experience of His Power.

Some people may not understand, but in my first visit itself, I could understand; we had Baba's blessing to understand that He had Infinite Power! How could we transcend? We thought that we would be disturbed, but we were not disturbed at all. We had to go to the hill for the call of nature, but it didn't bother us that 'Oh! We have to walk' or 'Oh! We don't have a toilet'; we walked happily. We didn't have tap water, we had to drag water from the well or walk all the way from the *Patha Mandir* to Chitravathi to wash so many clothes – with so many children being there - and take it back like a washerman; we were not used to all this! And yet, we used to cry on leaving Puttaparthi! Can you believe it? We didn't want to go back home! What did He do? It was an overnight change! I consider ourselves very blessed.

I won't say I am that detached now; I may be more aware of conveniences now. But, in those days, He did something to just give us a taste; it was not a permanent acquisition - like Shri Ramakrishna gave Swami Vivekananda the experience of *Nirvikalpa Samadhi* just for a short while and then took it back and kept the secret. Baba did the same thing; He gave us an experience of His Infinite Power and Grace, that He can do anything, just like that! He doesn't need time! I don't have to do *sadhana* for 6 years to get that; nothing! It was instant; but only a taste of it. With *sadhana* alone, I can get permanent realization of His Power.

Even now, we have to work with ourselves, because so many things are happening in our family; things that we don't approve of – like tragic incidents; so many things which upset people. It may upset us for a little while – it does not upset us permanently, because we have that knowledge to get over that situation. Why does it not affect us always? We don't worry - at that moment, yes, we will be upset, because we are not yet stabilized in our *jnana*; our knowledge. Until that knowledge is stabilized, that permanent acquisition of the equanimity of the mind won't be available.

Swami is showing us that through our experiences - something unpleasant may happen, and we may think 'why should this happen?' We think about it and give it too much thought – not that we worry, we pray to Swami. But if we give it lot of time and a lot of thought; that is what should not be done. Instantaneous indifference to anything happening externally should be our acquisition, our achievement. That is the achievement Swami wants to give us, but we have to work with ourselves. And each one will perform according to their own capacity.

Capacity means *prarabhda karma*, tendencies and merits acquired from previous births. I may like to do like someone else, but I am not able to! Why? It's my *prarabhda karma*. Once we asked Swami if *prarabhda karma* can be wiped out. He said: "Yes. You made your *prarabhda karma*; God has nothing to do with your *karma*. You have written your *karma*, your destiny and landed here; you have to wipe it out." Like an examination paper, you have to answer your own examination paper. Can somebody else come and correct it for you? No! Not even the teacher! It is a test which you have to face alone! You have written your destiny, you can wipe out your destiny."

How can you do it? He told me once in Whitefield - which I will never forget - about "Obedience to your Guru." There's nothing else you need to know. We now hear His discourses about obedience to Guru. He is not talking about it individually; there are millions coming now; can He talk to every one individually? No! During those days, there were hardly 100 people! So He could give a lot of time. Now, where is there time for Swami? There's only 24 hours! Hours don't extend; for Him too it is still 24 hours! He has to fit in so many things; it is impossible for Him now to give interview to everybody or talk to everybody!

He had told us about that year's ago! "You are very lucky! This chance you will not get again! Years later, you will not get this opportunity!" Now do I talk to Swami? No! We just see Swami, and return. I can't believe that at one point, we had so much joyous time with Him! Once He told me that: "Old devotees must withdraw and go to the back; give place to the newcomer." That is the Grace of old devotion.

What Should We Ask God?

Old devotees want to come and sit in the front line and want interviews. What have you imbibed? Nothing! He told me of an old devotee who was a friend of mine, who wanted an interview each time she came. And Swami was very fond of her too. She would come from Madras and stay here for one or two months, and each time, she would ask for an interview before she left. Swami wouldn't let us; but she would insist; so Swami would say: "Okay, go." He can't say 'No' to old devotees - I tested Him!

We ask Him; but we are not supposed to ask! What is the use of coming for so many years? My coming here for 57 years is no qualification; let me tell you that! A person who has come for just 10 days can realize much more than I have done! Because they might be understanding; they might be ready; they might be mature! You must have spiritual maturity to understand Swami. And your life must be in tune with Swami's teaching – not tuned with what you want; then you can receive *sampoorna kripa*, complete Grace, and your *prarabhda* is wiped off.

He doesn't want great performance; think of Him all the time - it's so easy; *naamasmarana*. Pray: "Swami, I surrender everything to You!" and be at peace. Years ago, a couple of years after I came, He told me once: "You don't know how to pray, your prayer is all wrong. I will teach you how to pray."

I didn't know what was wrong with me, because He said: "You are asking for all sorts of things! 'I want this...I want that...I want this done this way...etc' You are always asking for something or the other. Don't do that. 'If let's say you ask for a necklace, or a bangle, or something material; it is a piece-meal prayer; make it a total prayer. And the total prayer is to ask for *shanti*; *parama shanti* – Supreme Peace that is undisturbed by anything external. That is what you should ask for and I will give it to you.'"

And then He added: "You won't know how I will give it to you! I know the way it will reach you, you leave it to Me! Just say 'Swami, I want peace.' That's all you should ask as your prayer. Don't ask that this one should be like this, or that one is troubling me, or I want more money, I want a house. Don't ask; I will give you."

The Wealth That Only God Can Give

Once, we were reading the Bhagavad Geeta; the *pravriti marga* – the two-fold path. He said: "Because you are a good devotee, and you are devoted to Me, and you are doing prayers and *sadhana*; I will grant you whatever you want in the world! But then, you can't get Me! You will get everything in the world, but not God! God is Peace! He is Truth, Righteousness, Peace and Love! I am Love and Peace and Compassion! These you will not get! But you will get everything else in the world – money, position and power too – I will give it because you want it! But with all that, you will become, more peace-less! You will have more problems; so don't ask for that! If you are a wise person, a good devotee, ask for gold! Peace is gold; if you have that, you can get anything out of it. So ask for gold – Pure Gold! This Peace is pure, solid gold! That is what I have come to give you all – Supreme Peace!"

Lord Krishna says the same thing in the Bhagavata Geeta when Arjuna asks Him the same question: "Swami, what will I get if I obey You?" He said: "Arjuna, I will give you Supreme Peace; undisturbed by anything external; gain or loss, praise or blame, victory or defeat; everything will be the same. All are pairs of opposites; you will transcend all of them." Also, we will not feel any problems with heat or cold – because when it is hot, if we keep saying "Oh! It's so hot!" that's a disqualification too! Or when it is cold, if we keep saying: "Oh! It's so cold! I wish it was warmer!" that means we are reacting to things! Small things should not matter!

We should not even comment! So, even if it is the Truth – no doubt – but that comment will make our state of consciousness – which can give us peace – not available to us. We cannot capture that state of consciousness, which is available.

GET INSPIRED

THE RENTED ROOM

Our house was directly across the street from the clinic entrance of Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. We lived downstairs and rented the upstairs rooms to outpatients at the clinic.

One summer evening as I was fixing supper, there was a knock at the door. I opened it to see a truly awful looking man. "Why, he's hardly taller than my eight-year-old," I thought as I stared at the stooped, shriveled body. But the appalling thing was his face, lopsided from swelling, red and raw.

Yet his voice was pleasant as he said, "Good evening. I've come to see if you've a room for just one night. I came for a treatment this morning from the eastern shore, and there's no bus 'til morning'."

He told me he'd been hunting for a room since noon but with no success; no one seemed to have a room. "I guess it's my face. I know it looks terrible, but my doctor says with a few more treatments..."

For a moment I hesitated, but his next words convinced me: "I could sleep in this rocking chair on the porch. My bus leaves early in the morning."

I told him we would find him a bed, but to rest on the porch. I went inside and finished getting supper. When we were ready, I asked the old man if he would join us. "No, thank you. I have plenty." And he held up a brown paper bag.

When I had finished the dishes, I went out on the porch to talk with him a few minutes. It didn't take a long time to see that this old man had an oversized heart crowded into that tiny body. He told me he fished for a living to support his daughter, her five children and her husband, who was hopelessly crippled from a back injury.

He didn't tell it by way of complaint; in fact, every other sentence was prefaced with thanks for a blessing. He was grateful that no pain accompanied his disease, which was apparently a form of skin cancer. He thanked the Creator for giving him the strength to keep going.

At bedtime, we put a camp cot in the children's room for him. When I got up in the morning, the bed linens were neatly folded, and the little man was out on the porch. He refused breakfast, but just before he left for his bus, haltingly, as if asking a great favor, he said, "Could I please come back and stay the next time I have a treatment? I won't put you out a bit. I can sleep fine in a chair."

He paused a moment and then added, "Your children made me feel at home. Grownups are bothered by my face, but children don't seem to mind." I told him he was welcome to come again.

And on his next trip he arrived a little after seven in the morning. As a gift, he brought a big fish and a quart of the largest oysters I had ever seen. He said he had shucked them that morning before he left so that they'd be nice and fresh. I knew his bus left at 4 a.m., and I wondered what time he had to get up in order to do this for us.

In the years he came to stay overnight with us there was never a time that he did not bring us fish, or oysters, or vegetables from his garden. Other times we received packages in the mail, always by special delivery; fish and oysters packed in a box of fresh young spinach or kale, every leaf carefully washed. Knowing that he must walk three miles to mail these and aware of how little money he had, made the gifts doubly precious.

When I received these little remembrances, I often thought of a comment our next-door neighbor made after he left that first morning. "Did you keep that awful looking man last night? I turned him away! You can lose roomers by putting up such people!"

Maybe we did lose roomers once or twice. But, oh! If only they could have known him, perhaps their illnesses would have been easier to bear. I know our family always will be grateful to have known him; from him we learned what it was to accept the bad without complaint and the good with gratitude.

Recently I was visiting a friend who has a greenhouse. As she showed me her flowers, we came to the most beautiful one of all, a golden chrysanthemum, bursting with blooms. But to my great surprise, it was growing in an old dented, rusty bucket. I thought to myself, "If this were my plant, I'd put it in the loveliest container I had!"

My friend changed my mind. "I ran short of pots," she explained, "and knowing how beautiful this one would be, I thought it wouldn't mind starting out in this old pail. It's just for a little while, till I can put it out in the garden."

She must have wondered why I laughed so delightedly, but I was imagining just such a scene in heaven. "Here's an especially beautiful one," the Creator might have said when he came to the soul of the sweet old fisherman. "He won't mind starting in this small body."

All this happened long ago — and now, in the Celestial Garden, how tall this lovely soul must stand.

In the same light, Bhagavan Baba has related the inspiring story of sage Ashtavakra, who was born physically deformed, but outclassed many scholars of King Janaka's court. He called the learned men "cobblers" as they were concerned only about his skin. To read this story from Bhagavan's discourse, please refer to Sathya Sai Speaks volume 20, chapter 11.

Let us always remember that the most important part of our body is not the skin, but our heart. If our heart is broad, happiness will surround us and peace will be our friend.

JUST KEEP PLANTING

Paul Rokich is a local hero. When Paul was a boy growing up in Utah, he happened to live near an old copper smelter, and the sulfur dioxide that poured out of the refinery had made a desolate wasteland out of what used to be a beautiful forest.

When a young visitor one day looked at this wasteland and saw that there was nothing living there - no animals, trees, grass, bushes, birds...nothing but fourteen thousand acres of black and barren land that even smelled bad - well, he glanced at the whole stretch and said, "This place is crummy." Paul knocked him down. He felt insulted. But he looked around him and something happened inside him. He made a decision: Paul Rokich vowed that some day he would bring back the life to this land.

Many years later, Paul was in the area and he went to the smelter office. He asked if they had any plans to bring the trees back. The answer was "No." He asked if they would let him try to bring the trees back. Again, the answer was "No." They didn't want him on their land. He realized he needed to be more knowledgeable before anyone would listen to him, so he went to college to study botany.

At the college, he met a professor who was an expert in Utah's ecology. Unfortunately, this expert told Paul that the wasteland he wanted to bring back was beyond hope. He was told that his goal was foolish because even if he planted trees, and even if they grew, the wind would only blow the seeds forty feet per year, and that's all you'd get because there weren't any birds or squirrels to spread the seeds, and the seeds from those trees would need another thirty years before they started producing seeds of their own. Therefore, it would take approximately twenty thousand years to re-vegetate that six-square-mile piece of earth. His teachers told him it would be a waste of his life to try to do it. It just couldn't be done.

So he tried to go on with his life. He got a job operating heavy equipment, got married, and had kids. But his dream would not die. He kept studying up on the subject, and thinking about it. And then, one night he got up and decided to do something. He did what he could with what he had. This was an important turning point. As Samuel Johnson wrote, "It is common to overlook what is nearby keeping the eye fixed on something remote. In the same manner, present opportunities are neglected and attainable good is slighted by minds busied in extensive ranges."

Paul stopped busying his mind in extensive ranges and looked at what opportunities for attainable good were right in front of him. Under the cover of darkness, he sneaked out into the wasteland with a backpack full of seedlings and started planting. For seven hours he planted seedlings.

He did it again a week later. And every week, he made his secret journey into the wasteland and planted trees, shrubs and grass. But most of it died.

For fifteen years he did this. When a whole valley of his fir seedlings burned to the ground because of a careless sheep-herder, Paul broke down and wept. Then he got up and kept planting. Freezing winds and blistering heat, landslides, floods and fires destroyed his work, time and again. But he kept planting.

One night, he found that a highway crew had come and taken tons of dirt for a road grade, and all the plants he had painstakingly planted in that area were gone. But he just kept planting. Week after week, year after year he kept at it, against the opinion of the authorities, the trespassing laws, the devastation of road crews, the wind, rain and heat...even against plain common sense. He just kept planting.

Slowly, very slowly, things began to take root. Then, gophers appeared. Next were rabbits; and then porcupines. The old copper smelter eventually gave him permission, and later, as times were changing and there was political pressure to clean up the environment, the company actually hired Paul to do what he was already doing, and they provided him with machinery and crews to work with. Progress accelerated.

Now the place is fourteen thousand acres of trees, grass and bushes, rich with elk and eagles, and Paul Rokich has received almost every environmental award Utah has.

He says, "I thought that if I got this started, when I was dead and gone, people would come and see it. I never thought I'd live to see it myself!" It took him until his hair turned white, but he managed to keep that impossible vow he made to himself as a child.

What was it you wanted to do that you thought was impossible? Paul's story sure gives a perspective on things, doesn't it?

The way you get something accomplished in this world is to just keep planting. Just keep working. Just keep plugging away at it one day at a time for a long time, no matter who criticizes you, no matter how long it takes, no matter how many times you fall. Get back up again. And just keep planting.

Bhagavan Baba says, "The one with noble qualities of purity, patience and perseverance, is verily God." Even sky is not the limit for a person who is diligent and determined, because he or she gains access to an infinite source of ideas and energy. Let us be persistent with our pure ideas and new vistas will open in our life conferring on us immense happiness.

WHAT'S IN A GIRL'S PAPER BAG

It was Molly's job to hand her father his brown paper lunch bag each morning before he headed off to work.

One morning, in addition to his usual lunch bag, Molly handed him a second paper bag. This one was worn and held together with duct tape, staples, and paper clips.

"Why two bags?" Dad asked.

"The other is something else," Molly answered.

"What's in it?"

"Just some stuff, take it with you."

Not wanting to discuss the matter, Dad stuffed both bags into his briefcase, kissed Molly and rushed off. At mid-day, while hurriedly having his lunch, he tore open Molly's bag and shook out the contents: two hair ribbons, three small stones, a plastic dinosaur, a pencil stub, a tiny sea shell, two animal crackers, a marble, a used lipstick, a small doll, two chocolate kisses and 13 pennies. Dad smiled, finished eating, and swept the desk clean — into the wastebasket — leftover lunch, Molly's junk and all.

That evening, Molly ran up behind him as he read the paper. "Where's my bag?"

"What bag?"

"You know, the one I gave you this morning."

"I left it at the office. Why?"

"I forgot to put this note in it," she said. "And, besides, those are my things in the sack, Daddy, the ones I really love — I thought you might like to play with them, but now I want them back. You didn't lose the bag, did you, Daddy?"

"Oh, no," he said lying, "I just forgot to bring it home. I'll bring it home tomorrow."

While Molly hugged her father's neck, he unfolded the note that had not made it into the sack: "I love you, Daddy," it read.

Molly had given him her treasures — all that a 7-year-old held dear. Love in a paper sack, and he missed it — not only missed it, but had thrown it in the wastebasket!

So back he went to the office. Just ahead of the night janitor, he picked up the wastebasket and poured the contents on his desk.

After washing the mustard off the dinosaur and spraying the whole thing with breath-freshener to kill the smell of onions, he carefully smoothed out the wadded ball of brown paper, put the treasure inside and carried it home gingerly, like an injured kitten. The bag didn't look so good, but the stuff was all there and that's what counted.

After dinner, he asked Molly to tell him about the stuff in the sack. It took a long time to tell. Everything had a story, or a memory, or was attached to dreams and imaginary friends. Fairies had brought some of the things. He had given her the chocolate kisses, and she had kept them for when she needed them.

"Sometimes I think of all the times in this sweet life," he mused, "when I must have missed the affection I was being given. I have a friend who calls this 'standing knee deep in the river and dying of thirst'."

We should all remember that it's not the destination that counts in life — it's the journey. The journey with the people we love is all that really matters. Such a simple truth so easily forgotten, yet we can, at any moment, choose to see the truth. A little girl's smiles, chocolate kisses wrapped in old paper bags — that we sometimes throw away too thoughtlessly, when each is a tiny treasure.

Mother Teresa said, "Everybody today seems to be in such a terrible rush, anxious for greater developments and greater riches and so on, so that children have very little time for their parents. Parents have very little time for each other, and in the home begins the disruption of the peace of the world...Love begins in home, lives in homes..."

Bhagavan Baba says, "The family is essential for the blossoming of the human personality — how can a helpless baby grow and learn, talk and develop without the home? The home needs the community around it to keep it safe and happy. We have to expand our knowledge, our emotions, our sympathies, our love. Expansion is life. Expansion is love."

If we are alert and care to observe, our life is actually filled with so many little things. Let us recognize them and relish them every present moment, then the future will automatically be taken care of.

TEST YOUR SPIRITUAL QUOTIENT

MULTI FAITH QUIZ

This quiz concerns festivals celebrated by people of different faiths all around the world in the month of May. It shows how for generations man has exalted God and His Presence on earth in this blessed month in so many beautiful ways and found light, peace, bliss.

1. On May 1, 2008 Christians celebrate Ascension Day, celebrating Jesus' ascension to Heaven after he was resurrected. Ascension Day marks the last earthly appearance of Christ after his Resurrection. Christians believe Christ ascended into heaven.

After which important event is this Day celebrated?

- A. Lent
- B. Good Friday
- C. Easter
- D. Pentecost

2. Although on May 11, Mother's day is celebrated world-wide, interestingly, there is another festival called 'Mothering Sunday' that is celebrated in England whose origin has no connection with the American festival of that name.

In whose honour was the festival celebrated in the beginning?

- A. The Bishop's Mother.
- B. Jesus Christ's Mother.
- C. The Queen's Mother.
- D. All Grand-Mothers.

3. For Buddhists, May 20 is the festival of Buddha Poornima. Swami has always taught us that this holy day is celebrated to remind us that *Prema* (Pure Love) is the pathway to *Poornam* (totality).

In His Divine 2000 Discourse, on Buddha Poornima Day, Swami explained: "People have strange ideas about liberation, imagining that it involves going to heaven and having eternal existence there. That is not the meaning of liberation. It means achieving selfless love that is constant, unabating, and total. This is the state that one must seek to attain; it is only when this state is reached that one is truly liberated. In the name of liberation, seekers are trying out all sorts of spiritual paths. All such exercises can at best confer temporary

satisfaction. The path of Pure Love alone can truly get you there and confer permanent Bliss.”

Which *Dharmic* quality did Swami and Lord Buddha emphasize that helps us achieve this ‘*Prema*’ - and liberation?

- A. Always Being Truthful.
- B. Being Soft in Speech.
- C. Undertaking Charitable Projects.
- D. Practicing Non-Violence.

4. On May 23rd, Baha'i's commemorate one of the most important events in the history of the Baha'i Faith. This event is referred to as ‘The Declaration of the Bab’. On this day, the Báb was sent forth heralding and proclaiming the Kingdom of God, announcing the coming of ‘The One Whom God Will Make Manifest,’ that is, Bahá'u'lláh. The day the Báb declared His mission, is now celebrated by Bahá'ís around the world as ‘one of the greatest and most significant of all festivals.’

The Bab and Baha'u'llah are viewed as the twin Manifestations of the Baha'i Era.

The **Kitáb-í-Asmá** is one of the most important works of the Báb. What does the book contain?

- A. The Commandments.
- B. The Names of God.
- C. The Prophecies of Bab.
- D. The Proclamations of Baha'u'llah.

5. The Masjid al Haram is the most revered Masjid in Islam and is also known as The Grand Masjid. It houses the holy ‘Kaaba’ which in Arabic means a high place with respect and prestige, which is the focal point of prayer for all Muslims.

Muslims believe that Allah created a well to provide Hajira, the wife of Prophet Ibrahim, and her baby Prophet Ismail with water in the hot, dry valley they were in. In her desperate search for water, Hajira ran seven times back and forth in the scorching heat between the two hills of Safa and Marwa to provide for her baby who was dying of thirst.

Today, this same ritual act - called *sa'i* is a necessary rite of Hajj that all Muslims, mothers and fathers, must complete. Safa is located approximately half a mile from the Kaaba, and Marwah is located about 100 yards from the Kaaba. The two points and the path between them are now inside a long gallery that forms part of the Masjid.

What does the term *Sa'i* mean?

- A. Devotional act of walking.
- B. Praying to the Sun.
- C. Fasting.
- D. Singing hymns.

6. For the Jews, the Torah has been revered as the inspired word of God, as it is said by tradition to have been revealed to Moses by Him. The Torah is sometimes referred to as the (written) Law or written Torah (unlike the oral Torah called Mishnah). The Torah is the first part of the 'Tanakh' - the Hebrew Bible, and is made up of five books. For that reason it is also called the 'Chumash', or 'the Five Books of Moses'.

The five books of the Torah are: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Which one of these is referred to as 'The Law of Moses'?

- A. Genesis and Exodus
- B. Leviticus
- C. Numbers
- D. Deuteronomy

7. Jainism is a religion propounded by a 'Jina'. Principles enunciated by a 'Jina' constitute Jainism and the follower of Jainism is known as a 'Jaina'. Further, a 'Jina' is neither a supernatural being nor an incarnation of an all-powerful God. Human beings are entitled to become 'Jinas' and as such 'Jinas' are persons of this world and Jainism is nothing but a set of principles preached by such persons known as 'Jinas'.

According to Swami, who is a 'Jina'?

- A. One who renounces the world.
- B. One who has attained conquest of the senses.
- C. One who spends his life in meditation.
- D. One who preaches from the sacred texts.

8. Swami has repeatedly stressed: "I tell you often, you are not one, but three - the one you think you are (physical body), the one others think you are (mental body) and the one you really are (*Atma*)."

Of all the Hindu mantras, which mantra reveals this profound Truth?

- A. The Aum mantra.
- B. The Soham mantra.

- C. The Gayatri mantra.
- D. The Shanti mantra.

9. The **Ardās** is a Sikh prayer that is done before performing or after undertaking any significant task; after reciting the daily prayers; or completion of a service like the hymn-singing program or any other religious program.

How is this prayer done?

- A. Kneeling down.
- B. Standing with folded hands.
- C. Holding hands in a group.
- D. Facing the Sun.

10. The most sacred texts of the Zoroastrian faith, which are known as the **Gathas**, are 17 hymns believed to have been composed by Zarathushtra (Zoroaster) himself. Zoroaster believed that he had been entrusted by God with a message for all mankind, and he preached again and again in plain words to ordinary people. Some of the verses of the Gathas are directly addressed to the Omniscient Creator Ahura Mazda. These verses, devotional in character, expound on the Divine essences of _____ (*Asha*), the good-mind (*Vohu Manah*), and the spirit of righteousness.

What does *Asha* represent?

- A. Discrimination
- B. Truth
- C. Compassion
- D. Devotion

ANSWERS:

1C. Easter.

Ascension Day marks the end of the Easter season. It is celebrated 40 days after Easter. For many Christians, Ascension Day's meaning provides a sense of hope that the glorious and triumphant return of Christ is near. It is a reminder of the Kingdom of God within their hearts, and of the ever-present Spirit of God, watching over and protecting them as they spread the light of Jesus' truth throughout the world.

2B. Jesus Christ's Mother.

Mothering Sunday did not begin as a celebration of motherhood. In England, the early Christians used to celebrate the Mother's festival in order to honor Mother Mary, who is the Mother of Jesus Christ. It is interesting to know that later, a religious order stretched this holiday to include all the mothers into this festival. And hence this occasion was named as the "Mothering Sunday". How did that come about?

Centuries ago, it was considered important for people to return to their home or 'Mother' Church once a year. So each year everyone would visit their 'Mother' Church - the main church or Cathedral of the area which is believed to have the spiritual power that not only gave all those people life but also protected them from any harm or so called danger.

Inevitably the return to the 'Mother' church became an occasion for family reunions as it was the return to the 'Mother' church which led to the tradition of children, particularly those working as domestic servants, or as apprentices, being given the day off to visit their mother and family.

And later this practice became a tradition. These people, realizing the warmth of the occasion used to come back home with several gifts, flowers and unique Mothering Day cakes to celebrate their reunion. This day became an occasion when people could spend one special day with their mothers.

Even today the Mother's Day celebrations means the time for the children to express their love and concern towards their moms. And they do so by giving presents, flowers and other home made cards and crafts to their mothers.

3D. Practicing Non-Violence.

To convey this teaching further, Swami narrated the story: "One day in his wanderings, Buddha came to a village. The residents of the village were performing a *yajna* and, as a part of the rituals, were preparing to sacrifice an animal. Buddha saw this and advised the villagers not to do so. He said, "No harm must be done in any manner whatsoever to any living being, because God dwells in all." God is wisdom. God dwells in all beings. Buddha added, "This is what I have learnt. God dwells in all; therefore the individual is God and God is the individual. Hence, it is wrong to kill this animal." The head priest replied, "Sir, we are not killing this animal; we are offering it liberation."

Amused by the reply, Buddha said, "You are offering liberation to an animal that did not ask for it. Instead, why don't you liberate a person who is asking for it? Your argument has no basis in the scriptures. No *Veda* advocates what you are saying. Your observation is false and untrue. Do you think Liberation can be granted by inflicting harm, pain, and injury? No! Your father, mother, wife, and son all want liberation. Why don't you offer them in sacrifice and grant them all the liberation that they seek? You are so eager to liberate an

animal that has no desire for it but unwilling to liberate fellow humans who are hungering for it. What kind of perverted logic is this? What you are trying to do is the worst of sins. Never hurt, injure, or kill living beings.”

This is how Buddha conveyed the idea: ***Ahimsa* (non-violence) is the greatest *dharma* of all.**

The love principle inherent in man is equally present in all beings, birds and beasts included. Therefore, one has to place the same value on the lives of all beings. Share the love latent within you with not only fellow human beings but also with all creatures in nature. This is the true universal love principle. Such principle alone should be the basis of one's life.

4B. The Names of God.

The **Kitáb-í-Asmá** is an extremely long book on the Names of God. The book was initially written to keep his followers unified until the Promised One would come who would bring peace and prosperity to His people. The Declaration carries this fundamental point of Bab, which is known as the '*Bayán*'.

He told them to be sincere in their allegiance to the Promised Beloved, and warned them not to let anything, not even the *Bayán*, keep them from recognizing him. He used to say that all your approaches should be conditioned according to the Will of God. By following the Holy path of faith and spiritual clarity, Bab turned the Bahai's into one of the world's great religions with over five million followers.

5A. Devotional act of walking.

Sa'i is the devotional act of walking between the two hills of Safa and Marwah. *Sa'i* is a search. It is a movement with an aim. It is depicted by running and hurrying. There are certain conditions necessary for *Sa'i* to be considered valid. It should be performed in seven rounds, and it must begin from Safa and end at Marwah.

Before beginning, Muslims pray: "O Allah! For the sake of Thy pleasure I intend to complete seven rounds of *Sa'i* between Safa and Marwah. Now render it easy for me and accord it Thy approval."

6D. Deuteronomy.

Genesis begins with the story of Creation, Exodus is the story of Moses, Leviticus has various moral and ritual laws sometimes called the Holiness Code, Numbers has many laws mixed among the narratives and

Deuteronomy, which is the fifth book, is essentially a recapitulation of the commandments reviewed by Moses before his death, sometimes referred to as the 'Law of Moses' or 'Mosaic Law' or simply 'The Law'.

Thus, the five books (the Torah) contain both the complete system of biblical law, called Commandments, as well as a historical description of the beginnings of what came to be known as Judaism.

7B. One who has attained conquest of the senses.

The word 'Jina' means the conqueror or the victorious, i.e., one who has attained supreme knowledge, subjugated one's passions by one's own strenuous efforts and is free from any sort of attachment.

In His 1991 Divine Discourse, Swami explains: "In Jainism also, the same truth was taught by Mahavira. When the senses are allowed to have their way, all kinds of reactions occur. It is only when the senses are brought under unified control that the nature of Divinity can be comprehended. The eyes have the power of sight. The ears can hear. The powers of all the sense organs - seeing, hearing, speaking, etc., are derived from the Divine. It is the Divine that enables the eyes to see, the ears to hear, the mind to think and to have various experiences. It is when all these sensory processes are brought under unified control (by the conquest of the senses) that man becomes a conqueror a 'Jina' - as termed by the Jains. Because he had conquered his senses, the title of victor was conferred on Mahavira."

8C. The Gayatri Mantra.

*Aum bhoor bhuwah swaha
tat savitur varenyam
bhargo devasaya dheemahi
dhiyo yo naha prachodayat*

In His Divine 2000 Discourse, Swami explains the significance of the Gayatri Mantra: "Gayatri is the Mother of the Vedas. It contains the essence of all the mantras and so, it is highly sacred. There is no need to chant any other mantra if you chant the Gayatri mantra.

Gayatri is the Embodiment of all Gods and Goddesses. Just as a single thread runs through all the flowers in a garland, the same Divine Power exists in all the God forms.

Gayatri has three names: Gayatri, Savitri and Saraswati...they are latent in everybody. *Bhur*, *Bhuvah* and *Suvah* in the Gayatri mantra refer to body (materialization), life-force (vibration) and soul (radiation). *Bhur* means *Bhuloka* (the earth), which is nothing but the combination of materials. This

denotes the human body, which is also a combination of materials. *Bhuvah* refers to the life-force, which makes the body vibrate. *Suvah* refers to *Prajnana Shakti*, which sustains the life-force. This *Prajnana Shakti* is known as Constant Integrated Awareness. This is also termed as radiation. All the three, namely, materialization, vibration and radiation are present in man.

I tell you often, you are not one, but three - the one you think you are (physical body), the one others think you are (mental body) and the one you really are (*Atma*)."

9B. Standing with folded hands.

The *Ardās* is normally said while standing with folded hands before and after performing any relevant task. Sikhs believe it is more than just a prayer; it is a petition to God, the Merciful Creator of the Universe. It lowers one's ego and brings calmness to the mental state. It teaches one to have humility, compassion and an even state of mind. One is reminded of the level of dedication required to become a better human being. It gives one inner strength and energy. It links the mind with the pure ones from human history. It elevates one's spiritual state; builds one's confidence. It brings a sense of "community" to the person.

In a congregational setting, the *ardās* is recited by one member of the assemblage with everyone standing reverentially, hands crossed, facing the Holy Book - *Guru Granth Sahib*. Periodically throughout the recitation, the assembly as a whole repeats the word 'Waheguru' in order to support the idea that God, the 'Wondrous Guru', is the Supreme Being capable of anything.

At the completion of *ardās*, the congregation bows down as one and places their foreheads on the floor to symbolize the fact that they will go as low as necessary to support Waheguru and all that He stands for; in essence, they are placing themselves as the servants of God.

Upon rising, the congregation proclaims 'Waheguru Ji ka Khalsa, Waheguru Ji ki Fateh'. Roughly translated, it means 'the Khalsa belongs to the Lord to whom [also] belongs the Victory'. Immediately after uttering these words, one member of the assembly states the phrase, 'Bole So Nihal', or "he who pronounces these words shall be fulfilled'. In response to this statement, the entire congregation heartily shouts, 'Sat Sri Akal', meaning 'True is the Timeless Lord'. The content of the prayers serves to unite the congregation and show the degree of faith present in each person.

10B. Truth.

The Gathas are prayers to God and guidance for humanity. Every line, every stanza, and every song is communion with God; and at the same time, they

impart an eternally modern message. They lead humanity, with all its modern science, to Ahura Mazda, God of Subtle Wisdom. With the Gathas as the guide in thought, word, and deed, one may devote one's life in practicing, teaching and preaching the Divine doctrine. Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds are the quintessence of the Gathas.

Some of the verses of the Gathas are directly addressed to the Omniscient Creator Ahura Mazda. These verses, devotional in character, expound on the Divine essences of truth (*Asha*), the good-mind (*Vohu Manah*), and the spirit of righteousness. They consist of 17 songs and have a total of 241 stanzas. Each stanza is a thought-provoker in a chain of thought-provocation. They stimulate one's thinking faculty and guide it on to the track to think precisely. They stir one to move on a clear, straight road with a basic map in hand and a discerning vision in mind.

QUIZ ON DIVINE DISCOURSES DELIVERED ON EASWARAMMA DAY

1. In His Divine 1999 Discourse, on Easwaramma Day, Swami shared with us how her Divine name originated. "Easwaramma, the Mother of this physical body, was first christened as Namagiriamma at the time of birth. But after her marriage, Kondama Raju, the grandfather of this physical body, being a *jnani* (one of wisdom) and blessed with a vision of the future, started calling her Easwaramma (Mother of Easwara)."

What does the name 'Easwaramma' mean?

- A. Mother Earth.
- B. Mother of God.
- C. Everyone's Mother.
- D. Divine Being.

2. In His Divine 2003 Discourse, on Easwaramma Day, Swami recalls: "In those days (Swami's school days), when we returned from the Bukkapatnam School in the evenings, Mother Easwaramma would lovingly enquire as to what happened in the school that day. She had no formal education at all. One day the children told her, 'Mother, today a teacher by name Kondappa made our Sathya stand upon the bench.' They started criticizing him. Mother Easwaramma intervened and said _____"

What did Easwaramma say?

- A. "I will have the teacher expelled!"
- B. "My Sathya can never do anything wrong!"
- C. "Why didn't you boys save my Sathya?"
- D. "Children, you should not talk ill of your teacher."

3. In His Divine 1999 Discourse, on Easwaramma Day, Swami talked about how on rare occasions, He would give glimpses of His Divinity to Easwaramma.

He recalled: "Before leaving his mortal coil, My grand-father told Easwaramma not to get deluded by body attachment. He said, 'Bodily relationship is temporary, whereas *Atmic* relationship is permanent. So, give up body attachment and develop attachment to the *Atma*.'

From that day onward, Easwaramma never stayed at home; she started staying in Prashanti Nilayam. Every day, in the morning and evening she used to come upstairs and talk to Swami. She also understood My Divinity very well."

Besides giving her the Vision of Shri Rama, what other Form did Bhagavan Grace her with?

- A. Lord Shiva
- B. Lord Hanuman
- C. Lord Krishna
- D. Lord Vishnu

4. In His Divine 2003 Discourse, on Easwaramma Day, Swami related the following: "I want to tell you an incident that speaks of her immense compassion and love for children. In those days, students from various States and countries attended Summer Classes. Gokak, who used to conduct the classes, was a strict disciplinarian...One day, the students were having lunch in the dining hall. One of the boys got up and went outside before others could finish their meals. Gokak, who watched this through the window, called him and chided him for his act of indiscipline. 'When your fellow students are having their food, you should not get up in the middle even though you have completed your meals. It amounts to insulting them.' Saying so, Gokak suspended him from the classes. The boy was in tears, but Gokak was not moved.

The boy came to Mother Easwaramma's room, fell at her feet and started crying. He told her about the harsh punishment meted out to him by Gokak. He pleaded with her to come to his rescue."

What did Easwaramma say to Mr. Gokak?

- A. "I will complain to the Principal about you!"
- B. "If you punish others, you will be punished in return."
- C. "My Son will give him permission to attend classes again!"
- D. "I am so proud of your disciplined methods!"

5. In His Divine 2002 Discourse, on Easwaramma Day, Swami bemusedly shared His fond memories of her being around students in spite of her not having had any formal education: "Summer classes were going on in the month of May 1972. She used to come and sit in these classes. Swami used to be amused at her presence and asked her what she followed in the classes."

What was her reply?

- A. "My mother had already taught all this to me."
- B. "I understand everything just by Your expressions!"
- C. "I come here to see how the students of Swami conduct themselves."
- D. "At least I get to have Swami's Darshan!"

6. In His Divine 1999 Discourse, on Easwaramma Day, Swami extolled about the sacredness of Easwaramma's love for Him: "Once, on a Shivarathri day, after I had completed My Discourse, and the *Lingas* were ready to emerge from My mouth, I sat on the chair and was in severe pain. Seeing Me suffering, Easwaramma got up from the gathering, came up to Me and said, 'Swami, why do You suffer like this? Come inside, come inside.' I said I would not come inside. She cried and tried to persuade Me, but I did not budge an inch. Unable to see My suffering, she went inside.

As soon as she left, *Hiranyagarbha Linga* emerged. All the devotees burst into thunderous applause. Listening to this, she came back, but by then the *Linga* had already emerged and I was showing it to the devotees. All the people got up to have a glimpse of the *Linga*. As a result, Easwaramma could not see it. Next day she pleaded with Me to show the *Linga* to her. I said I had given it to somebody. But she said, 'Swami, I have not seen. I want to see.' I told her that she would see in the future anyway."

What did she say to that?

- A. "But Shivaraathri is too far!"
- B. "You never show me anything!"
- C. "Please create a new one for me now."
- D. "I do not want to put You to inconvenience."

7. In His Divine 2000 Discourse, on Easwaramma Day, Swami recalled how He fulfilled His Mother's wishes. "Initially, I was staying in Subbamma's house. But when the number of devotees increased, a new mandir was constructed. One day Easwaramma came in when I was having My food. When others tried to follow her, she told them not to come. She held both My hands and pleaded, 'Swami, there is no Hospital in our village. Consequently, when the children become sick, mothers are forced to carry them to Bukkapatnam. I am unable to see their suffering. My children and others' children are one and the same for me. So, kindly construct at least a small Hospital in our village.' I promised her that I would fulfill her wish and accordingly I built a big Hospital."

How did she react to that fulfillment?

- A. She stayed awake the whole night!
- B. She distributed free food to the entire village.
- C. She took 108 ill ladies there instantly for treatment.
- D. She went without food and water all day.

8. In His Divine 1998 Discourse, on Easwaramma Day, Swami makes us dwell on the might of a mother's love by giving examples of Easwaramma's appearances even after her passing away. He said: "Mother's love lives on for

all times, long after her passing away. Twice she appeared in the night. The boys sleeping in my room noticed her presence. Those boys had not seen her at any time. They wondered who the old lady could be. The key of the lift was in their hands and there was no staircase leading to the apartment. How did she manage to come here? When the boys asked this question, Swami woke up. I went near her and asked her why she had come again."

What was her reply?

- A. "I came to see if Your health was okay."
- B. "I cannot live without seeing You often."
- C. "I need Your advice on some matters."
- D. "Your father and I want to come back and be with You."

9. In His Divine 2000 Discourse, Swami shares yet another incident about the appearances that Easwaramma often made. "On occasions, departed souls visit Swami both during day as well as at night. One morning, Swami returned to the Poornachandra Hall as usual after morning *bhajan*. It was around ten o'clock, and Swami went upstairs. Sitting there in the chamber was Easwaramma, the Mother of Swami's Body. Swami asked her, "Why do you come like this? What would people say? Don't come like this."

What was her reply this time?

- A. "Alright, henceforth, I will ask Your permission before I come."
- B. "I don't care about what people say!"
- C. "God cannot understand a mother's love!"
- D. "Can you please inform everyone to just accept my appearances?"

10. In His Divine 2001 Discourse, on Easwaramma Day, Swami revealed another incident about how much Easwaramma is still concerned about her Beloved Son! Swami shared: "Even to this day she makes her appearance in My room. The boys who sleep in My room too have witnessed this. Whenever she comes and talks to Me, they sit up on their beds and listen. One day, I asked the boys for a belt to keep the silk *dhoti* tight around My waist. The belt that they gave Me had a shining buckle and could be seen through the robe I wear. I did not want to use it lest people should think that Sai Baba wears a gold belt. After this, one day Easwaramma came to My room early in the morning and started talking to Me. Then Satyajit, Sainath and Srinivas woke up and wanted to know with whom I was conversing. They wondered how anyone could enter My room since the lift was locked and the key was with them. Then I told that Griham Ammayi (Mother Easwaramma) had come."

What did Easwaramma do that day?

- A. She took away the belt.

- B. She was very disturbed over the ostentatiousness.
- C. She asked Bhagavan never to wear any belt again!
- D. She gave Him another belt without a buckle.

ANSWERS:

1B. Mother of God.

Swami elaborated: “.....Kondama Raju, being one with wisdom, always craved Me. One day, he called Pedda Venkama Raju and told him to change his wife’s name to Easwaramma. He told this because he felt the Divine vibrations originating from within. His intention was to convey that she was the Mother of *Easwara*, God Himself. But Pedda Venkama Raju was not aware of the inner meaning of this name. He implicitly obeyed the command of his father and changed the name of his wife to Easwaramma.”

2D. “Children, you should not talk ill of your teacher.”

Swami continued: “Mother Easwaramma intervened and said ‘Children, you should not talk ill of your teacher. No teacher would punish his student without a proper reason. Our Sathya might have committed some mistake.’ Then she asked Me, ‘Sathya, what is the mistake You committed?’ I told her the facts as they happened. Kondappa ordered, ‘Whoever has written the notes should place it on his table. Others should stand upon the bench.’ I had not written the notes. That was My mistake. Hence, I stood upon the bench. I also said something which was more than necessary. I said, ‘Sir, can all those boys who have taken down the notes answer your questions? Though I have not written the notes, I can answer any question that you may ask.’

Kondappa thought that I was egotistic and ordered Me to stand upon the bench for three periods. I obeyed him and stood upon the bench. Meanwhile, the other teacher, Mahboob Khan, came to the class. He was a Mohammeden and a noble person. He was pained to see Me standing on the bench. He asked, ‘Kondappa, why have you made this boy stand upon the bench?’ ‘He has not taken down the notes, hence the punishment’, said Kondappa. Mahboob Khan defended Me saying, ‘So what if He has not taken down the notes? He can answer all your questions, and that is enough. Ask Him to sit down.’ But Kondappa insisted that I should be punished as I had disobeyed his command.

The bell rang and Kondappa had to go to another class. But he was unable to get up from the chair. Initially he thought that his *dhoti* had got entangled to a nail in the chair. But that was not the case. He was stuck to the chair! When he tried to get up from the chair, the chair also came along with him. Then Mahboob Khan said, ‘Kondappa, He is not an ordinary boy. He is one of great Divine Powers. You have punished Him without a proper reason. At least

now, ask Him to sit down.' Kondappa realized his mistake and told Me to sit down. Immediately, he could get up from the chair. When all this was narrated to Mother Easwaramma, she said, "Dear Sathya, you should not punish your own guru (teacher).' I said, 'I did not punish him; in fact, he punished himself."

3A. Lord Shiva.

Swami recalls happily: "When I appeared in the Form of Lord Shiva to her, she would ask, 'What Swami? Why are you adorning the snakes around your neck?' I would act innocent, 'Well, I don't have snakes on Me.' She would move away saying, 'Look, there are some snakes inside.' But later, on not finding any snake inside, she would ask for forgiveness.

Like this on many occasions, she had the experience of My Divinity. Similar was the case with Kausalya and Yashoda. Though they knew that their sons were Divine, they used to get carried away by their motherly affection toward them."

4B. "If you punish others, you will be punished in return."

Swami continues: "Easwaramma consoled him and sent him away. She was sitting on the steps where Gokak would pass by. After a while Gokak came there. She offered her Namaskar to him and he reciprocated the same most reverentially. Then she said, "When I did Namaskar to you, you reciprocated the same. In the same manner, if you punish others, you will be punished in return. The boy out of his innocence has done a mistake. Please forgive him and allow him to attend the classes.' Then Gokak replied, 'Mother, if I forgive him, it would set a bad precedent for others. Anyway, I will forgive him only for your sake.' In this manner, she would go out of her way to help and provide comfort and solace to others.

Though Mother Easwaramma had no formal education, she conducted herself in an exemplary manner. She was one of profound wisdom. The teaching that Mother Easwaramma imparted remained etched in the heart of Gokak. Later on, when he came as Vice Chancellor to Puttaparthi, he used to recollect her words of wisdom. He would remember her everyday. He would say, 'I see Easwaramma in my dream quite often. I follow her advice implicitly.'

We should not criticize others. We should not hurt others or make fun of them. We should love all. This is what mother Easwaramma taught everybody. Do your duty sincerely. Then, you will certainly progress in life. Whoever he may be, follow the sacred teachings of our elders."

5C. "I come here to see how the students of Swami conduct themselves."

Swami shares fondly: "She used to say, 'I am not interested in these studies. I come here to see how the students of Swami conduct themselves, how they obey His commands and how they react to Swami's advice and teachings.'"

6D. "I do not want to put You to inconvenience."

Swami said: "She said, 'I do not want to put You to inconvenience' and went away. She never had put Me to trouble any time. Whenever she asked Me for something, she would come back and ask if she had given any trouble. To all the devotees who came, she used to entreat not to cause any inconvenience to Swami. She used to be very much worried whenever any minister came to have My *Darshan*. The situation in those days was such that even a policeman with a red cap was enough to frighten the villagers. Easwaramma used to be very much afraid of the ministers, thinking that they might cause some problem to Me. This was only the result of her sacred love for Me. That is the greatness of mother's love. That is why she could lead a life of fulfillment and peace. In order to propagate this sacred ideal, this day is being celebrated as Easwaramma Day. This is to emphasize that each one of you should make your mother happy. If your mother is happy, Swami is happy."

7D. She did not feel the need for food and water.

Swami shared: "Easwaramma's joy knew no bounds. The whole day she did not feel the need for food and water as she felt highly contented and overjoyed. She caught hold of My hands and expressed her happiness as her wish was fulfilled in a big way. I told her, 'Be happy.' After some time, she approached Swami again and wanted a school to be built in the village. As desired by her, I got a school constructed. Initially, it was a small one. Later on, I made it into a big building. She was very happy. She went to the school, kissed the children and showered her love on them. She was extremely happy and said, 'In this Age of *Kali*, it is my good fortune to have a son like You, who has done whatever I wished.'"

8B. "I cannot live without seeing You often."

Swami tells us further: "She replied, 'I cannot live without seeing You often. The moment I see You, I feel happy.' After saying so, she gave Me some piece of advice, 'Swami, all persons describe themselves as devotees. But no one can tell who are real devotees and who are fake. Totally dedicated devotees will be ready to carry out anything You ask them to do, but there are others who come for their own self-interest. By coming to You they get their desires fulfilled and forget You thereafter. In this matter, You should be very careful.' Swami replied, 'I shall take due care. There is no need for you to tell Me.' After hearing this, she laughed and left the room. I am conveying to you

this episode as direct testimony to the greatness of mother's love. She might have given up her body but she is always with Swami. She said, 'I have performed many sacrifices for Your sake and have done many kinds of *pujas*. I realized the proof thereof. For 40 years I was with You. My life has its fulfillment.'"

9C. "God cannot understand a mother's love!"

Swami conveys the love of Easwaramma saying: "She replied, 'Swami, this is Your mother. What do You know about the love of a mother? Only a mother can understand my feelings. I am a mother and You are God full of Love for all. A mother cannot understand God's Love and God cannot understand a mother's love! I have come here in order to tell You something.' Swami then told her, 'Tell me quickly whatever it is that you want to say; I have to go somewhere soon.' Easwaramma pleaded, 'Swami, I don't know what to do because You are always in a hurry! Please relax, spare me a few moments, and listen carefully to what I have to say.' Swami asked her to continue and she said, 'The situation in the outside world today is not very good. Everywhere, there are bad thoughts, bad actions, and evil manipulations. You believe that people who come here are all full of Love for You. It is natural for You to think so but in my opinion, this is not always the case. When You give *Darshan*, so many people offer a handkerchief to You. This frightens me. Please accept kerchief only from those in whom You have complete faith; ignore the rest.'

Swami then asked, 'Why are you making such a request?' and she replied, 'For You, all are equal. Everyone is Your child. However, some people are wicked. The kerchief they offer may have poison and when You wipe Your face, the poison may enter Your mouth.' Swami said, 'Alright, to satisfy you, I shall henceforth be very selective.'

10D. She gave Him another belt without a buckle.

Bhagavan shared further: "I showed them the belt that she gave me. It had no buckle. There are many such noble mothers in this world. But Easwaramma was the chosen one. I chose her to be My Mother. That is the intimate relationship between Mother Easwaramma and Myself."

QUIZ ON HEART 2 HEART

This quiz concerns Swami's beloved Mother Easwaramma. All of the questions have been taken from the issues of Heart2Heart.

1. From day one, devotees have always been pleading with Bhagavan to visit their homes, towns, cities, and countries. Swami's only overseas trip thus far was in 1968, and that was to East Africa. When overseas devotees quote this example and pray that the Lotus Feet must sanctify their soil also, Swami just smiles and says that He did not go to Africa but to the house of a particular devotee. It so happened that the devotee was in Africa, that is all!

When people press and ask, "Swami, you have told so and so you will visit his country. When exactly would you do so?" He smiles and says, "Do I have to go only by plane?"

In our cover story *African Odyssey* from the June 15th 2004 issue, we reiterated the story of how when preparations for the African safari were being made, Divine Mother Easwaramma became rather anxious.

What was Easwaramma so worried about?

- A. The constant rainfalls.
- B. The wild animals and savages.
- C. The unreliable transportation and unknown land.
- D. Swami's meager clothing.

2. In our H2H Special *With the Lord in the Mountains - Part 7* from the February 2007 issue, we narrated a story that took place when Swami was in Kodai Kanal on Easwaramma day. Whenever this day occurs, there is a special Narayana Seva, plus distribution of clothes and blankets for the poor at Sai Sruthi.

After the distribution was over, Swami came back inside, but seemed lost in thought. Normally, after such Seva, Swami is usually in an expansive mood and often talks to students about service, etc. This day, He did not and something seemed to be bothering Him, but no one could figure out what exactly it was. Suddenly, Swami called for the car, gave some instructions, took a few people with Him and simply drove out. Swami is known to go out occasionally for a drive while in Kodai, but this clearly was not one of them. Swami was away for a while, and even as the rest were waiting for His return, there was a lot of speculation as to why He went.

Where did Bhagavan go?

- A. To distribute blankets to the old and infirm.
- B. To relieve a devotee in distress.
- C. To have lunch at an old devotees home.
- D. To give a Discourse at another devotees home.

3. In fond memory of His Beloved Mother, Easwaramma, on Nov 19, 1995, on the occasion of the 70th Birthday celebrations, Bhagavan magnanimously declared that the 19th of November will henceforth be celebrated as Ladies' Day to highlight the sacred qualities of women and lay renewed emphasis of the quality of motherhood.

Ever since, it has been the privilege of women to celebrate this day as Ladies' Day in His Divine Presence at Prashanti Nilayam. On 19th November 2004, Swami inaugurated the Easwaramma Women's Welfare Project and then the Easwaramma Women's Welfare Trust was established to benefit women at large.

Which of the following is an activity taken up by the Easwaramma Women's Welfare Trust?

- A. The development of concrete roads in the villages.
- B. The development of schools for disabled women.
- C. Planting trees to keep Puttaparthi green.
- D. The general upliftment of women and Mother's and children's health.

4. In our cover story *When Divinity Descends...The Untold Story of Christmas* from the December 2006 issue, Father Charles Ogada talks about various Incarnations and also about our Beloved Sri Sathya Sai Baba, whose conception was shrouded in mystery until a pundit well versed in the Holy Puranas felt a sudden urge to ask a question. "Swami! Was your Incarnation a Pravesa (Entrance) or a Prasava (Encience)?" To answer his question, Swami turned to Mother Easwaramma, the chosen Mother, and said to her, "Tell Rama Sarma what happened that day near the well after your mother-in-law had warned you."

What did Easwaramma say to that?

- A. "I heard an Angel's Voice that said I will have a child soon."
- B. "Lord Vishnu appeared and blessed me with a boon."
- C. "A big ball of blue light came rolling towards me and glided in me."
- D. "My mother-in-law saw a halo around me and I fainted."

5. In Prashanti Diary from the April 2007 issue, some news we shared was of the events that took place on March 18th. It gave Swami immense joy that day when He saw three students of the Sri Sathya Sai University donned up in the traditional attire on stage to present a play entitled "Easwaramma – The Mother of God."

The student extolled Mother Easwaramma and narrated the *katha* – story - of the birth of this great soul and then reminded us that it was Mother Easwaramma who lifted up the 'standard of living' of the inhabitants of this tiny hamlet by virtue of the three boons she asked from Swami and compared each of the boons to Saraswati, Lakshmi and Ganga.

He said, "Bramha, the Creator has Mother Saraswati as His constant companion. She is the repository of all knowledge. That is the reason Mother Easwaramma asked Swami to build a school. Secondly, Mother Lakshmi, the consort of Lord Vishnu _____"

What is the comparison between Easwaramma and Goddess Lakshmi?

- A. She donated a lot of money to the downtrodden women.
- B. She gave a lot of guidance to the widowed women.
- C. She raised funds for the handicapped women.
- D. She asked Swami to construct a Hospital for the people of Puttaparthi.

ANSWERS:

1B. The wild animals and savages.

Not much was known about Africa in those days, and she was deeply concerned because she had heard that Africa was full of wild animals and savages.

When someone gently pointed out that this was not really true, and that even if true, nothing would happen to Swami because He was God, Easwaramma shot back, "I know Swami is God, you know He is God, but do those wild animals and savages know He is God?"

As in the case of Yashoda, so too it was with Easwaramma. Baba was her Son first and then only God!

2A. To distribute blankets to the old and infirm.

After a while, Swami returned, and this time His face was glowing and wearing a big smile. As the boys crowded around Him He said, "Boys, do you know where I have been? I went out to distribute blankets to the old and infirm that could not come here for the Narayana Seva. As I saw the poor people who came here, My thoughts went out to the many old and sick people out there who could not come here. I just could not bear to think of them suffering in the cold. So I had to go, seek them out, and give them the blankets. They were so happy!" How much joy there was in His voice and eyes, even as He spoke those words!! For God, service is not a duty or an obligation. It is an act of Pure Love that gives Him as much joy as it does for the one who receives, if not more.

3D. The general upliftment of women and Mother's and children's health.

Under the auspices of the Easwaramma Women's Welfare Project, a Mother and Child Health Care Programme is offered in villages on a regular basis providing the foundation for a healthy society. The programme is initially operational in the villages in and around Puttaparthi with the scope slowly expanding to include a growing number of villages. The Mother and Child

Programme schedules monthly visits to villages and includes trained doctors, nurses and volunteers. The groups are equipped with all the necessary equipment to conduct pre-natal checkups for monitoring the health of the mother and foetus, provide nutritional supplements and education on health care during pregnancy.

Additionally, the Easwaramma Self-Help Programme for women seeks to empower women to achieve self reliance and to provide a means of steady livelihood and thereby improve the health and quality of life of women and their families. The programme will train women in making a variety of useful and saleable products using locally available and environmentally friendly raw materials for sustained development.

4C. "A big ball of blue light came rolling towards me and glided in me."

The Mother said, "I had dreamt of Sathya Narayana Deva and she cautioned me that I should not be frightened if something happened to me through the Will of God. That morning when I was at the well drawing water, a big ball of blue light came rolling towards me and I fainted and fell. I felt it glided into me".

Swami then turned to Rama Sarma with a smile and said, "There you have the answer, I was not begotten. It was Pravesa, not Prasava".

5D. She asked Swami to construct a hospital for the people of Puttaparthi.

The student brought to our awareness that "Goddess Lakshmi not only gifts man with the wealth of the world but also heals him of all his afflictions and diseases. It for this reason that Mother Easwaramma asked Swami to construct a Hospital for the people of Puttaparthi. Finally, she beckons Swami to bless the land of Parthi with 'Sai Ganga' in the form of pure drinking water because it is Mother Ganga who resides in the matted hair of Lord Shiva and blesses mankind with her nectarous flow." Listening to this beautiful narration extolling Easwaramma, the Embodiment of Motherhood, Bhagavan was moved. He was so involved in the *katha* that one could feel as if She was right there standing beside Him. It was as if the tape was 'rewinded' and 'played' all over again much to the delight of the Lord Himself.

Then the student sang: "O mother Easwaramma, on this Earth you are the greatest amongst women. O mother of God, on the Earth none equal you. Had you asked your son, He would have brought the sky to your doorstep. The true God is the one who grants without our asking."

But Easwaramma says, 'Neither do I desire for the sky nor for any happiness and joy. This *Ashta aishwarya* (in the form of schools, institutes, hospitals and water supply projects) is not for me, but for the sake of all the residents of Puttaparthi.'"

HEALING TOUCH

FAROOKH'S TRIALS... AND THE TOUCH OF ALLAH

By Y. Arvind

This is the story of Farook, a hardworking motorcycle mechanic from Coimbatore, in Tamil Nadu, India. Everything was going smoothly for him until chest pains brought his carefree life to a halt. Seeking treatment sent the expenses through the roof and all seemed lost until the day he heard about Sri Sathya Sai Baba's Super Specialty Hospital...

The short spry man in grease stained grey overalls looked up from his efforts on the machine, nodded and stepped back. The young assistant kick started the motorbike and the engine roared to life with a slew of blue exhaust from the tail pipe.

The mechanic shook his head at the sight and turned to the owner of the vehicle.

"There is a problem with the petrol. The oil filter has far more sludge than normal. Change your petrol station...or you will be coming to my garage every month..."

"I believe you", said the customer taking out his wallet. "I too had the same doubts...but no one told me it was the petrol that was the problem. I was told that the oil filters are of poor quality...I have changed the filter four times. You are the only mechanic to have told me the cause of the problem. Thank you Farook."

"Solving the problem is more important than just replacing the parts, *sahib* (sir). You won't have any problem till the next service time...just take care of what you are pouring in the tank." The brown eyes in the grease stained face crinkled with good humour.

The customer smiled and patted the man on the shoulder.

"It's good to have you around Farook. Thank you and *Khuda hafiz*." (May God be with you)

"Khuda Hafiz, sahib"

Farook turned his attention to the other bikes that demanded his expertise. It was a family run two wheeler garage where Farook and his brothers worked. Farook handled the shop floor. He was a good mechanic and all was well until one day a nagging pain slowed him down; the pain was in his chest and spread out through his arms. He could not work as fast as he did earlier, and any quick work left him breathless. He put it off as strain and lessened his work load offloading more responsibility to his assistants.

Farook, the son of Mr. A.S. Sulaiman and Sara Begum, had three brothers and two sisters. They lived as a joint family in the city of Coimbatore, in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, India. He had dropped out of school after his 8th

standard and took up apprenticeship in his father's workshop to be a two wheeler mechanic. He joined a training program conducted by the Hero Honda company to be a mechanic and ever since had been at the front end of the work, diagnosing and solving the problems associated with the 'internal combustion engine'.

The Heart Cries Out

One day, he was on a visit to Mettur, a city nearby, visiting some of his relations. It was like any other day when he walked out into the drawing room. He took two steps towards the front door and...collapsed. A stabbing pain exploded in his chest cutting off his breath, and spread with lightning speed through his left arm. He had no idea of what happened next for he blacked out the next instant. When he regained consciousness he found himself lying on a bed, his wife seated on a chair next to him.

"Dilshad!" he called out.

But to his surprise she rose and left the room. Another woman entered, approached the bed and held his hand.

"Why did you leave the room when I called?" he asked.

"It was not me, it was my sister. I was in the next room and she came and told me you had called for me", replied his wife, Dilshad Begum.

"I was sure it was you...or maybe I was wrong. My vision is blurred..." muttered Farook passing his hand across his eyes. "It is still blurred," he continued looking at the fingers of one hand. "I can see ten fingers instead of five...it is double vision and..." he closed his eyes, "I am still feeling dizzy."

"I think we need to go to a hospital immediately", said his elder brother entering the room.

Luckily for him his entire family was supportive and he was taken to Sangeetha Hospital in Coimbatore.

The Mechanics of the Heart

Farook was a man who enjoyed a smoke and a tasty cut of meat. It came to him as a rude shock that these habits along with a host of others were responsible for his present condition. The results came to light after they met Dr. Rangarajan* who suggested the tests of ECG and Echo. It was diagnosed that He had a coronary artery disease. And it seemed to be progressing rapidly.

"You need to have strict diet control. No smoking or drinking, and here is a list of medicines that you must take regularly", said the doctor firmly.

"If you mess up your life now, your entire family, wife and children will suffer the consequences. So take care, at least, from now on."

Farook was not convinced and wanted a second opinion. He had an extended friends circle and one of them by name Nizamuddin took him to G. Kuppuswamy Naidu Memorial Hospital. There, they met Dr. Madhukar* a senior Cardiologist who again reaffirmed diet, no smoking and no alcohol.

Farook abstained for two months but then old habits die hard; he started smoking again. The pain returned.

Farook and his wife, went to Kaza Mayeen Healing Centre in Mettupalayam at the foot hills of Ootacamund and tried alternative medicine. There he underwent acupuncture for seven days and found that it gave him great relief. The cost of the treatment there was around Rs.20, 000 for a week. The moment he felt he was returning to normal, but Farook once again fell back to his old ways of smoking and non vegetarian food. And consequently his health took a beating. Before long the symptoms returned and he was worse off than before.

“We approached the K. G. Hospital in Coimbatore but they told us it would be an expensive affair. They also said that Coronary Artery Disease was a progressive disease and an operation would not put an end to the condition. There was always a probability that the condition could recur”, said Dilshad Begum.

Farook’s family knew he was going through a bad time and needed their support and intensified their prayers.

When the student is ready the master appears. After all their efforts came to naught and they gave in to God, He answered their prayers. One of their neighbours Ms. Vasanthi*, a devotee of Bhagawan Baba, suggested that they go to the SSSIHMS at Whitefield.

Finding Solace at SSSIHMS

“We came to this Hospital for the first time in February 2008 and were given the admission date in April. Everything went on very smoothly”, said Farook.

It was a good thing that Farook had brought all his previous medical records with him. Having a complete knowledge of the history of the patient’s condition helps the doctors diagnose and treat the ailment better. It is suggested that all patients should keep all their medical records carefully and file them. One can rarely predict when what may come of use.

Returning to Farook, on the April 1, Farook was admitted into SSSIHMS and after a couple of days of stabilizing treatment, the cardiologists attempted an Angioplasty. Angioplasty is an invasive procedure where a catheter is threaded through the femoral artery into the heart and a balloon is used to expand the blocked coronary artery. The procedure was not successful despite repeated efforts. It was finally decided that surgery was the only option.

Farook was scheduled for surgery and the operation was performed on April 16, 2008 and on the 6th post operative day when he was found to be fit for discharge, Farook sat on his bed in the CTVS post operative ward narrating his story.

“I had good family support, all my brothers helped me financially and otherwise too”, said Farook, his mischievous smile a contrast to the scar peeping over the décolletage of his shirt. “We spent more than 40,000 rupees before coming to Baba.”

“How many children do you have?” I asked.

"Two", replied his wife. "We have a son and a daughter. My son is in the 1st standard and my daughter, is in Lower KG."

"How do you feel? Now that you have been given a fresh lease of life? What will you do now?" I asked panning my vision to take in the eyes of both man and wife.

Farook began in a very matter-of-fact. "First, for the next three months I will take good rest. Follow all the doctor's orders and hence forth will never again touch non-vegetarian food or smoke. Then, I am planning to take up a less stressful vocation like a telephone kiosk, or set up a shop selling Cellphone SIM cards."

Gaining More Than Just Good Health

For a second his eyes left mine and flicked up to the photo of Bhagawan Baba on the wall. He continued his voice, unchanged.

"For me Baba is Allah. He came to us in our hour of need. Nobody will do anything of this magnitude, with such love and service to us outside. Believe me I have been through it. Outside unless I have money I cannot even enter the hospital. Here Baba is giving everything free. I will go back and spread the message in my town."

His words were simple and his expression unchanged. He spoke as though he had thought it all out and there was nothing that would induce him to change his mind. He had received the gift of life anew from a God who had answered his prayers. His life would be an offering of gratitude to him, period.

"Here we have full satisfaction" joined in his wife adding new warmth to the sun lit ward. "The doctors and nurses did not have any hesitation. We were completely informed about every thing all the time. All our questions were patiently answered. I have never seen such care anywhere else."

Farook continued to smile as he added, "Once I recover, I will come back here as a sevadal. More than serving others, it is a chance for **me** to be happy."

Small things make big things happen. It is said one cannot move ones finger without affecting the stars. We are all connected, one way or the other. There are no coincidences in God's Plan. He has provided for everything, in fact, God's delays are not God's denials. It is only up to us how fast or how slow we walk towards our life's goals. Let us all be grateful to whatever God we worship that we are able to see the sun rise, smell the fragrance of a fresh blossom, touch the innocence of a little child...be part of this world. To be alive.

* Names changed to protect identity.

YOUR SAY

Feedback from our readers from the April 2008 issue

Feedback on the cover story: *The Divine Oyster in Otteri*

Sai Ram!

Thank you for publishing the article the *Divine Oyster in Otteri*. I am inspired by the two gems of Swami who along with their father were responsible for the upliftment of these children in this remote village. Unless these events are published, many like me will not know how Swami's mission is unfolding through His Instruments. I would appreciate if you can publish such stories in your inspiring H2H or as Sunday specials.

With Respect and Love,

S. Cuganesan, Greystanes, Australia

[It is our constant endeavour to bring you such tales of inspiration from current times as often as possible. – H2H Team]

Dear H2H Team,

After each previous issue, I wonder what your team will come up for the next issue and I am delightedly surprised. By Swami's Grace, your articles are truly touching and lovingly written. *The Divine Oyster in Otteri* is wonderful. There are many students of Swami engaged in the Divine task of spreading the message of Love of our Beloved Sai. Truly, our Lord of Parthi has shaped several wonderful instruments of His across the Globe.

My hearty congratulations once again for the lovely story on the triumph of Sai sisters from Otteri in running a Sai School in an unknown village of Tamil Nadu with the loving help of Swami.

With best wishes,

Jagdish, Dubai, UAE

Dear H2H Team,

The article *The Divine Oyster in Otteri* has been really inspiring. It is no doubt greatly motivating. I request more such articles.

Sai Ram,
Harendra Singh, Dehradun

Sairam,

Thank you for an inspiring and very touching story. It is always inspiring to read about Swami's dedicated instruments as they selflessly serve under Swami's Divine Guidance.

Dick Murray, Florida, USA

Sai Ram Heart2Heart,

Just want to say a few things about April's issue:

1. The cover story is so inspiring. Too many students in the West take their education for granted and just waste it away.....this story is just so amazing - I can't write much as words do not do justice. The West has yet to achieve the discipline that these children have. Thanks so very much for featuring this article.

2. The stories of inspiration are just as the name suggests! Really inspiring!

Sai Ram, and thanks again,

Sherry Jagdeo, Trinidad, West Indies

Sai Ram,

Thank you for such a beautiful, inspiring, memorable piece on the work done at the SVV School in Otteri. I loved it and wished there would be such a school nearby (I live in Florida, USA) so that I could send our grandchildren there...How blessed those children that attend that school are - even if many come from very poor families. Those children are receiving the best education any child could dream of. Please let us hear from more ex-students of the Sai Baba Schools, and their ongoing projects. You are doing a beautiful work at Heart2Heart. Thank you for all the sharing.

Sai Ram,

Ana Maria Priu, USA

Sairam,

Reading your article *The Divine Oyster in Otteri* I was reminded of the poem written by Ann North called "The Gardener"; the text is given below. It only goes to show where there is dedication, discipline, and devotion, attaining

great heights is not impossible. It will surely become one of the role model schools of our country. The greatest miracle is seeing the results first hand by those who have put Swami's teachings into practice in their daily life and the attainment of the fruit of their actions. Great work!

*Some of the seeds of hope
Planted tentatively in the fall
Have not come up
They will lie still born and unrealized
Somewhere in the spring soil
Decaying
The strongest and best ones
Pushed up through the leaves
And layers of cold , hard resistance
Right into the clear blue air
And they stand there nakedly green
Breathing
It's always that way with growing things
Never knowing at the start
Which will make and which will fall
But the thing to hold fast to
Never to lose faith in
Is simply
Sowing.
—ANN NORTH*

Feedback on: *Coming Home*

Dear H2H,

Peggy Mason was such a lovely person. When I last saw her she must have been in her eighties, up on the platform at a Sai meeting at Hove, near Brighton, UK. She was so beautiful; she looked ageless. Her inner beauty shone through and radiated in an extraordinary way. It was good to read her writing again in H2H. I still keep her two little books by my bedside: both about spiritualism and allied subjects, written before she and her husband learned of Swami's existence.

Love,
Helen

Sai Ram,

The article of the late Mrs. Peggy Mason has touched my heart and soul concerning her encounter of the love she experienced from the Omnipresent Sathya Sai Baba. It has shared some light and hope in knowing that He is always with us and understands our shortcomings. Always willing to help and all we need is to surrender and live in His Divine Love.

Regards,
Helen Moremong, South Africa

Sairam,

I read the article and I've got the feeling, special feeling, that all this I already know deep in myself and this is the Truth. Probably I cannot describe the feeling right, it was really good feeling.

A few years ago, I've been with a group of people, who introduced me to the teachings of Sri Sathya Sai Baba. Till this time I've been seeking for something. I did not know what I'm seeking. But when I hear Baba's teaching: "There is only one religion, the religion of Love" and "There is only one God with many names", I was astonished. Something turned in me. And from that time I know this Truth.

I always like to read articles or books such as Mrs. Peggy Mason's, because it is so inspirational. Thank you for sharing your love.

Davor Rup,
Slovenia

Feedback on: *Musings Part 2*

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

I have read the two *Musings on Avatars* and they both have been like rain in May; I really enjoyed them. What I can say? It is lovely. I was thinking that it is such a huge privilege to have access to these stories, and also that an honored scientist of India makes use of his knowledge and memory in order to retell these accounts. I especially enjoy the parts of the story where Swami Himself points out hidden details and comments on their deeper meanings.

Thank you again, I love you all,

Ana Margarita Urzúa Camelo

Feedback on: *When God Becomes Your Guardian...*

Sairam,

Yes, very true, God becomes our guardian. Heart2Heart articles are such a feast every month. I thank you for such beautiful articles. Every time I read the article I feel the Divine bliss. It is again His Will that I experience it so. God is ever loving, ever forgiving and ever giving. His ways are profound. His Love is beyond a mother's love. What more can anyone ask for?

Best Wishes,
Girija

Sai Ram,

I just wanted to say how much I enjoyed reading this story. I cried, during the part when their car blew a tyre and they were faced with a very serious dilemma. It made me very sad. But, lo and behold! Our beloved Bhagavan came to their rescue. "What a mighty God, we serve". I thoroughly, enjoyed reading this story.

Peace and Blessings, Lady Melba

My heart melted especially with the last words of Sai Prasanth's mother: 'Our dear Lord promised that He would be with us, was and is always guarding and guiding us...' I have this experience over and over, feel so thankful to live right now and be blessed with Swami's presence. Thank you this story.

Yours,

Machteld Hanekroot,
The Netherlands

Feedback on: *The Love of Pure Law Vs. the Law of Pure Love*

Sairam Dear Members of H2H,

The article by Mr. Amar Vivek was truly inspiring and really makes you think. It is even more interesting as I am at the moment in my first year of LLB. I would very much like to know the outcome of Mrs. Savitha's case, and it would be great if you could keep us posted.

Loving Regards,

Nimish Ubhayakar

Feedback on: *Hungary For His Love*

Sai Ram,

I just finished reading *Hungary For His Love*. It is very beautiful, heart warming and inspiring. It also makes me realize that I have a long way to travel on this road. Thanks for sharing and making His Love available to us so

easily.

Anil Kaushal, U.S.A.

Feedback on: *Have a Blessed Day*

Sai Ram,

The message was put across in very few words, but very effective. Let us all be grateful to Him for every moment of our live. This reminds me of another saying which goes something like this – ‘I complained that I had no shoes, until I saw a man without feet.’ Once again thank you for reminding us of the above fact.

Regards,

Kartik Bhatia, San Bruno, California

Dear Respected Sir. Sai Ram.

Your article *Have a Blessed Day* is really teaching us to live life of peace; only our thoughts can lead us to good actions and accept the Will of the Lord who watches our actions.

"Bhagavan Baba says, "Life has to be an incessant process of repair and reconstruction, of discarding evil and developing goodness.... In the journey of life, if you want to travel without fear, you must have the ticket of a good conscience."

At the Feet of Swami,

Ram Chugani, Kobe, Japan

Feedback on: *Life Is A Game - Play It!*

Thank you very much for the wonderful articles which are published on the Web - I learned about this service only 2 months ago. This article on pollution, quoting Bhagavan's words, is well written, and the wonderful diagram is worth printing out to show to people.

I use energy efficient light bulbs, recycle everything that my local city council will take, and use cloth shopping bags whenever I can. Petrol prices are increasing greatly in New Zealand, so I am looking to use the car as little as possible, and welcome any other pointers towards using less.

Your Heart2Heart online magazine is colourful, interesting, and very inspiring. I am very grateful for the blessed work you are all doing - thank you, very much.

Om Sai Ram,

Cleone Drew, Christchurch, New Zealand

Feedback on the Get Inspired stories

Sairam,

For people like me who are physically far from Swami, these "Get Inspired Articles" are really morale boosters and eye openers. My only request to Sai brothers is to increase the number of these articles!

Jai Sairam,

In Sai's service, Mani, USA

General Feedback

Sairam,

Words are inadequate to express the sublime feelings one gets after reading all your articles on Swami's Divine Love reaching out to millions of dry hearts and quenching them with His Bliss, mysteriously and silently, turning each heart into His abode. How fortunate we are. Your team is doing a wonderful service, in reinforcing our faith, our aspiration to make our lives His message. How else can we express our love for Him? Thank you once again,

Sairam,

Jayalakshmi Chandrasekar