

Abstract

Ambiguity and the Modern Order: the Sathya Sai Baba Movement in Malaysia

Author: Alexandra Kent

Doctoral dissertation at the Department of Social Anthropology

University of Göteborg, Box 700

S-405 30 Göteborg, Sweden

This study examines the Malaysian following of the contemporary Indian godman Sathya Sai Baba, a neo-Hindu guru famed for his miracle-working. This religious innovation has broad appeal among non-Malays, but attempts to formalise and control it have evolved within a middle-class subsection of the Indian community. My concern here is to examine its special and ambiguous formula for addressing the totalitarianism and intolerance of Malaysian modernity as it is wielded by the Malay-dominated government.

The dissertation presents a background firstly of the Indian community in Malaysia, secondly of the guru, Sathya Sai Baba and his ambiguous symbolism and rhetoric and thirdly, of the Sai Baba organisation in Malaysia. The final four chapters, chapters four-seven, present ethnography through which the peculiar ambivalence of the élite Indian following is explored. The first of these contrasts the rationalistic visage of the Sai Baba organisation's public service events with the non-rational formulations used in its private celebrations. The second and third ethnographic chapters discuss how the male, middle-class Indian leadership of the organisation attempts to control both spiritual power, in the form of healing, and mundane power within the community. The final chapter deals with the participation of Sai Baba followers in the working-class Tamil festival of Thaipusam. Together, the ethnographic chapters illuminate how the organisation, on the one hand, rhetorically aligns itself to state-sponsored, bourgeois ideology and professes tolerance and ecumenism. On the other hand, the ethnography reveals its concerns with ethnic, class and gender ordering within the Sai Baba community and with the establishment of Hindu supremacy. The culturally besieged élite minority that controls the Sai Baba organisation appears to be torn between subversion and subservience towards the government and its assurance of the ascendancy of Malay culture.

The final chapter closes with a concluding section in which it is proposed that religious innovations based in miracles and ambiguity may address some of the profoundly felt disjunctions between lived experience, in all its complexity, and the standardising powers of an imposed modern order.

Key words: Anthropology, Malaysia, Sathya Sai Baba, religious movement, modernity, politics