

# ROOTS OF WISDOM, BRANCHES OF DEVOTION

Plant Life in South Asian Traditions

Edited by Fabrizio M. Ferrari and Thomas Dähnhardt



*Roots of Wisdom,  
Branches of Devotion*

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Fabrizio M. Ferrari and Thomas W.P. Dähnhardt

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# Contents

List of Figures	vii
List of Tables	x
Introduction	xi

## Section One: Nature, Landscape, Devotion

1	A Modern <i>Kalpavṛkṣa</i> : Sathya Sāī Bābā and the Wish-Fulfilling Tree <i>Antonio Rigopoulos</i>	3
2	'Pagoda Tree': Plants and Other Foliate Motifs on Indian Coins through History <i>Shailendra Bhandare</i>	29
3	Divine Flora, Divine Love: The Place of Natural Scenery in the Ultimate Vision of <i>Kṛṣṇa Bhakti</i> <i>Graham M. Schweig</i>	55

## Section Two: Devotion, Ecology, Ritual

4	Perfumed Islam: The Culture of Scent at the Nizamuddin Basti <i>Mikko Viitamäki</i>	79
5	The Bodhi Tree and Other Plants in the Pāli <i>Tiṭṭaka</i> <i>Antonella Serena Comba</i>	98
6	Wood, Water and Waste: Material Aspects of Mortuary Practices in South Asia <i>Albertina Nugteren</i>	118

**Section Three: Ritual, Power, Myth**

- 7 The Herbal Arsenal and Fetid Food: The Power of Plants in  
Early Tantric Exorcism Rituals 145  
*Michael Slouber*
- 8 Tree-Hugger: The Sāmavedic Rite of *Audumbarī* 165  
*Finnian M.M. Gerety*

**Section Four: Myth, Food, Nature**

- 9 *Caryota urens*: From Vegetable Manifestation of God to  
Sacred Tree of the Shamans of Odisha 193  
*Stefano Beggiora*
- 10 Rice and Rice Culture: Cultivation and Worship of a Divine Plant  
in Western Odisha 211  
*Uwe Skoda*
- 11 Agriculture, Floriculture and Botanical Knowledge in a Middle  
Bengali Text 241  
*Fabrizio M. Ferrari*
- General Index 270
- Index of Botanical Species 279

## Chapter 1

# A Modern *Kalpavṛkṣa*: Sathya Sāī Bābā and the Wish-Fulfilling Tree

ANTONIO RIGOPOULOS<sup>1</sup>

*kā kalpalatā loke  
sacchīsyāyārpitā vidyā |  
ko 'kṣayavaṭavṛkṣaḥ syād  
vidhivatsatpātradattadānaṃ yat ||*

What is in this world the fabulous creeper granting all desires?  
Liberating knowledge, that is offered to worthy disciples.  
What is the immortal banyan tree?  
That gift which is granted to a worthy person, according to the rules.  
(Śaṅkara, *Praśnottararatanmālikā* 39)

Ratnākaram Sathyanārāyaṇa Rāju alias Sathya Sāī Bābā (1926–2011), the charismatic saint of the village of Puttaparthi in the Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh, was undoubtedly one of the most famous gurus of our times. His followers, both in India and throughout the world, count in the millions, predominantly from the urban upper-middle classes.<sup>2</sup> Revered by his Hindu devotees as a *pūrṇāvatāra*, a ‘full manifestation of the divine,’ over the years Sathya Sāī Bābā (Tel. Satya Sāyibābā) was successful in transforming what was originally a local cult into a transnational phenomenon,

1 Antonio Rigopoulos is Professor of Sanskrit and Indology, Department of Asian and North African Studies, Ca' Foscari University of Venice (Italy).

2 For an up-to-date introduction to Sathya Sāī Bābā, see Srinivas (2013: 625–33). See also Srinivas (2008, 2010).

making the ashram of Prasanthi Nilayam<sup>3</sup> the headquarters of a global, cosmopolitan movement.

The saint's teaching, steeped in devotion (*bhakti*), was Vedāntic through and through. His organization, as is typical of neo-Hinduism, is based on a universalistic or, better, inclusivistic ideology.<sup>4</sup> In both theory and practice, the saint of Puttaparthi placed special emphasis on ethics (through his education in human values program) and social service (through the creation of schools, hospitals and a variety of charitable works). Sathya Sāi Bābā's towering fame, however, is not due to his teachings or social works but rather to his charisma and alleged miraculous powers, which are inextricably woven into his life and message.<sup>5</sup>

This chapter explores the peculiar function of trees in the construction of his cult. In particular, attention is paid to Sathya Sāi Bābā's appropriation of the myths of the *pārijāta*, *kalpavṛkṣa* and *vaṭa/bodhi* trees, which in the saint's hagiography are linked to his advent, his miraculous deeds and the meditative praxis conducive to final liberation (*mukti*), respectively (figure 1.1). My purpose is to show the ways in which these trees have been effectively 'transplanted' in Puttaparthi and highlight the role they have played – and continue to play – in substantiating Sathya Sāi Bābā's claim to being a divine 'incarnation.' Their symbolism is at the center of a remarkable network of sacred narratives which tie together memory and history, binding the village's destiny to the holy man's avatāric career.<sup>6</sup>

3 Lit. 'abode of highest peace.'

4 On the notion of inclusivism, see Halbfass (1988: 403–18).

5 Over the years the guru of Puttaparthi has had to face various accusations. Starting from the mid-1970s, he was charged with sleight of hand and, especially from the 1990s, he was accused of sexual abuses as well as financial mis-handlings. Despite all this, he succeeded in expanding his fame and fabulously rich 'kingdom.' Indeed, he has become a national figure, a trademark of India's spirituality.

6 This essay is based on fieldwork I carried out in Puttaparthi in November 1985, December 1991 and August–September 2001.

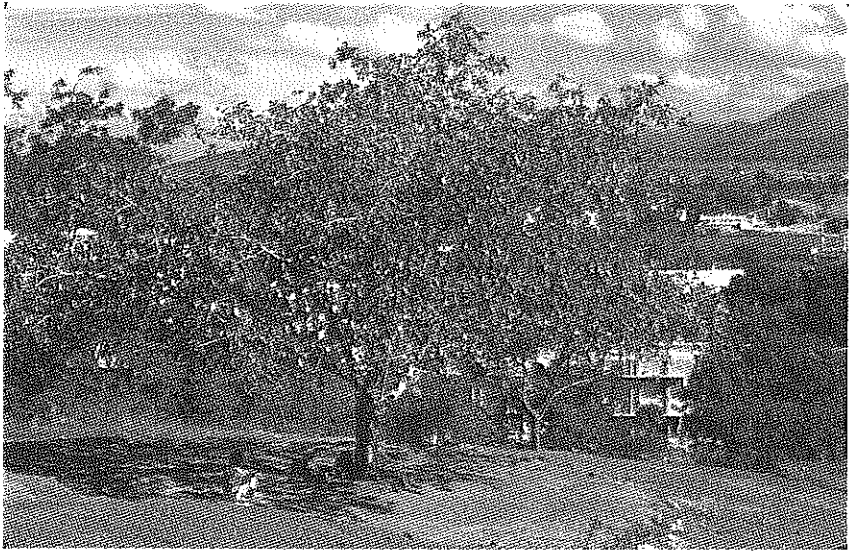


Figure 1.1. The meditation tree in Puttaparathi, 1980.

## THE PĀRIJĀTA AND SATHYA SĀI BĀBĀ'S ADVENT

The first tree to which Sathya Sāi Bābā is linked to is the *pārijāta*, that is, the night-flowering jasmine (*Nyctanthes arbor-tristis* L.).<sup>7</sup> This tree is related to the holy man's birth and plays a relevant function in the founding hagiography celebrating Sathya Sāi Bābā's divinity. The *pārijāta* makes its appearance in a premonitory dream that Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju (1840–1952), Sathya Sāi Bābā's paternal grandfather, is said to have had prior to his grandson's birth. In order to appreciate the significance of this dream I must first recall the popular Hindu myth centered upon this tree.

According to Hindu mythology, the fabulous *pārijāta* was produced when at the beginning of time the gods and demons churned the ocean of milk (*kṣīrasāgara*) in order to obtain the nectar of immortality (*amṛta*). The tree was then claimed by Indra, the king of the gods, and taken to his paradise where his wife Indrāṇī took care of it. Subsequently, it so happened

7 Its flowers open at night and their sweet perfume pervades the surrounding area. In the early morning following the night bloom, the flowers drop to the ground, carpeting it with their fragile beauty. On this tree, supposed to have fecundating powers, see Gupta (1991: 63–65); Nugteren (2005: 35).



that Kṛṣṇa offered the *pārijāta*'s beautiful flowers – characterized by snow-white petals and an orange-red center – to Rukmiṇī, his senior wife. Jealous of her, the proud Satyabhāmā, the third of Kṛṣṇa's eight wives, asked her beloved spouse to bring home to her the whole tree. In order to please her, Kṛṣṇa, who was especially fond of Satyabhāmā despite her capricious temper, did not hesitate to steal the *pārijāta* from Indra's paradise. Kṛṣṇa's theft led to a war with the king of gods in which the latter was ultimately defeated. The tree was taken to Dvārakā, Kṛṣṇa's capital, and planted there; at Kṛṣṇa's death, however, it returned to Indra's heaven.<sup>8</sup>

Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju was a simple peasant and a pious Vaiṣṇava. He belonged to the Bhatrāju caste, a Kṣatriya sub-caste whose occupation is to popularize sacred literature through songs and poetry.<sup>9</sup> Apparently, Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju had musical and dramatic talent and knew by heart many epic and Purāṇic myths culled from Sanskrit and Telugu sources. The story goes that one night he had a dream in which Satyabhāmā asked him to provide shelter for her. Here is how N. Kasturi, Sathya Sāi Bābā's main biographer, reports the episode:

Sri Kondama Raju lived to be a centenarian and I remember how tears of joy ran down those wrinkled cheeks whenever he recollected that enthralling experience. In the dream, Kondama Raju saw Sathyabhama, alone, expectant and forlorn, waiting anxiously for her Lord, who had gone on an errand to bring her from Heaven the much-coveted Parijatha flowers. The minutes increased to hours and the hours accumulated into days but still there was no sign of Krishna! Sathyabhama broke into tears. There ensued a huge storm accompanied by thunder, lightning and a heavy shower of rain. Luckily, Her eyes fell on Kondama Raju who was passing across the place where she stood and she asked him to provide some shelter. (Kasturi 1980: 4)

8 On the *pārijāta* legend in Sanskrit sources, see HV II.64 ff. and VP v.30 ff. For a review of the main Purāṇic loci, see Dikshitar (1995: vol. 2, 317). In Telugu literature, popular is the *Pārijātapaharanamu* poem written by Timmana under the patronage of the Vijayanagar king Kṛṣṇnadevarāya (r. 1509–1529), which is a staple of Kūcīpuḍi performers; see Rao (2007: vol. IV, 3099–100). On Satyabhāmā in epic and Purāṇic lore, see Mani (1975: 704–05); Dikshitar (1995: vol. 3, 513). On Satyabhāmā in Telugu literature and dance, see Soneji (2004). In Andhra Pradesh, Satyabhāmā is the model of the jealous woman.

9 See Rao (1985: 4); Padmanaban (2000: 11, 24 n. 6). On the Bhatrāju caste, see Thurston and Rangachari (1909: vol. I, 223–30); Nanjundayya and Ananthakrishna Iyer (1930–1936: vol. II, 259–76).

Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju thought that in order to offer protection to the goddess (Devī) he must erect a temple for her. Therefore, presumably sometime in the late 19th century, a Satyabhāmā temple was built that came to incorporate the shrine of the village deity (*grāmadevatā*) Satyamma.<sup>10</sup> The co-identification of the two goddesses was favored by the similarity in their names and by the fact that both, Satyamma and Satyabhāmā, are understood to be manifestations of Bhūdevī, i.e. Mother Earth.<sup>11</sup>

The guru of Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju was one Veṅkāvadhūta.<sup>12</sup> Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju and his wife Lakshamma (1852–1931) named their two sons ‘Veṅka’ after him: Pedda Veṅkama Rāju (1885–1963) – destined to become Sathya Sāī Bābā’s father – and Chinna Veṅkama Rāju (1898–1978). Veṅkāvadhūta was well-known in the area; his name implies that he was an *avadhūta*, an ascetic of a radical type, possibly consecrated to god Veṅkaṭeśvara<sup>13</sup> whose abode is in Tirupati, the major pilgrimage center of Andhra Pradesh.

Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju is reported to have had a memorable encounter with his guru one afternoon in Puttaparthi, underneath a banyan tree.<sup>14</sup> After he had devoutly offered him some food, Veṅkāvadhūta, much to his amazement, solemnly announced that Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa would soon manifest himself in the village in order to rescue Bhūdevī, who was in deep distress (Padmanaban 2000: 12, 25 n. 9).

In both Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju’s dream and Veṅkāvadhūta’s prophecy, Bhūdevī’s alias Satyabhāmā/Satyamma’s anguish mirrors the desolate condition of the village. Indeed, the Satyabhāmā/*pārijāta* tale is set within the wider context of a termite mound myth, which is the founding myth of Puttaparthi (Rigopoulos 2014). According to this legend – a variant of a typical folk motif – the village was once a prosperous locale. Its original name was Gollapalle/Gollapalli, the ‘village of cowherds’ (Gollas) who

10 See Kasturi (1980: 3–4); Padmanaban (2000: 11–12).

11 On Bhūdevī, see Venkatesan (2009: 491–98).

12 For a description of this holy man, see Kasturi (1984: 12–13). Apparently, he hailed from Maharashtra and died at Hussainpur in today’s Karnataka, Pavagada Taluk. His tomb in Hussainpur is located in the so-called Veṅkāvadhūta temple; see Padmanaban (2000: 25 n. 11).

13 Lit. ‘lord of the Veṅkaṭa hill.’ On this originally folk god who came to be revered as a manifestation of Viṣṇu, see Narayanan (2009: 781–85).

14 In many hagiographies this tree is the site of glorious epiphanies. The name banyan appears to have been first bestowed on a famous tree of this species growing in the vicinity of the Persian Gulf, under which Banias or Hindu merchants used to camp.

tended beautiful cows. The story goes that once a *nāga*, a divine cobra, issued out from a termite mound (*puṭṭa*) and, applying its mouth on a cow's teat, started sucking the milk that she willingly offered. This incredible scene caused one cowherd to react, hitting the snake with a stone. This sin brought the *nāga*'s curse upon the village, triggering its decline. To harm or kill a *nāga* is an act of sacrilege which is thought to cause a blemish (*nāgadoṣa*) and hence entail the malediction of infertility. Thus the hamlet was turned into arid land and renamed Valmikipura and subsequently Puttaparathi (Tel. Puṭṭaparti), 'the land where termite mounds multiply.'

Various narratives emphasize the power of the *nāga*'s curse and the incapacity of Satyamma/Satyabhāmā – who is the village – in restoring the pristine prosperity of the place through her own forces. In order to atone for their sin, the first response devised by locals was to worship the stone that hit the *nāga*, which came to be identified as Veṅugopālasvāmin or Kṛṣṇa Gopāla playing the flute. However, the inauguration of this cult, which is a typical reaction to *nāgadoṣa*, was not effective in countering the curse. The subsequent exile of all cowherds from Puttaparathi – on the orders of Satyamma as conveyed through a local woman whom she possessed – though believed to ease the curse, was still deemed insufficient to wash it away.

Local hagiography interprets Sathya Sāi Bābā's birth as the fulfillment of Veṅkāvadhūta's words. Satyabhāmā's grief is thought to have come to an end thanks to Sathya Sāi Bābā's advent, that is, thanks to Kṛṣṇa Gopāla's (= Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa's) return to his beloved wife and village.<sup>15</sup> What we witness here is the tying together of three distinct narratives: the village's founding myth of the termite mound – itself open to a variety of interpretations – with its nefarious consequences; the startling prophecy of Veṅkāvadhūta, the guru of the Ratnākaram family; and Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju's own premonitory dream. These tales are construed as sequences in a plot, being understood as the unfolding of a divine saga. In the end, Satyabhāmā's anguish due to the separation (*viraha*) from her lord is Puttaparathi's anguish, which is eventually overcome only through Sathya Sāi Bābā's descent on earth.

The appropriation of the Kṛṣṇaite myth of the *pārijāta* as a prelude to the holy man's appearance on the scene appears most fitting. It constitutes a theatrical climax by highlighting powerful, intertwined emotions: the utter desperation of Satyabhāmā/Puttaparathi at the god's absence and,

15 The cowherd Kṛṣṇa and Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa are typically identified with each other. Indeed, Kṛṣṇa is regarded as a *pūrṇāvatāra* of Viṣṇu.

at the same time, her/its ardent longing for his glorious return. Sathya Sāī Bābā's birth is interpreted as the fulfillment of a renovated communion, ushering in a new era of plenty.<sup>16</sup> By descending from his heavenly abode he offers himself to his spouse/village, and the scented flowers that he, as Kṛṣṇa, carries with him, are symbolic of his seductive appeal, of the fragrance of his pure love (*preman*).<sup>17</sup> Moreover, the *pārijāta* flowers are symbolic of asceticism and renunciation (*saṃnyāsa*), given that the saffron robe of renunciants – which Sathya Sāī Bābā started wearing from the 1940s (Padmanaban 2000: 432) – is traditionally prepared with the orange-red pistils of the *pārijāta*.<sup>18</sup> An early hagiographic source reports a telling episode of young Sathya Sāī Bābā's identification with Kṛṣṇa and the *pārijāta* flowers:

On another day, while climbing down the stairs, He halted midway like a wooden doll. Men stood around Him in a circle. After a few minutes, Swami<sup>19</sup>

16 Here is the testimony of Venkamma, Sathya Sāī Bābā's elder sister:

Milk was always scarce in Puttaparthi then ... After the advent of Sathya conditions improved and the place overflowed with milk, curds and butter ... There is nothing surprising in this since Sathya is also thought to be Lord Krishna, the divine cowherd. (Balu 1981: 41)

The idea is that thanks to the coming of Sathya Sāī Bābā – the vanquisher of the *nāga*'s curse – the village regained its pristine welfare and cowherds and cows once again thrived. In the late 1970s, Sh. Balu reported:

The Sathya Sai *Gokulam* (cow stabling) is on the outskirts of Puttaparthi village. It houses over a hundred cows and it is administered under the strict supervision of Sri Sathya Sai Baba. A graceful figure of Krishna with a cow stands at the entrance. The whole area has fresh green patches of lawn and lovely flowering trees. There are clean and bright sheds for the cows and water buffaloes; indeed, the whole place is spic and span. It also has neatly laid out living quarters for the cowherds who tend the cattle. (Balu 1981: 118)

17 As Vijayakumari observed:

The great boon, the priceless diamond, God gives to His devotee is devotion. Swami is verily a Parijatha flower to His humble devotees. (Vijayakumari 1999: 175)

18 Hindu ascetics dye their robes a rich fiery colour. When the *pārijāta* flowers fall to the ground, people collect them and separate the orange tubes from the white petals and dry them. Once they are dried they can be used for making this saffron-coloured dye; see Pellegrini (forthcoming). Already in 1948, Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju emphasized that his grandson was an *avadhūta*, a great ascetic: not an otherworldly ascetic, however, but an ascetic *in* the world and *for* the world; see Kasturi (1982: 85).

19 Honorific term meaning 'master.'

said with a smile, 'Today is Gokulashtami,<sup>20</sup> you see. That is why I went to visit Brindavan.' He went on standing on the stairs and, when we asked Him, 'Swami, shall we go down?' he showed us His feet. Heaps of *pārijātha* flowers exuding divine fragrance were covering His Lotus Feet. We collected handfuls of those flowers, and kept them safely like we would some treasure.<sup>21</sup> (Vijayakumari 1999: 132)

## THE KALPAVṚKṢA AND SATHYA SĀI BĀBĀ'S WONDERS

When the saint of Puttaparthi was fifteen or sixteen years old, he used to take his friends and devotees (*bhaktas*) up the crest of the Obuladevara Gutta hill on the left bank of the Chitravathi river, to a huge boulder under a solitary tamarind tree which soon came to be known as the *kalpavṛkṣa* or wish-fulfilling tree.<sup>22</sup> It is noteworthy that as early as 1949 Sathya Sāi Bābā himself narrated that when he was just thirteen he spent six months under this particular tree:

- 20 The festival celebrating Kṛṣṇa's birthday. It falls on the eighth day of the dark fortnight of the month of Śrāvaṇa (July–August).
- 21 The scent of *pārijāta* flowers is similar to a combination of jasmine and orange blossom. The saint's materialization of flowers and leaves was not frequent; see Rao (1985: 187–88); Padmanaban (2000: 288, 307, 315). Among the plays written by Sathya Sāi Bābā in his youth there was even a *Pārijātapaharaṇa* ('The Offering of the *Pārijāta*') in which he interpreted the role of Satyabhāmā instead of Kṛṣṇa, probably because he didn't want to embarrass his partner Narasimha Dass. Here is the latter's testimony:

Rāju observed propriety even in selecting the roles. I always thank Swami for having given me the role of Sri Krishna and taking up the role of Sathyabhama Himself, instead of doing the converse, which would have saddled me with the sin of touching [the person of an *avatar*] ... with my foot. (Padmanabhan 2000: 137)

According to the traditional plot, when Kṛṣṇa tries to appease Satyabhāmā she kicks his head with her left foot.

- 22 The *kalpavṛkṣa*, also known as *kalpataru* and *kalpadruma*, is said to have first emerged when the gods and demons churned the ocean of milk (VP I.9.95; BhP VIII.8.6; MP CCL.5). Together with the *pārijāta*, the *kalpavṛkṣa* is among the five fabulous trees of Indra's paradise: it is famed for its golden fruits of exquisite flavor, nourishment of the gods. On the wish-fulfilling tree, see Crooke (1978: vol. 2, 87–88); Bhattacharyya (1990: 78); Dubois (1990: 633–34); Malla (2000: 104–08); Nugteren (2005: 43, 327–30). For an overview on sacred trees and plants, see Smith (2013: 161–67).

In my thirteenth year, coming to know that I had become a 'Baba' and had left home, one of my friends became mad ... Another friend jumped into a well and died ... One friend became an ascetic. For the next six months, keeping out of sight of everyone, I remained hidden in an underground tunnel, under a tree that has since come to be known as Kalpa Vriksha ... That tunnel still exists. But most of it is closed with rocks and pebbles. Inside it are still to be found a kamandalam (the vessel with a handle in which sages carry drinking water), dandam (a staff carried by ascetics), a writing desk, a pen, an ink bottle, a copy of the *Bhagavad Gita* and a few letters. Devotees who had gone there with true devotion have seen them and come back ... People with doubting minds cannot even find the opening of the tunnel, and they come back disappointed.<sup>23</sup> (Vijayakumari 1999: 218–19)

In those early days, young Sathya – as he used to be called – climbed up the hillock innumerable times with his pals. He often challenged them in a race to reach the top of the Obuladevara Gutta from the river bed, the finish line being invariably the tamarind tree. The hagiographies report that even though Sathya allowed his companions to have a lead start, he would always win the race: his bewildered pals, though running as fast as they could, would find him placidly seated on the tamarind's branches smiling at them.<sup>24</sup>

He would then prove his astounding powers by telling his friends to ask for any fruit, in or out of season, and the same would appear hanging off the branches of the tree. Apparently, the tamarind bore not only fruits but also sweets such as *laḍḍūs*, sugar candies, et cetera.<sup>25</sup> These *mirabilia*

23 Vijayakumari and her brother Murthy visited the tunnel and said that they could find all the objects mentioned by the saint as well as a lion who roared at them: terribly frightened, they managed to escape and were later scolded by Sathya Sāī Bābā for going there without permission; see Vijayakumari (1999: 219–21). The *kamaṇḍalu* and the *daṇḍa* are the symbols of young Sathya's new ascetic identity, whereas the desk, the pen and the ink bottle are reminiscent of his schooldays. He attended school up to 1943, when he was admitted to Form Three (Standard VIII) in the High School at Uravakonda; see Padmanaban (2000: 128–29). The presence of a copy of the BhG is in keeping with his identification with Kṛṣṇa and his Vedāntic teaching centered upon *bhakti* and *karmayoga*.

24 On these and other marvels taking place at the tamarind tree, see Murphet (1981: 69–72); Padmanaban (2000: 426). On occasion people could see a huge halo surrounding Sathya Sāī Bābā, a vibrant circle of light like a *cakra* (wheel): they felt as if lord Viṣṇu himself stood before them; see Balu (1981: 151). For a rare photo of the *kalpavṛkṣa* in 1946, see Vijayakumari (1999: between pages 124–25).

25 On the constitutive link of magic trees with food, see Narayan (1989: 200–03).

are part of a large repertory of astonishing deeds (*camatkāras*) associated with Sathya Sāī Bābā's youth, analogous to Kṛṣṇa Gopāla, the charming cowherd boy of Vṛndāvana, paradigm of the juvenile god performing all sorts of marvels (Kasturi 1980: 64; Vijayakumari 1999: 52–58; Steel 1997: 133, 1999: 40). To be sure, the biographies of the saint of Puttaparthi are replete with the miraculous, first and foremost a bewildering variety of materializations (ashes, food, rings, pictures, idols, et cetera).<sup>26</sup> He used to say that the first sixteen years of his life would be marked mainly by *līlās*, that is, playful actions,<sup>27</sup> the next sixteen by *māhimās* or miracles, and the subsequent years by *upadeśas* or teachings (Kasturi 1980: 62).

The Kṛṣṇaite flavor of Sathya Sāī Bābā's early days is corroborated by his habit of swinging.<sup>28</sup> Devotees would hang two ropes from the sturdy branches of a tree on the banks of the Chitravathi and, with a wooden plank, improvise a swing (*jhūlā*) on which the boy would merrily ride. The sources report that, while swinging, he would throw sweets at people from his empty hands (Vijayakumari 1999: 127–28; Padmanaban 2000: 300–01).<sup>29</sup>

Numerous are the testimonies centered upon the *kalpavṛkṣa*. For instance, Kamalamma, one of the two wives of the village *karnam*,<sup>30</sup> recalled:

- 26 One of the earliest documented materializations is a photo of Shirdi Sāī Bābā with Kṛṣṇa, Rāma, Śiva and Hanuman in the background; see Padmanaban (2000: 136). N. Kasturi, presenting the extraordinary features of Sathya Sāī Bābā as a young boy, narrates:

His playmates called Him, 'Guru' (Preceptor). For He was always correcting them and consoling them; He comforted them in distress and never seemed to get cross or tired. He was a liberal giver, even at that age; for, He pulled out of empty bags, delectable sweets, pencils, pieces of rubber, toys, flowers and fruits for them. When asked how He got them, He answered: 'O, the village Goddess gives me what I want.' That was only to slake their thirst; that was the only answer which would quiet their doubts. But the wonder remained! (Kasturi 1981a: 2)

For a review of Sathya Sāī Bābā's alleged miracles, see Steel (1997: 129–71).

- 27 Identifying himself with Kṛṣṇa, young Sathya Sāī Bābā even danced with his female devotees, plunging them in bliss. He explained the experience as the reenactment of the *rāsālīlā*, Kṛṣṇa's dance with the *gopīs* or female cowherds (BhP X.29–33); see Vijayakumari (1999: 122–25). On the concept of *līlā*, see Schweig (2010: 793–97).
- 28 While on the *jhūlā*, he even gave visions of himself as Kṛṣṇa; see Kasturi (1980: 64).
- 29 On swinging, see Nugteren (2005: 107–17, 336–39).
- 30 The hereditary chieftain and revenue official in charge of land records and tax collection.

And, His *leelas*! How wonderful they were! He would take Subbamma<sup>31</sup> and myself to the *Kalpa Vriksha* ... and ask us to hold its leaves. Each day the tree would give different fruits according to our requests. (Padmanaban 2000: xv)

The *rāja* of Venkaṭagiri, who used to visit Puttaparthi in the early years, observed:

Once or twice I was with Swami when He went to the *Kalpa Vriksha* tree ... He used to ask the devotee to request any kind of fruit, including the ones out of season. I am a serious type and so I did not ever ask Him for fruit out of season, but I was present when other people did. Many people would ask for something and whatever they wanted, they would get. They did not get it from Swami's hand, but from the tree itself. Swami would be sitting far away from the tree. 'What fruit do you want?' He would say. 'Then go and get it,' He would tell them. (Padmanaban 2000: 482)

The implicit assumption in all testimonies is that the veritable *kalpavṛkṣa* is none other than Sathya Sāi Bābā: he himself used to openly say so,<sup>32</sup> echoed by the words sung daily during the closing *ārati* ceremony in Prasanthi Nilayam, which praise him as *āsritakalpalatikā*, 'the wish-fulfilling creeper to those who seek refuge in him.'<sup>33</sup> The two-hundredth of his 1008 names extols him as the wish-fulfilling tree (*Oṃ Śrī Sāi Kalpataruve Namaḥ*)<sup>34</sup> and the sixty-ninth of his 108 names states that he is like heaven for his devotees (*Oṃ Śrī Bhakta Mandarāya Namaḥ*). Here is how Kasturi interprets this latter name:

Mandara<sup>35</sup> means Heaven; Baba is as Heaven to the Bhaktas. He is their Heavenly wish-fulfilling Tree ... Even when Baba was fifteen or sixteen years old He used to take Bhaktas up the hill on the bank of the Chitravathi, to the Tamarind Tree that is still there and pluck from its branches whatever fruit

31 First wife of the brahmin Lakṣmīnārāyaṇa Rao, the village *karnam*. Subbamma was much devoted to Sathya Sāi Bābā from the time he was a little boy.

32 He even sang: 'When you have before you the wish-fulfilling tree, why do you desire to foster inferior trees?' (Kasturi 1981b: 104). See also Kasturi (1980: 63).

33 A famous saint who identified himself with the wish-fulfilling tree was Ramakrishna (1836–1886). On 1 January 1886, he played out the role of the *kalpataru* showering his blessings on the devotees, revealing himself as an *avatāra*. It is worthwhile noticing that in Tantric Yoga the *kalpataru* is equated with the *anāhatacakra*, the esoteric center located at the heart; see the *ṣaṭcakranirūpana* of Pūrṇānanda (16th century).

34 See Narasappa et al. (1985: 27).

35 The mountain that the gods and demons used as a stick to churn the primeval ocean.



each one asked for; of course no one asked for the Tamarind fruit! So Baba had to transcend the laws of nature that He has framed, in order to make apples, mangoes, figs and plantains grow upon that tree. That tree is called Kalpavriksha ... but really it is only a Sankalpavriksha (a tree that behaves as He wills). Take shelter under Him! ... He is Kalpavriksha, indeed! In fact, He is even more magnificent. He moves among Bhaktas of all places instead of being like the Tree in one place only. He gives, without asking, whatever is good for us. (Kasturi 1979: 69)

The saint of Puttaparthi was deemed capable of making any tree at any time a wish-fulfilling tree (Steel 1997: 133-35; Padmanaban 2000: 357).<sup>36</sup> Among Hindus, nonetheless, the tamarind tree (*Tamarindus indica* L.; Skt. *tintiḍīka*; Tel. *cintaceṭṭu*) is generally considered inauspicious. Its fruit, which flourishes during the dry season, is extremely sour and the traditional belief is that the offering of it causes the fruitlessness of any ceremony (Gupta 1991: 91). It has been suggested that Sathya Sāī Bābā's choice of this tree as his *kalpavṛkṣa* is one of the few Islamic links to Shirdi Sāī Bābā<sup>37</sup> (Aitken 2004: 84) – his purported prior 'incarnation' – given that the tamarind is revered by Indian Muslims and specimens of it are found surrounding their settlements and cemeteries (Ali 1974: 312; Crooke 1978, vol. 2: 109). On the other hand, it might be argued that the saint of Puttaparthi selected this tree precisely because it is ill-omened. He could thus demonstrate his omnipotent will (*saṃkalpa*), capable of transmuting what is deemed unfavorable into a treasure trove of plenty, in this case the sourness of the tamarind fruit<sup>38</sup> into pure nectar.

More to the point, I think that Sathya Sāī Bābā's choice of the tamarind was related to the village's founding tale of the termite mound. Indeed,

36 He is even reported materializing fruits out of thin air; see Rao (1985: 187); Padmanaban (2000: 370).

37 Shirdi Sāī Bābā (d. 15 October 1918), one of the most popular saints of India, was an unconventional *faqīr* who lived the greater part of his life up to his death in a dilapidated mosque of the village of Shirdi in the Ahmednagar district of Maharashtra. For an introduction to this figure, see Rigopoulos (2013a: 641-50).

38 In his discourses the saint of Puttaparthi would sometimes establish an analogy between the tamarind fruit and man. Once he noticed that striking an unripe tamarind fruit (= man) wounds it, while striking a ripe one doesn't. He also pointed out that just as it is impossible to separate the rind, pulp and seed when the tamarind fruit is green, in the same way it is impossible to discard identification with body, senses and mind until one is ripe in experience; see Gries and Gries (1993: 253).

termite mounds and tamarind trees are closely associated.<sup>39</sup> In particular, it should be noted that the origin of the cult in Tirupati was a termite mound raised beside a tamarind tree, in which Veṅkaṭeśvara was believed to reside.<sup>40</sup> Given the sacredness of the tamarind in Tirupati's cult, it seems plausible to suggest that Sathya Sāi Bābā chose a tamarind as the wish-fulfilling tree of Puttaparthi – the village of termite mounds – in order to establish a correspondence between his abode and Tirupati, thus stressing the special sanctity of his birthplace.<sup>41</sup>

The delicious fruits offered by the *avatāra* symbolize the bliss (*ānanda*) he has come to shower upon his fellow villagers and devotees, especially as a giver of worldly enjoyments. The bountiful tree<sup>42</sup> has been universally perceived as a potent instrument of Sathya Sāi Bābā's grace, and for more than 75 years people have thronged to the *kalpavṛkṣa* in search of solace and answer to their supplications.

Paying one's respects to the tamarind tree has always been a must for all his *bhaktas*. The popularity of this site is proven by the small shops that one finds along the steep path leading towards it. The tree and its surroundings are a place of intense worship and prayer. The people that come to take the tree's *darśana*<sup>43</sup> – climbing the 190 odd steps of the hill – tie pieces of string with countless messages containing their wishes to its branches (figures 1.2 and 1.3). They then walk away comforted that their concerns will be taken care of. When Sathya Sāi Bābā was alive, this practice used to be regarded as a good substitute in case he didn't take one's letters during the morning and afternoon *darśana* rounds at the ashram. At many pilgrimage sites in India, expressing wishes and prayers in front of sacred trees is a common ritual practice, as well as leaving messages and votive gifts on their branches and near their trunk. The custom of tying pieces of cloth and threads on trees in the hope of relieving diseases and other troubles is also well-known (Abbott 1974: 326–34; Nugteren 2005: 329).

39 Termite mounds help mitigate the effects of drought on tamarind trees under increasing drought conditions, while tamarind trees offer food to termites; see Fandohan et al. (2012: 345–55).

40 On the tamarind tree/forest at the origin of Veṅkaṭeśvara's cult as well as of the holy sites of Paṇḍharpūr and Cidambaram, see Dhare (2011: 43–55). On Veṅkaṭeśvara as a god of trees, see Neelima (2013: 89–90). On the link between the termite mound and the tamarind tree in South Indian folk religion, see König (1984: 180–81, 188, 258).

41 On Puttaparthi as another Tirupati, see Rigopoulos (2014).

42 On the generosity of sacred trees, see Nugteren (2005: 59–61, 328).

43 Lit. 'vision,' the experience of seeing the divine and being seen by it; see Valpey (2010: 380–94).



Figure 1.2. The path leading to the wish-fulfilling tree in Puttaparathi, 1980.

It should be noted that the saint of Puttaparathi taught his devotees to place a ceiling on desires, i.e. to keep one's wishes under control and practice detachment (*vairāgya*). He warned his *bhaktas* by reminding them that desires are a prison and that man can be freed only by limiting his wants. Already in one of his early discourses dated 24 October 1963, he cautioned his followers by saying:

Desire leads to ultimate ruin. It can never be destroyed by fulfillment. It grows upon each satisfaction and becomes a monster that devours the victim himself; so, try to reduce your desires; go on reducing them. There was once a pilgrim who accidentally sat under the *Kalpatharu* (a wish-granting tree)! He was terribly thirsty and said to himself, 'How I wish someone gave me a cup of sweet cool water!' And, immediately, there was placed before him a cup of deliciously cool water. He was surprised, but, drank it nevertheless. Then, he wished for a meal of tasty dishes, and he got it in a trice. This led to a wish for a cot and a bed and when he wished his wife was there to see all this wonder, she appeared in an instant. The poor pilgrim mistook her for an apparition and when he exclaimed, 'O she is an ogress!' she became

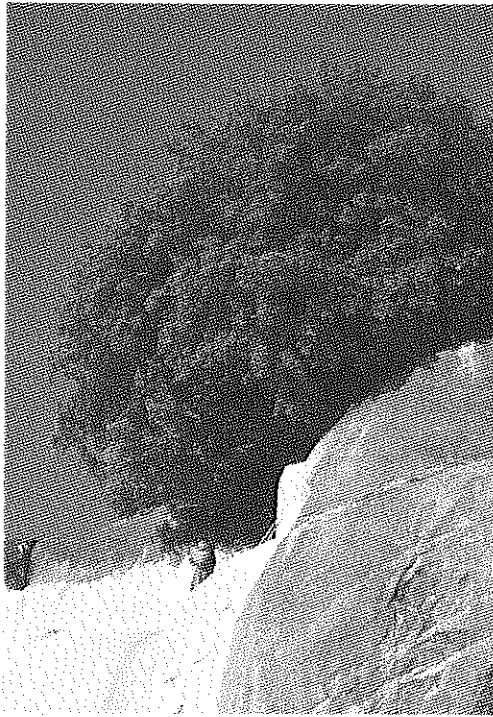


Figure 1.3. The wish-fulfilling tree in Puttaparthi, 1980.

one, and the husband shook in terror, crying, 'She will now eat me up,' which she promptly did! The chain of desire binds one to the point of suffocation. Control, curb your tendency to wish for this and that. Tell the Lord, 'You are enough for me. I do not wish for anything else.' Why pine after golden jewels? Pine for gold. The *Gita* teaches the lesson of *Saranagati* (unconditional surrender to the Lord); wish for His Will to prevail, not your wish to succeed. This is what Krishna meant when He said, 'Be a *Sarvambha parityagi*' (one who renounces all self-centered actions).<sup>44</sup> (Sathya Sai Baba 2008: 233–34)

If in the old days the tamarind stood solitary on top of the hillock that overlooks the Chitravathi river, in later years the area was transformed into a green paradise of sorts with many trees, shrubs, bushes and grass covering it. Amidst the vegetation, the *kalpavṛkṣa* stood tall as its crest-jewel, revered by all as an immortal tree, until a terrible thunderstorm hit the place on the night of 19 May 2011, causing the tree to collapse.<sup>45</sup>

44 BhG xii.16c, xiv.25c.

45 On the association of sacred trees with immortality, see Nugteren (2005: 51–54).

This was an additional shock to villagers and devotees who less than a month before had to cope with the death of their master and lord: on 24 April 2011, Sathya Sāī Bābā had died of cardio-respiratory failure at Puttaparthi's super-specialty hospital. The afflicted *bhaktas* interpreted the tree's collapse as an ominous sign, a catastrophe adding salt to their emotional wounds.

Quite soon, however, people realized that the tree's roots and main trunk had remained intact and that the stump protruding from the ground was not dead since a fresh, lively shoot had sprouted and was growing rapidly towards the sky. Everybody was greatly relieved: the *kalpavṛkṣa* was not gone, it had rather changed its outer shape and rejuvenated itself. Devotees have extended the analogy to their beloved guru, maintaining that he has not died; he has simply worn out his 'old clothes.' The 'resurrection' of the *kalpavṛkṣa* is thus interpreted as a confirmation of the ongoing divine presence.

### THE MEDITATION TREE AND SATHYA SĀĪ BĀBĀ'S POST-SECTARIAN CHARISMA

A third tree that is especially significant in Sathya Sāī Bābā's cult is a banyan or *vaṭa*<sup>46</sup> (*Ficus benghalensis* L.; Skt. *nyagrodha*; Tel. *marri ceṭṭu*, *vaṭamu*) which the guru himself planted within the premises of the ashram on 29 June 1959. Devotees flock to it to practice meditation (*dhyāna*) as the tree is thought to be charged with great spiritual energy given that the saint of Puttaparthi installed at its root a *yantra*, a thick copper plate – 15 inches long and 10 inches wide – upon which special *mantras* and mystic markings are etched. In the list of Sathya Sāī Bābā's 108 names, the 97th extols him precisely as *Oṃ Śrī Sādhakānugraha Vaṭavṛkṣa Pratiṣṭhāpakāya Namaḥ*. Here is Kasturi's explanation of it:

One Vaisakha Purnima day,<sup>47</sup> years ago, Baba was on the sands of the River Chitravathi in the evening, with about a hundred Bhaktas.<sup>48</sup> The talk inevitably moved towards Buddha whose birth, illumination, and release happened on that day of the year. While speaking on the Bodhi Tree at Gaya to which Buddha proceeded for Tapas,<sup>49</sup> someone asked, 'why did he go so far

46 The name *vaṭa* is derived from the Sanskrit verbal root *vaṭ*, 'to surround.'

47 The full moon day in the month of Vaiśākha (April–May).

48 This episode took place in April 1959.

49 Lit. 'heat;' ascetic practices.

and select that tree?' And Baba replied giving an account of mystic *yantras* over which such trees grow, *yantras* which keep out evil forces and stimulate spiritual impulses and help concentration. Even while He was describing these *yantras*, He created from the sands a shining copper plate on which was drawn in squares the mystic symbols and numbers of which He spoke. He said that He would be depositing it in the Tapovana (on the hills behind the Prasanthi Nilayam) and plant a Vatavriksha (*Ficus benghalensis*) thereon. 'It will act as the *yantra* which I am describing. Yogis wherever they are, when they reach a certain stage of sadhana,<sup>50</sup> will know of this congenial spot and hurry hither, to be benefited by this mystic potency,' He said. Baba is therefore indicated by this Name: He who is the Pratishtapaka (person who planted firmly) the Vatavriksha (the Banyan tree of Dakshinamurthi – Shiva as the teacher) as an Anugraha (boon) to the Sadhakas.<sup>51</sup> (Kasturi 1979: 99–100)

This meditation tree cum *yantra* – a diagram supposed to carry occult powers (Bühnemann 2010) – is presented as a spiritual magnet attracting *yogins* and *sādhakas* from all over the world (Steel 1997: 40). It is thought of as the center of a penance grove (*tapovana*) that is conducive to liberation, an analogy with the Buddha's enlightenment (*bodhi*) tree. The practice of installing *yantras* at the root of trees so as to charge them with spiritual power is not uncommon, especially among Tantric adepts.<sup>52</sup> Sathya Sāi Bābā's assumption is that the Buddha himself was drawn to the Bodhgayā tree precisely because it was charged by a potent *yantra*.

It must be pointed out that the Buddha's *bodhi* tree was not a banyan but an *āśvattha* or *Ficus religiosa*, also known as *pīpal* (Nugteren 2005: 143–241).<sup>53</sup> The banyan and the *āśvattha*, though very different, are nonetheless frequently confused. A reason for this confusion might be that banyan

50 A generic term for spiritual practice.

51 The *sādhakas* are spiritual practitioners. On this episode, see Kasturi (1980: 96); Rao (1985: 198–99); Steel (1997: 29); Vijayakumari (1999: 265–66).

52 These *yantras* function as underlying supports. On the analogy with architectural *yantras* laid into the foundation of temples, see Khanna (1994: 143–52). Magic *yantras* are often inserted into a deity's image (*mūrti*), which then undergoes burial.

53 Interestingly, Sathya Sāi Bābā – appearing in his Shirdi form – would have told a lady devotee that he had his ashram near the holy Vidura *āśvattha*, an ancient *Ficus religiosa* supposedly planted by sage Vidura. This fig tree, which is still an object of worship, is located about thirty miles away from Puttaparthi; see Kasturi (1982: 118); Rice (1887: 130). In BhG xv.1–3, which echoes KU vi.1, the *āśvattha* – with roots aloft and branches below – is symbolic of *samsāra*; see Coomaraswamy (1984).

trees figure prominently in the Buddha's legendary biography, both before and after his enlightenment (Nugteren 2005: 153–54). The huge banyan, also believed to be a wish-fulfilling tree, is a powerful symbol of immortality (*akṣaya*).<sup>54</sup> It is even known as *bahupāda*, 'many-footed,' since it supports itself through the development of adventitious prop roots from its branches, roots that grow downwards to the ground into thick woody trunks which, over time, become indistinguishable from the main trunk.<sup>55</sup>

It is noteworthy that Sathya Sāī Bābā narrated that in his previous incarnation as Shirdī Sāī Bābā he was born under a banyan tree (Rigopoulos 1993: 23). In Hindu tradition, the banyan or *vaṭa* is linked to Viṣṇu – who is said to sleep in its large leaf during *pralayas*, the periods of cosmic dissolution – and especially to Śiva, with whom it is identified. As recalled by Kasturi, the archetypal *yogin* and guru Śiva Dakṣiṇāmūrti<sup>56</sup> is described as manifesting himself at the foot of a *vaṭa* while teaching his disciples the knowledge of the Self (*ātma-jñāna*) through silence (*mauna*). The idea is that just like the aerial roots of the *vaṭa* suffocate all other plants, in the same way the thought of the Absolute (*Brahman*) must suffocate all other human aspirations.<sup>57</sup> The association of the *vaṭa* with asceticism is highlighted in both literary and ethnographic accounts (Nugteren 2005: 54–55 n. 128, 281, 340–41).

54 On the banyan tree, see Upadhyaya (1965: 5–6); Crooke (1978, vol. 2, 98–99); Gupta (1991: 47–49); Malla (2000: 33–35); Nugteren (2005: 54).

55 On the *nyagrodha* that develops from a tiny seed and symbolizes the all-pervading *Brahman*, see ChU vi.12.1–2.

56 Lit. 'having one's face turned to the South.' This form of Śiva faces death which is thought to come from the South.

57 Here are two significant verses (11–12) taken from the *Dakṣiṇāmūrtistotra*, a hymn attributed to the great Vedāntin master Śaṅkara (c. 700 CE):

I bow to Śrī Dakṣiṇāmūrti in the form of my guru  
 Seated upon the earth by yonder banyan tree;  
 I bow to Him who bestows on the sages direct knowledge of Ultimate  
 Truth;  
 I bow to the Teacher of the three worlds,  
 The Lord Himself, who dispels the misery of birth and death.  
 Behold, under the banyan are seated the aged disciples about their  
 youthful teacher,  
 It is strange indeed: the teacher instructs them only through silence,  
 Which, in itself, is sufficient to scatter all his disciples' doubts.  
 (Nikhilananda 1947: 239–40)

In accordance with his master's neo-Vedāntic universalism (Srinivas 2010), Kasturi interpreted the tree as a symbol of the eternal religion (*sanātanadharmā*):<sup>58</sup>

The tree may be said to symbolize Sanathana Dharma, for its branches reach out in all directions and draw sustenance from every type of faith and every spiritual striving. (Kasturi 1980: 95)

In his *sarvadharma* emblem Sathya Sāī Bābā incorporated all world religions, acknowledging them as different paths leading towards the same ultimate goal, though reserving for Hinduism, the 'mother' of all religions, the highest place in the hierarchy of faiths. His appropriation of the *bodhi* tree via the *vaṭa* tree shows his willingness to assimilate the Buddha and Buddhism in his post-sectarian teaching and charisma, while at the same time stressing his identity as Śiva.<sup>59</sup> When on 6 July 1963, the day of *gurupūrṇimā*,<sup>60</sup> he announced his future 'incarnation' as Prema Sāī – to be born in the State of Karnataka (Steel 1997: 204–05) – he linked the Sāī Bābā avatāric lineage to Śiva's mythology, that is, to a boon Śiva and Śakti would have granted to the seer Bharadvāja due to the latter's piousness in the preparation of a sacrifice taught to him by Indra.<sup>61</sup> On

58 On the crucial notion of *sanātanadharmā*, see Halbfass (1988: 343–46).

59 Sathya Sāī Bābā spoke symbolically of the *aśvattha* as the tree of life. Kasturi reports:

He says that the tree of life, the *Aswattha*, has its roots in the *ātman*. If that faith is absent, we dry up and are wafted hither and thither by every wind of fortune – wayward whiffs of transience. The trunk and the branches, the leaves and twigs of the tree of life are the ramifications of our contacts and commitments with the outer world, the kith and kin, the I and mine, the plus and minus into which life proliferates. The flowers of the tree are words, thoughts, and deeds of love; and the *ānanda* derived is the fruit. But, Baba says, the sweetness in the fruit is virtue, *seela*, good godly character. Without *seela*, which makes the fruit worthwhile, and the *ātmic* root which sustains the tree, life is a mere plowing of sands, the body is but fuel, fodder for vermin. (Kasturi 1974: 36–37)

The saint of Puttaparthi also said that *karmayoga* is the trunk of the tree of life, *bhaktiyoga* its branches, leaves and flowers, and *jñānayoga* its ripe fruit; see Gries and Gries (1993: 255).

60 This festival honoring the guru falls on the full moon day in the month of Āṣāḍha (June–July).

61 For an analysis of this claim and of the Bharadvāja myth, see Swallow (1982: 136–45).



this solemn occasion, Sathya Sāi Bābā presented himself as the *avatāra* of Śiva-Śakti.<sup>62</sup>

If through his wish-fulfilling tree the saint of Puttaparthi stressed his willingness to grant *bhukti*, i.e. to fulfill the needs and aims of his devotees in the realms of *kāma* (pleasure in all its forms) and *artha* (material wealth and worldly success), through his meditation tree he stressed his eagerness to grant *mukti* or liberation from the painful cycle of transmigration (*saṃsāra*), that is the highest of all legitimate goals of human life (*puruṣārtha*). The mission of the *avatāra* is to restore righteousness (*dharma*) and protect the good (*sādhu*), leading them to take refuge in him and realize their true nature through the 'austerity of knowledge' (*jñānatapas*).<sup>63</sup> As Sathya Sāi Bābā himself declared on various occasions:

In my present *Avatar*, I have come armed with the fullness of the power of formless God to correct mankind, raise human consciousness and put people back on the right path of truth, righteousness, peace and love to divinity. (Sandweiss 1985: 236)

Through the implementation of the meditation tree, Sathya Sāi Bābā established himself as the guru of gurus, as none other than Śiva as 'lord of Yoga' (*yogeśvara*). Within an overall *bhakti*-oriented perspective, he highlighted the need to practice contemplation in order to discipline and silence once and for all what he used to call the 'monkey mind'.<sup>64</sup>

## CONCLUSION

All in all, the three trees I have examined played a considerable role in setting the stage of Sathya Sāi Bābā's life and mission, being as it were the signposts of his advent (the *pārijāta*), of the disclosure of his divine

62 On 29 June 1963, Sathya Sāi Bābā had a stroke that caused the paralysis of the left side of his body. His severe illness lasted eight days. For a detailed report of the saint's sickness, miraculous recovery and momentous disclosure, see Kasturi (2012). On Sathya Sāi Bābā being both Śiva and Śakti, see Babb (1986: 159–201; 1987: 168–86). He stressed his Śiva-hood through the daily production of ashes (*vibhūti*) and through the emission of Śiva *liṅgas* from his mouth during Mahāśivarātri festivals; see Steel (1997: 113–19); Bhatnagar (2011); Rigopoulos (2013b: 181–83). Mahāśivarātri, 'the great night of Śiva,' is held on the fourteenth day of the dark fortnight of the month of Māgha (January–February).

63 See BhG iv.8–10.

64 On Sathya Sāi Bābā's *bhaktiyoga*, see Srinivas (2014: 261–79).

status (the tamarind as *kalpavṛkṣa*), and of his consecration as dispenser of the summum bonum of liberation (the *vaṭa*). If the *pārijāta* is a 'dream tree,' in the sense that it was appropriated by local hagiography through a 'revelation' that Sathya Sāī Bābā's paternal grandfather had in his sleep, the *kalpavṛkṣa* and *vaṭa* are real, physical trees that the saint of Puttaparthi deliberately consecrated. And yet the *pārijāta* is no less real than the other two, given that in the context of shared memory the distinction between fact and fiction is ultimately irrelevant.

To this day, these trees are at the center of a complex interplay of sacred narratives, combining the oral and literary dimensions in a shared idiom of recollection that crosses temporal boundaries. In particular, the *kalpavṛkṣa* and the *vaṭa* are powerful memorials celebrating the spiritual presence of the saint of Puttaparthi. Part and parcel of Sathya Sāī Bābā's transnational cult – whose center is nowadays constituted by the tomb (*samādhi*) housing his body<sup>65</sup> – these sites bring together memory and history, texts and practices, past and present. Devotees come to these trees both in order to share/retell the memories of the old days, as well as to experience here and now the living (*jāgrta*) fragrance of the divine through the performance of an array of ritual observances and meditative techniques.<sup>66</sup>

As *sarvadevātmasvarūpa*, the embodiment of all gods, Sathya Sāī Bābā claimed to incorporate all deities in his post-sectarian persona. There is no doubt that his appropriation of the myths of the *pārijāta*, *kalpavṛkṣa* and *vaṭa/bodhi* trees proved remarkably efficacious in supporting his claim to divinity. In time, he grew into a veritable *viśvavṛkṣa*, a world-tree providing shade and shelter to the ever-expanding international gathering of his devotees.<sup>67</sup> He consistently presented himself as the quintessential god-head, beyond the boundaries of institutionalized religion, be it Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity or Islam:

I have come to repair the ancient highway to God.... I have not come on behalf of any sect or creed or religion. I have come to light the lamp of love in the hearts of all humanity. (Mason and Laing 1982: 225)

Along these universalistic lines, the *kalpavṛkṣa* as well as the *vaṭa* have come to be regarded as symbolic of a divine sap which enlivens all beings.

65 On Sathya Sāī Bābā's perfect body and the conceptualization of the body among his devotees, see Srinivas (2012: 185–205).

66 On the interplay of history, memory and a tree in the cult of the 13th-century Marathi poet-saint Jñāneśvar, see Novetzke (2009: 212–32).

67 See Kasturi (1974: 43).

This sap or essence is love, and it is not accidental that one of the saint's most frequent terms of address used to be *premasvarūpa*, 'embodiment of love.' Finally, the true nature of the *kalpavṛkṣa* – identified as Sathya Sāi Bābā *sub specie arboris* – is said to be none other than pure love:

This *Prema* is My distinctive mark, not the creation of material objects or of health and happiness, by sheer exercise of Will. You might consider what you call 'miracles' as the most direct sign of Divinity, but the *Prema* that welcomes you all, blesses all, that makes Me rush to the presence of the seekers, the suffering and the distressed in distant lands or wherever they are, that is the real sign! It is that which declares that I am Sai Baba.<sup>68</sup> (Sathya Sai Baba 1967: 169–70)

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68 On the centrality of love in Sathya Sāi Bābā's teachings, see Gries and Gries (1993: 109–13).

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