

SRI SATHYA SAI BABA AND THE RATIONALISTS

By
Dr. K. Bhaskaran Nair

Blessed indeed is our ancient land. God has again come into her lap in human form. Millions of our people have recognized the phenomenon and are seeking and getting spiritual solace and grace from it. But the situation has created fierce animosity in certain quarters and concerted efforts are being made to thwart their aspirations. Is it justified; is it fair ?

This is the important question we have ^{to} consider in the context of the controversy set afoot, strangely, by a centre of higher education, a university, in our country regarding Sri Sathya Sai Baba. The Vice Chancellor and his Committee say that they are after truth. But what do they mean by truth ? Obviously, for them as for so many of our countrymen who pride themselves as 'educated', truth means only veracity or perhaps scientifically established concepts. This I would say is a great disservice done to mankind by modern education, this limiting of the connotation to the confines of a laboratory crucible or a few mathematical equations. From this narrow, strictly circumscribed concept an entire world view has been constructed in the course of the last few generations and this has been accepted as the basis for a philosophy of life by present-day man. He does not question its premises, nor is he aware of the limitations of its validity and relevance. He is satisfied that it works, that it has been verified by great scientists in foreign countries and he accepts it on faith - no less blind than the worst superstition. Actually for the vast majority of the so-called scientifically minded people in all countries such things as the conservation laws, evolution, radioactivity, the atom, relativity, the quantum, DNA, RNA, the gene, are absolutely unintelligible, but they are always ready to swear by them. The ordinary man on the other hand knows at least

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Blessed indeed is our ancient land. God has again come into her lap in human form. It is for our people now to make the best of this opportunity. Will they do it ?

This is the important question facing us in the context of the controversy set afoot, strangely, by a centre of higher learning, a university, in our country regarding Sri Satya Sai Baba. The Vice Chancellor and his Committee say that they are after truth. Truth is a much abused word. To the 'educated' Indian of today it has come to mean only veracity or perhaps scientifically proved fact. This I would say is a great disservice done to mankind by modern education, this limiting of the connotation of truth to the confines of a laboratory crucible or a few mathematical equations. From this narrow, strictly circumscribed concept an entire world view has been constructed in the course of the last few generations and this has been accepted as the basis for a philosophy of ^{life} by present-day man. He does not question its premises, nor is he aware of the limitations of its validity and relevance. He is satisfied that it works, that it can be verified (by somebody, somewhere!) and that it contributes to material well-being. This concept of truth, or truth in the philosophical sense, is good enough so far as it goes and as long as it works, but it does not go far enough. It leaves out practically everything that is fundamental and profoundly significant to human life, so much that cannot be reduced to ~~to~~ equations and formulae and the rationalist analysis. There are the experiences which form the warp and woof of sentient life, the problem of subject and object, of the seer and the seen, the phenomenon of perpetual perishing we call time, the limitless inner world of feeling. Science and philosophy, and even the philosophy of science, have not bothered about

these things which cannot, by and large and in the main, be even adequately articulated and communicated to others. It is here that India, persecuted and humiliated though she might be by the march of history and the tidal waves of an acquisitive materialistic culture that has swept over the planet, has shown the way to humanity. She has pursued truth not in the narrow philosophical sense but in the grand, all-embracing, prophetic or religious sense. That alone resolves dualities and distinctions and makes sense of the phantasmagoria of existence.

But this is just the thing that our people today have lost sight of and in many cases consciously and wilfully rejected. They have become entangled in the rat race for material progress. And the worst of it is that the mental climate of the country has begun to show wide-spread symptoms of what psychologists call "cognitive dissonance", that is, the tendency to reject or deny information that challenges pre-conceived notions and the abrasive aversion to hear things that may upset the existing structure of beliefs, wise or otherwise. There is no other explanation for the criticisms and challenges and controversies that are directed against Baba today. They started in Kerala some ten years ago, in the sacred soil that gave birth to Sankara, and ~~is~~^{are} now spreading to the neighbouring states. However, the fact remains that Baba's advent has transformed Puttaparthi, that backward, out-of-the-way village of Andhra Pradesh into a place of pilgrimage for millions of people. There are no advertisements, no railway concessions and no invitations issued. And Puttaparthi is no holiday resort or tourist centre. Still it is witnessing an ever-increasing concourse of people from all parts of the world. Of the vast crowds that gather there, not even one in a thousand ever gets a chance of speaking to Baba or witnessing his "miracles". They come away after getting his darsan and are evidently satisfied, for the time being at any rate; but they take the earliest opportunity to go there again, and again and again. To the rationalists all these

people are credulous fools while they alone are wise. This may be described as arrogance or overweening pride, but it may just as well be sheer ignorance.

His devotees call him an Avatar and worship him as God. But even if viewed only as a human being there are many things which are truly extraordinary about him. His charisma is breath-taking. He elicits not only respect but spontaneous adoration. His personality is so powerful and awe-inspiring that even when he cracks a joke you hesitate to laugh. Something tells you that it has depths you cannot probe, but you feel nevertheless that he is ^{an} embodiment of love and kindness. You forget yourself in his presence and instinctively realise that you are under his care, that you have known him for ages and that he knows you more intimately than anybody else. This is vouched for by direct personal experience and corroborated by every devotee one has spoken to. And then the ability to bear the terrible physical strain of hundreds of thousands of people always gazing at you and looking up to you for solace and relief from pain and sorrow and of never having a moment's rest or respite, is undoubtedly superhuman. His voice takes you on its wings to sublime heights of joy and when he sings it is bliss itself.

These experiences are only the fringe benefits that radiate from B Baba's personality. He may mingle, talk and joke with men as one among them but he has his being in an altogether different realm. That awareness is forced upon you every now and then in his presence and you realise with a sudden sense of awe that you are witness to a mystery that is of the essence of life itself. Your soul is awakened and brought face to face with the immensity of the divine spirit that is his true nature. This realization for aught I know lasts only for a fraction of a second but its impact is over-powering. The hard shell of the ego is shattered, the familiar world ~~it~~ falls like a veil from the face of reality and you get a glimpse of the supreme truth of which Baba speaks so often. I take it

that this is what he means when he says that his life is his message. That message is not a code of conduct or a catalogue of intellectual concepts, but the kindling of a transcendental experience in the heart of man. He has declared again and again that he has come for this very purpose, namely to lead humanity towards God and to regenerate the life of the spirit.

Though in our country there are critics and detractors of this programme of spiritual regeneration and the way of life that it envisages, it is a fact that all over the world there is an intense yearning for a fundamental change in the ends and aims of ~~life~~ earthly existence. Too long has it been assumed, largely under the inspiration of the West, that all was for the best in this, the best of all possible worlds, that unending progress and ever-increasing affluence were attainable through industrialism and technology and that the ideals and values cherished by other civilizations of the past were disgusting and unworthy of a second look. The thrust of technology ~~at~~ after the Second World War created such a swell of enthusiasm and euphoria that scientists and politicians and journalists honestly believed that the age of plenty was round the corner, that electricity from the atom would be too abundant to be metered, and later still, that there would be cities in the sky and settlements on the moon. All this has vanished now and the talk today is about energy crisis, depletion of natural resources, industrial pollution and degradation of the environment, the plunder and pillage of this lovely planet by the greed of man and the vulgarity of his avarice. There is also the rising cry of the Third World where two thirds of mankind live for a place under the sun. These bitter experiences have created wide-spread disillusionment and the exuberant faith ~~as~~ in industrial progress and the affluent society so evident in the post-war period has been undermined.

Some of the best minds of the age are today forced to contemplate the ambiguities of the human situation and to wonder whether the scientific

and rational approach to reality is the only one that is valid and acceptable. They are also beginning to realise that the so-called objectivity of abstract knowledge is a myth, that the seer and the seen are inseparable and that the former is as important, if not more, in rediscovering "the wisdom that we have lost in knowledge." The current phrase for this malady of civilization is "search for identity" which is only another way of saying the old, old thing: desire to know oneself, not in conceptual thought, but in flesh and blood, by actual living experience. The conscious and open allegiance to a culture of feeling as against the culture of the abstract intellect is being widely proclaimed as an antidote for the torments of existence. In this journey inwards, the exploration of the world within, the importance of the sensitive soul, the real man in human life, that unseen entity which is the witness of pleasure and pain, joy and sorrow, and all that is felt in the bone is self-evident.

It may sound incredible, but it is a fact, that the greatest strides in this new field of enquiry are being made in the USSR and the socialist countries of Eastern Europe. Their commitment to dialectical materialism has not prevented them from pursuing research in subjects which might be considered as tainted by religion and spirituality, elsewhere. Their discoveries have been described as earth-shaking and when made known to the West during the last few years, have created consternation in scientific and ~~mix~~ military circles, almost like the orbiting of the first Sputnik. As a result of this, massive research efforts are being organized in many parts of the world, often defying the frowns and castigations of the scientific establishment. All of a sudden parapsychology, PSI, ESP, ASC, Bio-energy, mind exploration, TM, and a host of off-beat disciplines have acquired great importance. Traditional and even esoteric knowledge of other cultures as represented by such words as Acupuncture, Yoga, Zen, Kundalini, Prana, Tantra, Ayurveda, etc. are being studied with a seriousness verging on reverence. This has produced a flood of

publications in the form of research papers in international journals, seminar reports, books etc. and some of these are coming into our country too through normal trade channels. But our scholars have ~~xx~~ already formed their opinions about them and do not want to look at them. Still, it may be expected that very soon large numbers of our students and professors will go abroad to study this 'new knowledge' at first hand, then come back and start departments of study and research institutes here. This is how education has progressed in this country for the past five or six generations and enlightened us to the extent of hating our heritage and slinging mud at everything our ancestors considered sacred!

Baba's ministry is the only silver lining in the ~~black~~ cloud of unknowing that has enveloped us. We have strayed too far from the first and last things of life to realise what we have ~~mm~~ missed. Not only India but the whole world needs his insights to save itself from doom. What the great Goethe said of the Buddha might be applied to him with equal force: "While others live in a waking dream haunted by monstrous visions spawned by their subconscious minds, he lives the dream of life wide awake." Fortunate are we who are his contemporaries. .. Seldom in history has it been vouchsafed to so many, and so unmistakably, to be the witnesses of an Avatar and to receive from it the greatest of the gifts of earth and heaven, love, in such abundant measure. At the World Conference of Sai Organizations held in Bombay in May 1968 Baba made a great declaration which still rings in the ears of those who were fortunate enough to hear it straight from his lips: "This is a human form in which every divine entity, every divine principle, that is to say, all the names and forms ascribed by men to God, are manifest. Do not allow doubt to distract you; instal steady faith in the altar of your heart and you can win a vision of my reality." A hundred thousand people listened in rapt attention to those stirring words and their hands automatically folded in salutation. Baba's heart melted at the sight and in a gesture brimming with compassion he added: "I bless you, all my devotees everywhere, and my detractors too if there

are any." That gesture and that love flowing to friend and foe alike can come only from God incarnate and they are greater than all the miracles of his daily life.

It may well be that this epiphany signifies a break in history and a break-down of social life as we have known it for a long time now. In this era of all-round scarcity caused by dwindling natural resources, skyrocketing ~~per~~ prices and terrifying population explosion, the worst scarcity of all is experienced in respect of an entity which is not an article of trade at all, namely, human love. A dog-eat-dog relationship has come into being between man and man and the loneliness of human destiny is unbearable. You may be surrounded by an ocean of your fellowmen, but still you are all alone. Gone are the days when people cared for others and went ~~extraordinary~~ out of their way to help each other. It is this situation more than even the stockpile of nuclear weapons that threatens to destroy civilization. Science and technology may be all-powerful and ~~may~~ may have an answer for all problems under the sun. They may, for that reason, be worthy of man's worship, but it has yet to be shown that they can produce Prema - love. The insights and the inspiration of high example provided by the introspectives and the faithful are the only ~~means~~ means to that end known to mankind. In India their revelations in the glorious dawn of our history established the kinship of all creation and enshrined it in a nexus of ecstasy. Baba is the embodiment of that ecstasy and that love. We can overcome our sorrows and redeem ourselves from ignorance and illusion by our unwavering faith in him. Sahasra pranams at his lotus feet.
