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Swami's Jayanthi Message: Religious Harmony, Quality Education for All and Service to Mankind

November 23rd was a unique day for the life of the simple residents of a small village named Puttaparthi in the state of Andhra Pradesh. Indian press reports estimated a half a million people from all over the world had found it - devotees favored numbers approaching two million. This was a special occasion for them, the celebration of the 65th birthday of Satya Sai Baba, a person they revere as their guru or spiritual master. Never had the village seen such a gathering of Baba's devotees. Everyone present on the vast, sprawling ground savored the spirituality in the air.

The figure of Satya Sai Baba with his distinct Afro hair style has been in the news in India and abroad for decades. He has been deified by his followers and defamed by his critics. This should not surprise anyone familiar with the domain of spirituality. A spiritual master in any country arouses the feelings of both devotion and disparagement because he polarizes the society between the positive and negative forces by his presence. Satya Sai Baba has been debunked for years by persons calling themselves rationalists. He has been called both a charlatan and a trickster. He has never responded to the criticism, he took it all in his stride. His detractors have failed to make any impact on his image and capability. This was clear on the 23rd when hundreds of thousands streamed into the vast open ground in the village of Puttaparthi to offer their devotional gratitude to him for showing them the path of spirituality.

The devotees had in their midst the President of India, R. Venkataraman, and

many Indian dignitaries. Among Satya Sai Baba's devotees are senior judges of the Supreme Court, vice-chancellors of reputable universities and scientists in other countries. Baba does not enjoy the authority of the Sankaracharyas of India, nor does he get the kind of publicity Rajneesh used to get, still his followers outnumber theirs. It is difficult for any of the Sankaracharyas to get the kind of reception Baba got on November 23rd. A daily newspaper in New Delhi compared the gathering with Kumbha Mela held on the banks of the Ganges.

According to some of the devotees who had gone to Puttaparthi from Delhi, there were about 25,000 foreign devotees in the gathering sharing with their Indian brothers and sisters the holy experience of watching Baba address them on the occasion of his 65th birthday. A grand and colorful stage had been set up for Baba to sit and speak to his disciples. It had as a backdrop a colossal statue of Hanuman standing on a hillock. It was an imposing and majestic scene.

As Baba came on the stage and looked sheltered under the statue of Hanuman - the great bodyguard and devotee of Lord Rama - thousands waiting for him raised loud slogans of "Sai Ram, Sai Ram." The sky above reverberated with the joy and happiness the devotees expressed. Those who were near the stage could see Baba directly and seek mental communion with him. But those far away did not miss his presence for, via dozens of closed circuit television monitors, they felt near to Baba. They could hear him clearly and, as one of them described it, soak up all the words of wisdom he spoke. Baba spoke briefly, because of his health, but he spoke dynamically of love of humanity and the importance of devotion. Everyone listened to him with rapt attention. One devotee, Marianne from France, told the Times of India. "This was the moment I was waiting for." Marianne told the Delhi paper that she kept having visions of Baba even though she had never met him or heard of him in her life.

There were many other foreigners like Marianne who were visiting the village for the third or fourth time. The devotees from Yugoslavia had an interesting story to relate. They had been told by Baba some time ago that 108 people from their country would soon visit his ashram. And it was indeed a group of 108 Yugoslav devotees attending the birthday celebration. Nearly 150 Malaysians simply chartered an airbus for a direct flight to Bangalore to take part in the celebrations. June Tan, a bookkeeper from Malacca, Malaysia, described her experience in these words, "I came for spiritual enlightenment, I have found it." Gilles Klien, a furniture designer from Mulhouse, France who was an atheist until two years ago, said his life had completely changed for the better, all because of Baba. It was his third visit to Puttaparthi.

The huge gathering of devotees had no problem staying in the village for the celebration, so excellent was the planning of the ashram management. All the devotees were housed and fed by the ashram. Several tent cities had sprung up, rows on rows of pitched tents, each neatly marked out for devotees from a particular state or country. They had come for a darshan of Baba. They had not come to see him do miracles, like producing rings or watches from the air. They were keen to have his vibhuti, which Baba offered generously. Baba seldom now performs the miracles he used to do earlier, but this has not in any way reduced the number of his followers.

The devotees began to disburse on November 24th, and a few days later, the village returned to its original peace and tranquility while Baba went back to giving guidance and direction to a number of social welfare programs he has launched. He now has a full-fledged university, besides several schools and colleges, offering education to thousands of youth in morality and spirituality, as well as standard academic subjects.

Made in the image of India's ancient rishis and saints, Satya Sai Baba, along with several saints like him, is doing what many of us in India do not understand. He is holding the fort of spirituality which is facing a great onslaught from materiality. India, which has been the land of spirituality for ages, is in the grip of materiality. With seers like Baba, there is the hope of dharma ultimately triumphing over adharma.

Devotees Talk About Their Experiences

Dr. Bronkey, 73, psychologist and doctorate of religion, lives in Oregon and has visited Sai Baba 23 times since 1974. She operates a hospice and runs the local Sai Baba center.

"Such great spiritual love and devotion emanated from him. You'd have to be there to experience it. Everything ran so smoothly. So many people from so many places accepted sleeping on the ground, on their saris, in their sleeping bags, in tents. People who I talked to who didn't go said they felt the strength and love of Baba stronger than they had ever felt it. Baba taught that wherever we are, we are to offer service wherever it is needed. Service comes first, we come second."

Fee Alvi, 32. Los Angeles, California, is a professional photographer and has visited Sai Baba several times.

"At 18 years old I was smoking pot and drinking beer, I really needed something like this. Now every year I go to retreat, go to Sai centers, do homeless feeding, paint halfway houses, very rewarding, very beneficial, really straightened things out. I spent a lot of time in the village, and I noticed that the people who appeared very poor seemed without a doubt much more content than people who were very wealthy in Los Angeles - more content in their being, in the things they talk about and consider their problems."

Issac Tigrett, 42, lives in London. He was born in Jackson, Tennessee, and has been visiting Sai Baba every year since 1974. Tigrett founded and recently sold the very successful group of restaurants called "Hard Rock Cafe"

"Satya Sai Baba spoke a great deal of the necessity for free education and quality education in India. Spiritually for me the highlight was in the evening when they swing him on a jula, a big silver swing, as the gopis did Krishna. It is a great ceremony, you must think of God in your heart, probably the most exciting for me. He's the Avatar of the Age and it's quite a magnificent experience just to know that his vibration is on the planet."

Dr. Krishna L. Rama Das, 45, was born in India and lives in Topeka, Kansas. He is a psychiatrist and has been visiting Sai Baba yearly since 1976.

"I could see a transformation in the life of many people in that they would become less prejudiced and more tolerant in the future. Regarding the Ayodhya situation, Baba pointed out that the political leaders had incited this disharmony. He said it is the duty of all religious leaders in India to see to it that people live in harmony, and that one should not exploit the situation to their personal advantage. He pointed to the President of India, saying 'There are more than two million people sitting here that belong to different religions. How well they are getting along. Why can't people be like this?'"

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