A Contextual Approach to Multi-dimensional Analyses of Sai Bhajan: A Vocal Genre from South India

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by

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This map shows a small city of Puttaparthi where Sathya Sai Baba’s ashram, Prashanthi Nilayam is located, and where I visited many times, partly as a field research for Sai Bhajan music.
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Abstract

This research focuses on the contexts – historical, socio-cultural, spiritual, and musical – in which the devotional songs called *Sai Bhajan* had emerged from. Since around 1960, it has evolved into a distinctive vocal genre from South India. Based on these contexts, selected specific areas of *Sai Bhajan* are scrutinized and analyzed to reveal the inner workings of structure, patterns, formats and practices. The scope of this study is a contextual exploratory into the complexity of a musical world phenomenon. Inherently, a multi-disciplinary framework is utilized for a more comprehensive outcome that also includes 108 original transcriptions adapting into the western staff notation for *Sai Bhajan* songs, all of which derived from the vast extensive repertoire within the Indian oral tradition.
CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTORY OVERVIEW

My Journey to Sai Bhajan Music

Being one of the eleven children from a large extended family, I feel rather fortunate to have been trained in Western classical music through piano lessons since I was around eight years old. I recall my father being my first piano teacher for a short time, then followed by a few other music teachers in private piano lessons. All of these experiences happened in Bangkok (Khroong Thep), the capital of Thailand, where I was born and grew up. During the crucial enculturating stage of my early childhood, my father converted to Christianity. As a result, I along with other family members allotted good portion of our time attending the adopted local bi-lingual Presbyterian Church, a place where I had been given plenty of opportunities to learn singing and playing hymnal music, participating in the church choir among other functions. But then, I also realized we had become a minority member of a Thai society, living in the Thai mainstream culture that is predominantly Buddhist at over 90% of the total population. That meant I had to learn to adjust and to feel comfortable, getting along well with non-Christian friends as well as other groups of Thai people who thought and acted somewhat differently from my family’s belief system. Indeed, this part of my childhood bi-cultural experiences influenced my interest in the musical heritage of other cultures beyond the Thai native genres.

While I was growing up, I also would welcome any chance to pick up any casual knowledge of guitar and violin through socializing among the selected musical friends and acquaintances. Meanwhile, because of my desire with an innate drive to learn, to explore
and to experience living in foreign lands, I sought out any opportunity to fulfill my dreams. Subsequently I received a scholarship, becoming an exchange student to Australia for one academic year before coming to study in the United States. I first went to Judson College in Alabama for my undergraduate degree. Later, at the graduate music education program at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, my first pleasant encounter with Indian music happened when a visiting Indian professor whom I called ‘Dr. Ayyangar’ presented a seminar on Carnatic (South Indian) singing class, and I was one of her several students in that class. Outside my required coursework, I was also curious enough to electively enroll in An Introduction to Ethnomusicology class with Dr. Bruno Nettl during that same year, even though my major concentration was in choral music at the time. These positive and strong impressions of such wonderful time in the academic environment seem to have lingered on in my psyche for life. All the while along with some other chance exposures to experience more of the Indian music in a few various social settings, I came to know about Sai Baba’s teachings and the Sai Bhajan music as a result. Since then, I have continued to follow my interest in the Sai Bhajan songs and their orally transmitted sources even after I got married and lived for several years in Madison, Wisconsin. Finally settling down in Pittsburgh from 1990 until today, I spend most of my energy and time devoted to raise my two children. Along the way, it seemed so natural for me to be surrounded by many Indian acquaintances and friends among the Sathya Sai groups in the area.

However, during the time I was in Madison in 1987, I made my first trip to South India, including a visit to the ashram of Sathya Sai Baba. That first adventurous trip was the turning point, resulting in my passionate desire to know even more about this intriguing vocal music known as Sai Bhajan. With the spirit of an explorer, I traveled to a small
village called Puttaparthi, which has since grown into a small city in the Anantapur District of Andhra Pradesh region in the middle of South India. Initially, it was my curiosity about Sathya Sai Baba as a spiritual guru, whom I had heard and had been reading about in the previous several years that led me there. But to my surprise, I actually had a chance to witness Sathya Sai Baba himself in singing Sai Bhajan songs with a mellifluous voice, as he was leading a huge gathering of thousands of people, in a participatory singing style that I can still vividly remember. The music sounded so uplifting that I clearly wanted to hear and to learn more about it. Being a foreign guest inside this official residence of Sathya Sai Baba, a sprawling compound of an ashram called Prashanthi Nilayam, meaning the abode of supreme peace, there I was intrigue while absorbing a new musical phenomenon and that has become an active part of my musical life ever since. Based on my first-hand experience in observation, Sai Bhajan songs were utilized in a regular musical-spiritual function, the singing session was scheduled twice daily in the ashram, one in the morning around 9:00 a.m. and one in the very late afternoon around 5:00 p.m., usually following the talk or a discourse by Sathya Sai Baba himself. Because of the warm climate in that region of India, the crowded congregational Sai Bhajan singing was held in the huge open-air hall with only several rows of supportive tall columns with no enclosing walls. Women and men (children are allowed to be with either of their parents) sat separately, one on the right side and the other on the left side, on the ground with crossed legs as it is generally practiced by the Indian people.

Following that first visit, I have returned to the same ashram for several other different festive occasions in the next two decades, four more times so far. Each visit gave me more first-hand experiential knowledge and a deeper level of personal understanding.
about the inter-connection of musical, spiritual and cultural phenomena. Meanwhile in the U.S.A., I sought out the diaspora of Indian people who congregated to practice the singing of *Sai Bhajan*. Subsequently I had found and gradually became involved with the official Sathya Sai group in the Pittsburgh area for more than 15 years, starting simply from the viewpoint of an observer to become fully immersed as an active weekly participant observer in the past several years. Although when I began my journey, learning about *Sai Bhajan* as an outsider, from the etic perspective, but a prolonged time of my involvement with this particular type of music has helped me acquiring an advantage of the emic, the insider’s perspective as well. From this vantage point, I can say I have been well equipped and well prepared from so much of real life experiences, making this dissertation a valuable one.

**What is Sai Bhajan?**

The word *Bhajan* is commonly used in Hindi language, came from the Sanskrit root word *Bhajana*, referring to any devotional singing practice, which can be the devotional song itself, or a gathering session when the spiritual aspirants congregate to commune and to connect with their deities through singing. The Sanskrit origin to some other related terms such as, Bhakti (devotion), Bhakta (devotee), Bhagvan (god), came from the root verb 'bhaj’ which means *to share, to give, to partake*. So it is simply a shared musical-spiritual activity among devotees, as an offering to their gods. The *Bhajan* session can be formal as well as informal, ranging from a few participants in a home casual setting to a formal setting with several hundreds to more than ten thousands of people gathering for a special occasion. The practice of *Bhajan* singing can be traced back to the Bhakti movement that had emerged from the spiritual-cultural context of the Asian sub-continent, especially the South Indian culture since around the 6th century. This began as a dominating counter force by the
Hindu population, as a kind of theistic reaction toward the growth of Buddhism and Jainism around that time within the historical context of India.

According to William Jackson, "Bhakti is experiential seeking and spiritual exercises cultivating desire for union with the divine. With its drive toward vision, its song of longing, and its moments of exaltation in finally tasting vision, it has ancient roots."¹ One of these ancient roots came from the Vedas (a collection of knowledge) that had been orally transmitted until it became the revered Sanskrit texts, some of which had been traced back to the Aryans, as well as the ancient Harappan civilization in the Indus valley of Northern India. The word 'Veda' means 'knowledge' which had been heard (Shruti) - a divine inspiring process to acquire knowledge that happened since around 3,000 B.C.E. Exclusively trained to maintain the knowledge, the Brahmin priestly caste were responsible, for thousands of years to keep their religious rites and literatures alive. Over time, the Vedic chanters gradually transformed the plain Vedic chant that contained three tone syllabic melodies into a more complex chanting of Samaveda, one of the four Vedic collections. This practice of Sama-Veda chanting was considered by the orthodox Hindus to be the source of later Indian musical culture.

The word 'Sai' adding to the generic term 'Bhajan' denotes a specific sub-genre known as 'Sai Bhajan' which derived from and still is a part of the on-going belief in the Triple incarnation of Sai Avatars (Shirdi Sai, Sathya Sai and Prema Sai). The Divine Principles, as believed by people from inside and outside of India that gods will continue to incarnate back on earth in human forms when the world needs the divine guidance toward the Supreme God (the ultimate Divine Principle). Shirdi Sai Baba, revered as a Muslim

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saint had lived in Maharashtra of West India from around 1838 to 1918. Then following by eight years later, Sathya Sai Baba who was born in 1926, had eventually announced himself as a reincarnation of Shirdi Sai. Until recently, Sathya Sai Baba himself being a wonderful singer, had played a huge role in Sai Bhajan formation and adaptation. But unfortunately, Sathya Sai left his physical body on April 24, 2011 – which means that the world is in a transitory period before Prema Sai enters the scene. Based on this scenario, Sai Bhajan songs can also be seen as a part of the South Indian originated spiritual-cultural-musical phenomenon. However, the most important avatar is Sathya Sai who popularized Sai Bhajan. As William Jackson describes, “Since at least the 1960s, Sathya Sai Baba, a spiritual teacher based in Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka, has given a boost to bhajan singing, as thousands of his followers enthusiastically gather for sessions in homes and halls in many part of India. His devotees, from a variety of castes and sectarian backgrounds, have built halls for bhajan singing. There they regular meetings, especially on Thursdays and Sundays. Sai Baba’s devotees have adopted the practice of nagasankirtana, the singing of bhajan while walking in a procession just before dawn. Other groups also sing and promote bhajans, including the followers of Amrita Mata, probably the most famous living woman guru of Kerala.”

To sum up, Sai Bhajan is an emerging vocal genre of devotional music from South India that has already been spreading in many other countries including the U.S.A. Especially in the Pittsburgh metro area where I have lived for over 20 years, this is where the Indian diaspora group of Sai devotees had become my primary focus as a participant observer in the Sai Bhajan activities. Enhancing with my past several trips to South India

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2 Ibid, 267-68.
since 1987, my long term association with Sai Bhajan music has given me an advantage of some *emic*, an insider’s perspective as an added value to the *etic*, an outsider’s perspective. A broad contextual approach to this research can be seen as a preliminary survey through a historical, cultural, spiritual, musical timeline in a descriptive account from my plentiful experiencing first-hand with Sai real world and cyber-spaces. Accordingly, the outcome of this study may also be looked upon as coming from both the diachronic and the synchronic views, in breadth as well as in depth to a certain extent.

**Literature Review**

Specifically on the subject written about Sai Bhajan as a South Indian vocal genre, there are very limited in number outside a few scholarly sources. As mentioned in the New Grove (vol. 12, 2001:248), Maria Lord writes – “Sai Baba Bhajan are extremely popular and may be heard almost anywhere in South India.” Morton Klass as a cultural anthropologist shed some light into Sai Bhajan through his book entitled *Singing with Sai Baba: The Politics of Revitalization in Trinidad* (1991). Klass’s synchronic study on Sai Bhajan singing among the communities of the Indian diaspora in Trinidad and Tobago includes some analyses of the social, economic, political and religious contexts.

However, there are plenty of peripheral literatures that I found to be useful as a contextual support to substantiate my research topic. An extensive source is Volume 5 of *The Garland Encyclopedia of World Music* (2000), Alison Arnold as editor on *South Asia: The Indian Subcontinent*, it presents both overview and specific areas of music in that vast region where Sai Bhajan music had also become widespread. Historically, most Bhajan and Kirtan singings had been evolving from the Bhakti (devotion) movement in India, out of which some of the songs in Sai Bhajan repertoire can be traced back to many of these Indian
ongoing past to present variegated traditions. Adding to the list of my most recent find is *The Oxford Anthology of Bhakti Literature* (2011), edited by Andrew Schelling. This book reveals more details on how and who in the Bhakti movement that helps spreading the message of attaining God through poems and songs from the origin in South India to the West India, then North to East, a clockwise direction until the whole country is saturated with the Bhakti ideas along with the singing practices. Another good source for some insights into the great tradition of Sanskritic Hinduism in contrast with other local little traditions was provided by Milton Singer in *When a Great Tradition Modernizes: An Anthropological Approach to Indian Civilization* (1972). Particularly it is valuable for me to understand how, why and what happened in the socio-cultural context - the interchange among different cultural contacts that make the pan-Indian unified values possible. Then also, a probe into *A Brief History of India* by Alain Daniélou (2003) is a great foundation from a western viewpoint, especially for reading in order to see the bigger picture of a historical context suitable for my topic.

Sorting out the abundance of relevant literatures by the Indian authors, these selected few are considered reliable based on the writers’ scholarly credentials and their general reputations. A well-respected author, Surendranath Dasgupta (1885-1952) whose long enduring book, *Hindu Mysticism*, first published in 1927, it has been in reprints at least six times with the latest one in 2002. Indeed, Dasgupta’s writing on 'Classical Forms of Devotional Mysticism and Popular Devotional Mysticism’ is quite illuminating in terms of making contribution to the spiritual context for Sai Bhajan music. Another outstanding source came from Krishna Sharma, the author of *Bhakti and The Bhakti Movement: A New Perspective*, which is a critical and thought provoking interpretation of the Bhakti idea and
its movement spreading across the Indian sub-cultures. Based on the more recent cultural-historical view, a prominent Indian historian named N.S. Rajaram wrote *A Hindu View of the World: Essays in the Intellectual Kshatriya Tradition* (1998) that provide a valuable source with analysis of evidences, linking the new Indian middle class to Sai Bhajan music.

Moreover, several selected sources derived from the Western authors such as Arnold Schulman whose career in journalism made him a more objective writer. Schulman wrote about the activities of Sathya Sai Baba in his book, *Baba* (1971) that shed some light on Sai Bhajan singing as the integral part of Sathya Sai Baba’s routine spiritual function in the earlier days, before I have come into contact with and learned about Sai Bhajan myself. Clearly, another first-hand account by an American psychiatrist, Samuel H. Sandweiss who wrote *Sai Baba: The Holy Man and the Psychiatrist* (1975) is highly acclaimed and often quoted by many other Sai followers. Sandweiss’s narrative is indeed insightful concerning the practice of Sathya Sai’s teachings, in which Sandweiss himself had incorporated into his own practice in psychiatry. Interestingly, Sandweiss mentioned about his own effort in learning some Sai Bhajan songs because of their good effect on mental health. In his own words, Sandweiss writes "Baba considers singing these devotional songs very important; they are supposed to have great effect on our meditation and spiritual outlook and are performed by one person singing a verse and the rest of the group repeating it.” (p.131)

Because a substantial portion of this research project includes over one hundred of musical transcriptions on Sai Bhajan songs as derived from the oral tradition of India, therefore, a critical look at some of the literatures about transcriptions is essential to verify the importance of the musical techniques. A forefront among many transcription experts, Ter Ellingson in *Ethnomusicology: An Introduction* (1992:110) had summed up this way,
"Transcription, which has to do with the writing of musical sounds, has long been considered universally applicable and universally requisite to ethnomusicological methodology. This method provided objectively quantifiable and analyzable data that furnished a solid base for ethnomusicology’s claim to validity as a scientific discipline.” From the very beginning of ethnomusicological history, according to Ellingson (Myers, 1992:111), "The tradition of ethnomusicological transcription can be traced to a single line of methodological and intellectual development deriving from key figures such as Alexander J. Ellis (1814-90), Carl Stumpf (1848-1936), and Erich M. von Hornbostel (1877-1935) around the turn of the 20th century.” Particularly, the guidelines so called 'Proposal’ by Hornbostel and Abraham for transcription are still useful and applicable to my transcribing project. One of the good advices (Myers, 1992:130) stated in this document is the following translation – "Techniques for transcribing: Phonograph generally used; if impossible, transcribe by ear, which also has advantages. Best to learn music to sing or play to satisfaction of natives.”

As a provision for a theoretical framework in 1958, an excellent article in Musical Quarterly (Vol. 44: 184-95) by Charles Seeger, the author had clearly differentiated a functional distinction between prescriptive and descriptive musical transcription, and this is extremely helpful for me to conceptualize my own transcribing techniques. Finally, as stated by Bruno Nettl, in The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-one Issues and Concepts (2005:90), "Western notation is being adopted by musical cultures throughout the world, modified to account for diversity, and it has become (e.g., in Iran) a reasonably adequate prescriptive system, and this is leading to a kind of vindication of Western notation for the purpose of transcription.” Because I began doing musical transcriptions in Western staff
notation over ten years ago, and still continue to transcribe as long as there are more *Sai Bhajan* songs to be explored, some of the Sai Bhajan songs previously transcribed may be included as a part of this research study within the specified related contexts.

**Statement on Methodology**

The research question is broadly framed as - What is this Sai Bhajan music all about? Approached from different angles in various perspectives (historical, spiritual, socio-cultural and musical), the methodology is inevitably a multi-disciplinary one. As I intend to draw from the anthropological methods, i.e., fieldwork, participant-observation, and descriptive ethnography, all of which have been a common practice for a research in the ethnomusicological studies. I followed in the same footsteps, as initially and thoroughly expounded by Alan P. Merriam (1964) in *The Anthropology of Music*. On the other hand, Mantle Hood (1971) as a proponent of 'bi-musicality' believed that a person can learn to be fluent and proficient in music of the other’s culture beyond one’s own through an immersion process. That means one can be simultaneously fluent and effective in two different musical cultures, similar to a bi-lingual person who can speak two different languages very well like a native of both languages. Long-term immersion applied well to my situation, since I have been involved with Sai Bhajan music for over 20 years, mostly with the Sathya Sai Center in the Pittsburgh area. Therefore, I can claim to have been participating in Sai Bhajan music long enough that I have been generally seen as the main accompanist, actively playing my synthesized keyboard as a melodic support for the weekly Sai Bhajan session.

Beyond 'bi-musicality’- Hood had also been one of the leading scholars who had explored different techniques to establish the musical transcription method. Agreeably,
Helen Myers in *Ethnomusicology: An Introduction* (1992:15), she writes, "Fieldwork remains the focal point of research, and each scholar is expected to collect his own material for analysis. Ethnomusicologists continue to acknowledge the value of written notation; some use mechanical music writers, including computers and the melograph, but a surprising number, armed with various special symbols, still rely on conventional Western notation.” Complementarily, my prior lesson and experience in musical composition gave me an advantageous edge, a competency in creating Western notation with computer software called 'Finale’ which makes the finish product, a prescriptive musical transcription more legible with a cleaner look. The input into the computer stage can only happen after an arduous persistent task of repeated listening skills with paper and pencil handy to scribble and capture the sounds I heard over months and years. Along the way, some other short-cuts like Chinese and Thai abbreviated notational systems (using numbers and alphabets to represent pitches respectively). Then at some point eventually, I convert these short-cut hand-written scribbles back to Western notation because of its functional universality in today’s global musical scene.

An equally important component of this research relies on the method of an archival search through libraries both in the U.S.A. and in India, often times via the online access, mostly for the historical context that provides the background and framework for all other contexts. Some other specific ethnomusicological techniques I have used for this research project include the collection of personal interviews, audio and video recordings, still photos from the field, plus obtaining relevant resources in prints or via internet, such as subscriptions to Newsletter directly from India, and in the U.S.A. within a vast network of the official Sathya Sai organization. Hence, the intended outcome of this dissertation is to
generate some new materials, i.e. original musical transcriptions, while gaining a fresh look into a fusion process and the resulting knowledge derived from the ancient Indian sources along with other socio-cultural and spiritual forces that give rise to Sai Bhajan music to become one of the global genres in the foreseeable future. From these emerging spiritual music and songs within the contexts of individual to people, to gods or the divine principles, a new musical repertoire is added to Ethnomusicology for posterity and education. Also perhaps, it can serve as a stepping-stone into a further growth, for the sake of enhancing and enriching human musical-spiritual experiences.

The author was accompanied by her daughter Dara in 2010 at Chaitanya Museum in Puttaparthi
A tour of world religions & life messages of Sri Sathya Sai Baba
CHAPTER TWO

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Some Relevant Backgrounds

The country called 'India’ to the outside world, is actually called 'Bharat’ or ‘Bharata’ among the Indian people themselves. Today, India is the world’s largest democratic country and the second most populous nation. Linguistically, it is truly a tremendous challenge that India seems to be much more diverse than any other countries in the world. From the outsider’s viewpoint, there must have been many layers, different levels and versions of historical accounts from various oral traditions. As Alison Arnold writes, "The Indian constitution recognizes sixteen principal languages, of which two (Hindi and English) are the official national languages; India has a further 1,652 dialects. The principal language spoken in the Gangetic plain is Hindi, of the Indic branch of the Indo-European family, with several North Indian dialects – including Rajasthani, Braj Bhasha, Bhojpuri, Magadhi, and Maithili – all considered closely related... In the southern peninsula, four major Dravidian languages predominate – Kannada, Malayalam, Tamil, and Telugu – with other Dravidian languages such as Gondi, Tulu, and Kota spoken by specific ethnic and tribal groups."^3 However, the latest update includes up to twenty-two languages recognized by the government of India.

My own first-hand experiences socialize with lots of the Indian friends and acquaintances in Pittsburgh area, had confirmed the fact of these deep rooted sub-cultural

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variations. Even when the Indian diaspora in groups, it is separated in terms of linguistic divisions, for examples: Bengali Association of Pittsburgh, Telugu Association. The dynamics of casual socialization happen mostly along the line of linguistic division as well. However, when the communication has to be conveyed more formally among the Indians of different linguistic groups, English language comes in handy, spontaneously utilized more frequently than Hindi. These are based on my direct observations over the past two decades. I now see how English had become one of the main factors that unified people of India as an emerging powerful nation into the future. A brief look at this point is to get a glimpse of the Indian historical development as far back as possible.

To trace history by following the recent archaeological findings particularly from the famous sites at Harappa and Mohenjo Daro, there were layers upon layers of ancient artifacts dating back to around 3,000 B.C.E. that substantiated the Indus River Valley as one of the oldest civilizations, now located partly in today’s Pakistan and the northwest region of India. This vast conglomerated ancient civilization extended all the way to the Arabian Sea is a fascinating story that continues partly through an on-going archaeological effort along with its endless challenges. So far, there are sufficient new evidences that verify the existing settlements sprawling across huge distances in that region before the Aryan invasion occurred. Most current history books still give all the credits to the Aryan people for their superiority that brought with them the Sanskrit language and the Vedic knowledge into India. The Aryans were the nomadic people who came through northwest Khyber Pass into India. Viewed as the outsiders who invaded and conquered the natives in the second millennium B.C.E., they introduced Sanskrit and Vedic knowledge that had been infused to become an integral part of the Indian dominant
culture, also known as the Sanskrit great tradition. Evidently, both Sanskrit language and the Vedic chanting have been routinely included in the Sai Bhajan functions.

Going further back into the more ancient history, based on the textual analyses in the previously known outside and inside the legendary Indian sources such as, *Puranas, Ramayana, Mahabharata,* and *Vedas* through which Alain Daniélou had convincingly gave high credits for the surviving cultural-intellectual traits of the widespread, pre-historical presence of the Dravidian (the indigenous people of India). Here I find some significant statements in Daniélou’s book, e.g., “In the tradition of the Indian *Puranas* numerous myths and legends are found that are also known in Mesopotamia. One of these legendary stories is the one about the Flood that has come to us from the Sumerians, through Babylon. A Hurrian fragment referring to it was found at Boghazköy. This story is one of the basic myths of the pre-Aryan tradition in India. The hero of the Flood is called Manu. Manu comes from the Dravidian root *man,* which means “clay.” Manu is “the man of clay,” like Adam, meaning mankind in general, of whom he is the progenitor.”

In other words, what had been transpired out of Daniélou’s historical perspective is perhaps, that humanity has the common links going back to the oldest civilization in the land we called ‘India’ today. To substantiate this point, here are a few secondary sources in which some related passages being quoted by Daniélou. Clearly, there are historians who spoke of a great civilization that can be traced from India to southern Europe, at the beginning of the sixth millennium before our era. “We must now realize that an early culture of this kind once extended from the Mediterranean to the Ganges Valley, and that the whole of the Ancient East has behind it this common

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*4 Alain Daniélou, A Brief History of India, Translated from the French by Kenneth Hurry (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2003), 19.*
inheritance.”⁵ “It has been established beyond a possibility of doubt that India played a part in that early complex which shaped the civilized world before the advent of the Greeks.”⁶ “The Dravidians are a branch of the Mediterranean race. Such is the opinion of modern anthropologists. Accordingly there must exist some relationship between the Dravidians of India and the other branches of the great Mediterranean race, the Iberians of Spain, the Ligurians, the Palasgians, the Etruscans, the Libyans, the Minoans of Crete, the Cyprians, the Egyptians, the Hittites and the Sumerians. It is therefore not strange that some of the signs of the Mohenjo Daro script should have some resemblance to the signs of the scripts of these nations.”⁷

In addition to the above historical accounts, Daniélou writes, “From an ethnic point of view, the Indian branch of these ancient peoples of Dravidian culture included the populations of the Indus and Ganges basin as a whole, as well as those of central India. The southern peoples, who alone speak Dravidian languages today, are, on the other hand, greatly mixed with the older aboriginal peoples – the Mundas, Negritos, and others, with the contribution of African and Madagascan elements. They are not representative of the ancient Dravidian type. At the same time, the Brahmans of the south, imported from the north during a relatively recent period and taken as Aryans, are as often as not pure Mediterranean-Gangetic types, that is, ancient Dravidian.”⁸ These ancient peoples of the Dravidian type were conquered and gradually subdued to slavery by the Aryan invasions. The Aryan conquest put an end to the Indus Valley civilization. Although it did not

⁵ A.K. Coomaraswamy, History of Indian and Indonesian Art (London, 1927), 5.
⁷ S.J. Heras, Studies in Proto-Indo-Mediterranean Culture (Bombay, 1953), 63.
⁸ Alain Daniélou, A Brief History of India, Translated from French by Kenneth Hurry (Rochester, Vermont: Inner Traditions, 2003), 12-13.
happen overnight, but over centuries in a long process of the destruction and assimilation of a highly developed Dravidian culture by hordes of nomadic shepherds and warriors from the north or northwest. Fortunately however, Daniélou continued to richly explain, “...when the northern invaders were ravaging the fertile plains of the Indus and the Ganges. The protection afforded by the Deccan plateau, together with its distance, allowed the Dravidian culture to maintain its integrity, from many points of view, down to our own times. Indeed, southern India is still a culturally and even politically independent country. Any domination by the northern empires was always temporary and rather nominal. Archaeology indicates that the southern kingdoms had direct trade relations with Egypt, Babylon, Arabia, and Palestine, as early as the second Millennium B.C.E. and probably well before that. Since most ancient times, the institutions of the southern kingdoms had the benefit of stability and continuity that northern India never knew after the Aryan invasions... According to the Bible, King Solomon imported ivory, monkeys, and peacocks from southern India. Many of the terms employed in ancient Mediterranean languages derive from Tamil.”

As it turns out, Tamil language had become the Dravidian culture torchbearer. Many original literary records before they were translated into Sanskrit can still be found in the Tamil language. From the Tamil source, around sixth millennium B.C.E. when Shaivism was the dominant spiritual practice in India before the arrival of the Aryans, according to the Puranas, the god Shiva which means ‘favorable’ manifested himself in India and taught people spirituality, philosophy, the arts and sciences. Later, Shaivism was integrated into Brahmanic practice of the Aryans. In fact, the Indian spiritual practice

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9 Ibid, 36.
known as Hindu today had indeed derived considerable contribution from the ancient pre-
Aryan Dravidian culture, perhaps more importantly so than that of the Vedic Aryan
Brahmanism. The point in which Daniélou had further elaborated this way, “The religion
known as Shaivism in India seems to have expanded immensely in Indo-Mediterranean
proto-history and, under different forms, played a major role in the ancient world. The
myth of Osiris in Egypt, for example, is a variation on one of the stories of Shiva
described in the *Puranas*. The Egyptians, moreover, considered that Osiris had come
from India riding on a bull, the vehicle of Shiva.”10 As a participant observer, I also
notice how Shiva seems very special in the Sai Bhajan’s repertoire, the songs about Shiva
and his many other names (manifestations) with attributes are sung about more often than
that of god Brahma.

**South Indian Origin**

The emergence of Sai Bhajan as a genre began in Puttaparthi, now a small city
to the north about three hours car ride from a major city of Bangalore in southern India.
This happened during the time of Sathya Sai Baba (1926-2011), who loved to sing Bhajan
since his childhood years, already as a leader to his classmates and schoolmates. At the
tender age of 14, he left home to pursue the pre-ordained career as a great master of the
Sai spiritual teachings, already began to gather his followers. Bhajan singing had evolved
to become one of his regular activities, as one of the ways to spend time with his followers
while immersing in blissful sound vibration. To reinforce his spiritual teachings, Sathya
Sai was known to have composed many Bhajan songs himself. Over his lifetime, the
group singing of Bhajan had been integrated as part of Sathya Sai Baba’s organizational

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10 Ibid, 28.
mission based on his teachings, as it had developed into its own unique characteristics that can be clearly identifiable as Sai Bhajan music that is now virtually and globally accepted. However, this devotional music genre did not happen out of a vacuum. Sai Bhajan draws heavily from the past ideas in terms of adopting and adapting from the ancient Dravidian culture and the Aryan derived Vedic Sanskrit literary works, as well as from other many regional traditions. Hence, the prior relevant historical context leading up to the time of Sathya Sai Baba is the focus timeline in this chapter.

Practically most of the historical sources about Hindu India did mention the word Bhakti (devotional love longing for God) as rooted in the Indian cultural spiritual foundation, but the Bhakti movement only had spread from South to West to North to East (clockwise) since around the medieval time. The poet-saint singer also called itinerant or mendicant who usually improvised ideas in poetic chanting singing to express their Bhakti sentiments. Although a probing analysis that goes beneath all the surface level, these ideas can be construed as a disguise in the quest for equality because of the active caste system in the Medieval India. As confirmed in Andrew Schelling’s work, he writes, “The poems of the bhakti tradition began to take shape in India during the eighth or ninth centuries. Scholars have tracked its origins to Svetasvatara Upanishad, Bhagavadgita, Bhagavata Purana, and other texts that advocate or describe the yoga of devotion. At this point we can document the names of hundreds, if not thousands of singers who fit the profile of bhakti. These poets have been drawn largely from the old excluded orders of India’s political or social hierarchies, and their songs and subversive beliefs caused upheavals in families and entire clans. At times, revolutions spread across whole kingdoms, propelled by the emotions of bhakti. Driven by spiritual hunger, a fierce desire
for spiritual freedom, and long-simmering demands for social or economic equality, bhakti poets issued forth in dozens of languages… What sets the poets of bhakti apart from their classical Sanskrit or Tamil predecessors – transforming them into a prominent *countercultural* force – is their resolve to match life and poetry: To live by what they sing, no matter the stakes. Some bhakti poets gathered around themselves ‘communities of dissent’ in their own lifetimes.”¹¹

The most ancient devotional practice at the beginning of *bhakti* movement happened in the Tamil Nadu where the oldest Dravidian literary sources were still in existence. The Tamil people of South India during the first millennium were involved in the worship of deity Vishnu by the Alvars (Vishnu devotees) and the worship of deity Shiva by the Nayanars (Shiva devotees). Both of these groups/sects were devout spiritual seekers who made pilgrimages to the shrines and temples across the South. The hymns of the *Tevaram* or ‘Garland of the Divine’ lyrics sung by Shiva devotees, is a collection of over eight thousand verses composed by poet-saints namely - Appar, Cuntarar, and Tirujnana Sambandhar. The *Tevaram* was by then around seventh to ninth centuries, a result of the mutually enriching Dravidian and Aryan Sanskritic elements. On the other hand, the *Divya Prabandham* or ‘Sacred Light Collection’ of four thousand Tamil verses was contributed by a group of twelve Alvar saints, including the special two namely - Andal (the only woman) and Nammalvar (born a peasant caste). These wandering poet-singers attracted followers who joined them in singing in the local colloquial linguistic format. Over the centuries, these oral traditions live on, the chanting of the *Tevaram* and *Divya Prabandham* can still be heard in the South Indian temples.

The following selected poet/saint/singers are well recognized on the historical trail of the bhakti movement. Their stories, works and achievement are linked to Sathya Sai’s teachings and the Sai Bhajan music in many subtle ways at various levels. Listed here in chronological order, they are:

**Adi Shankara** (c.788-820 CE) – Sometimes referred to as ‘Shankara’ in short, he was honored as the first to reinterpret the ancient Hindu sacred texts, such as the Vedas, the Upanishads, and disseminated to the masses. Indian scholars consider him to be the most prominent Advaita (non-dualism) philosopher. His immortal Sanskrit devotional poem *Bhaja Govindam* had become a catalyst, forming the core of the Bhakti movement as well as epitomizing the Advaita Vedanta teachings. The main focus of the Advaita concept is that, only the Brahman (Divine Essence) is real and everything else is an illusion (Maya). Through the intense practice on this Oneness principle, an idea in the Advaita Vedanta, ego can possibly be removed from the mind of man. Although his emphasis on the ultimate reality of Brahman (Divine Principle/Essence) is clear, the extant multiplicity with pantheon of gods in the Indian culture was not undermined. The inclusion of both worldly and transcendental experiences is accepted as valid. For the sake of safe guard and keeping these ideas alive, Adi Shankara had established four monastic centers in the four corners of India. Each center was assigned one Veda: Atharva Veda in the north, Yajur Veda in the south, Rig Veda in the east, and Sama Veda in the west region of India.

**Ramanuja** (c.1017-1137 CE) – He is one of the most known primarily as a South Indian philosopher from the Tamil Brahmin (priestly caste) family. According to Deva, an author describes him as, “A gem of the brightest hue in this garland, was a
profound personality and gave a new turn to religious life. His teachings started the initial ripples of a wave of bhakti throughout India. While Sankara’s thought-experiences are some of the greatest in the world, they demanded an uncompromising understanding of the One – a state of mind too dizzy of appeal. Vaishnavaite think-feeling makes the Godhead a personal being, almost anthropomorphic. One could love, abuse, play or quarrel with such a God! Hence the intense emotional attraction of Ramanuja and Madhva, the latter to even greater degrees, for bhakti or devotion becomes the closest attachment of the Mind of Man to the Godhead.”12 Ramanuja as an influential scholar had written nine commentary books based on the theistic interpretation of the Vedas in Sanskrit language. He was the chief proponent of Visishtadvaita, one of the Hindu philosophical schools of thoughts that combined the concept of Advaita (oneness of god) with Vishesha (attributes).

Madhva (c.1238-1317 CE) – As one of the Hindu Vedanta philosophers, he is also respectfully called ‘Madhvacharya’ being the initial proponent of ‘Dvaita or dualist school of thoughts.’ The tenet of Madhva’s Dvaita is his interpretation that the Vedic tradition teaches a fundamental difference between Atman (human soul) and the Brahman (ultimate supreme reality). Essentially, this is different from the earlier Shankara’s Advaita interpretation, which viewed the Atman experiences as projecting a false sense individuality and plurality under the influence of delusive power of Maya (illusion). The cosmic truth is that only Brahman is the pure consciousness with no attributes, and human souls are simply the eternal particles issuing from Brahman, the transcendental source. For Madhva, his perceived idea that Vishnu as Brahman makes sense in terms of

devotional practice, which is the important component of a religious belief system. Therefore, attaining Vishnu as God and his grace is the soul’s only hope to achieve liberation (Moksha) from the cycle of birth and death (Samsara). Thus, Madhva’s philosophy gives validity to human souls in relation to human external experiences. In other words, reality according to Madhva is consisted of three basic elements: God (Brahman), the soul (Atman), and insentient matter (Jada).

Annamacharya (c.1408-1503 CE) – Sometimes known as Annamaya who started the tradition of devotional songs in Telugu language, he was born in 1408 at Tallapaka village within the Cuddapah district of Andhra Pradesh. He came from a Brahmin family, and as a child he sang to Venkatesvara, a form of Vishnu as Lord of the Tirumalai Hills. According to Andrew Schelling, “When still as a child he experienced a dream in which, ‘I saw Lord Venkatesvara, father of the cosmos, gazing on me.’ He adds, in one of his compositions to the god, ‘you gave your command, honoring my tongue with the chance to sing songs of praise to you…’

Eventually Annamaya was placed in charge of temple singing, and received the title Grandfather Poet of the Padas. He composed at least one song a day, generally as he bathed in a nearby pool or waterfall. His son claimed that over the course of his life he had composed 32,000 *padas*, which were inscribed on copper plates. A storehouse of these coppers at the temple came to light in the second decade of the twentieth century – a collection of 14,000 of the songs.

A pada is a brief musical composition, sung in light classical mode. In the case of devotional compositions, they are sung as kirtan in the temple. Often temple dancers, the *devadasis*, will choreograph steps to the songs. In South India, it was Annamaya who gave the pada form a standardized cast, with an opening line, the *pallavai*, which recurs as a refrain or burden, sometimes with a second line, the *anupallavai*. The songs belong to the devadasis and their temple musicians. As with the Virasaiva poets of the Kannada tradition, the particular name of the god acts as a *mudra*, or identifying signature – contrasting with the northern tradition in which the poet’s name identifies the composer.13

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**Vallabha** (c.1479-1531 CE) – He was born into a Telugu Brahmin family, and had shown precocity in spiritual matters from early on. His ancestors had lived in Andhra Pradesh, where they belonged to the Telugu Vaidiki Brahmans as Vellanadu, the followers of Vishnu Swami School of thoughts. His family migrated to the holy town of Varanasi in the north where the Muslim ruler was in control at the time. As the story of his birth was quite out of ordinary and was seemingly miraculous while his mother was on a run from political turmoil. As if he was supposed to be born for a divine purpose, to eventually become a highly revered devotional philosopher who had subsequently founded the Pushti (grace) sect, based on Shuddha Advaita (pure non-dualism). Some of the principle teachings are firmly based on a complete surrender to god, and only with the god’s grace that salvation can be attained. God should be worshipped through love (Bhakti), not by fasting or other physical austerities. According to Vallabha’s life story, his education commenced at the age of seven, studying all the four Vedas. He also had learnt the philosophical systems of Adi Shankara, Ramanuja, Madhva, as well as Nimbarka, along with learning the Buddhist and Jain schools of thoughts. One great legendary account was the debate at the court of Raja Krishna Deva of Vijayanagar Empire of the South India, in which he defeated all the famous Pundits (scholars) of that court when he was still young. Vallabha had traveled extensively and had undertaken pilgrimages throughout India, spreading his devotional-philosophical practice attached to Krishna as god. Eventually, he had settled in Mathura (a hometown of Krishna) at the foothill of Mount Govardhana, and that became the center for his scholarly activities. Among the Indian great four Vaishnava Acharyas (teachers), Vallabha was honored to a prestige title as the last Acharya, preceding him by Ramanuja, Madhva, and Nimbarka. Clearly a huge contributor to
Bhakti movement within the Indian philosophical world, Vallabha had written a considerable number of philosophical works, his many commentaries, and especially his Pusti Marg (path of god’s grace) are still being followed by groups of people in the northern and western regions of India.

**Purandara Dasa** (c.1484-1564 CE) – Generally accepted as the Grandfather, sometimes *Father of Carnatic* music, he composed songs mostly in Kannada language of the Karnataka state. His original name was Srinivasa Nayaka, born as the only son of a wealthy merchant. He was well educated in sacred music, proficient in both Kannada and Sanskrit languages. At the age of 30 years old, he became a wandering minstrel. Along the way, he met a holy sage named Vyasatirtha who initiated him to become Purandara Dasa. He had traveled extensively through Vijayanagara Empire in Karnataka, Tirupati, Pandharapura, among other places. All the while, he composed soul stirring songs of praise rendering mostly to Lord Narayana and other Devatas (Goddesses). He eventually systematized the method of teaching Carnatic music, introducing series of graded lessons that are still useful to the present day. His Kirtan (songs of praise) have simple lessons on living a noble life, as well as explaining the essence of Upanishads and the Vedas in Kannada language. Through music and songs, he fought the existing caste system and promoted the spirit of humanism. He emphasized the idea that one’s birth should not decide the highness or lowness of man.

**Mirabai** (c.1498-1557 CE) – As a female poet-singer of the Bhakti movement, she is one of the most well recognized for her many bhajans that are still being sung today. She was the only daughter of a Rajput chieftain and landlord in the fortress city of Merta. From a very early age, she was attracted and devoted to Krishna (one of Vishnu’s many
reincarnations). Her mother died when she was only 4-5 years old, so she ended up being raised at her grandfather’s house. Her other family members were already inclined toward Vaishnava Bhakti tradition, that meant her loving sentiments for Krishna could be freely exercised. So she adored Krishna as a divine husband. Even though when she was married off to an earthly warrior husband, she still preferred and believed herself to belong to divine Krishna. Perhaps as fate might have dictated it, her human husband died few years later in a battle with the Mughal Emperor Babur. That was when she became obviously detached from the material worlds around her. Since then she continued to live a completely devoted life for Krishna, and wholeheartedly expressed her longing of her soul in poetic songs that were well received, being used as bhajan till these days.

Tukaram (c.1577-1650 CE) – As a prominent Varkari Sant (pilgrim saint) and a spiritual poet-singer of the Bhakti movement, Tukaram worshiped Vitthala, or Vithoba (another name and form of Vishnu deity). Indian scholars esteemed Tukaram’s stature in Marathi language literature as comparable to that of Shakespeare in English or Goethe in German. Marathi language is a mother tongue to approximately 50 million people in the southwest of India, where Mumbai (Bombay) is the biggest city of that region. The poetic songs by Tukaram are known as ‘Ahbangs’ in Marathi culture, somewhat exclusively in praise of Vithoba/ Vitthala. In a deeper level of analysis, Tukaram’s devotional literatures hinted at the resistance to the North where the Islamic influenced Mughal Empire were in power. Tukaram’s works reflected the Marathi of common ordinary man, projecting the imagery of everyday living experience. Tukaram helped transforming the colloquial expression into the classic ideal literature by means of a universal approach. In many ways, Tukaram’s poetic literatures had helped the Maratha people binding together to
assert their cultural identity. A collection of nearly 5,000 poems was credited under the
name of Tukaram and they encompass practically the entire gamut of Marathi culture.

**Tyagaraja** (1767-1847 CE) – He was born to the Telugu-speaking Brahmin parents at Tiruvarur in the Tanjore district. Mainly because of the royal patronage for music at the time, Tanjore had been for years and years one of the most important music centers in India. Indeed, today’s Indian people celebrated Tyagaraja as the most famous composer, a great poet-singer of South India. His musical achievement has spurred the annual festival to perform his songs/compositions/dance/drama both in India and abroad. One such well-known yearly event called Aradhana, the annual death celebration of Tyagaraja’s musical works, was organized for many days around springtime in Cleveland, Ohio. So highly revered as an icon for the music of South India, Tyagaraja was also mutually enriched by his two other contemporary composers named *Syama Sastri* and *Mutuswami Dikshitar*. All these three were grouped together as *Trimoorpy*, or the Trinity saints of Carnatic music. But in terms of devotional songs, as a part of later Bhakti movement, Tyagaraja used his creative energy of music pouring out his love for Rama (another one of Vishnu’s reincarnation). Tyagaraja managed to produce thousands of devotional songs in *Kriti* and *Kirtana* forms. Here are some specific details about Tyagaraja, according to Deva who writes, “He saw potentiality in new melodies and from them gave forms to *ragas* like *Kharaharapriya* and *Devagandhari*: at least he must have breathed life into such simple tunes to make them into *ragas*, if not produced them *de novo*. The rhythms used by him are also simple and are generally confined to *talas* such as *Adi, Triputa, Roopaka*. Complex temporal and melodic patterns would not have expressed the lyricism of his mystic adoration. A beautiful elaboration introduced by him
as the *sangati* as a built-in part of his *Kriti*. These melodic variations convey so many shades of the main mood that all the finer nuances of text and music find expanded expression.”¹⁴ A musical analysis of Tyagaraja’s *Kriti* form/ musical structure, as described by Amy Catlin reflects a familiar musical format happened in some of the Sai Bhajan music that has crossed my path. Here is the passage by the author Catlin, she writes – “Tyagaraja’s *kriti* compositions follow a logical tripartite structure in which the *pallavi* (P) states a musical and textual idea, the *anupallavi* (A) develops it, and the *caranam* (C) extends it still further. In some cases the musical idea dominates, in others the textual idea takes the foreground, or else there is a balance between them. A return to the *pallavi* (sometimes preceded by the *anupallavi*) as a refrain at the conclusion of each section serves to reiterate the central idea of the *kriti*. The tripartite form can be expressed as P, A P, C (A) P (commas indicate a break in the singing, a drum cadence, or possibly a cycle or two of solo drumming).”¹⁵ The predecessor of *Kriti* form is the simpler *Kirtana* form that had been evolved and developed through many South Indian poet-saint-singers of the Vaishnava sects, a part of Bhakti movement in the 1500s-1600s C.E. Even though Tyagaraja’s music is primarily light classical to classical oriented levels, his recurring themes are all about his devotion to deity Rama. For that reason, his music and devotional songs are also construed as a continuum of the Bhakti movement.

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North Indian Influence

From the beginning of a very long history of the north and northwest regions of India, there had always been periodic waves of foreign invasion/migration into the areas. Since around few thousand B.C.E., the so-called Aryan nomadic tribes had crossed via Khyber Pass (today’s where Pakistan bordered northwest with Afghanistan) to invade the areas where the ancient Indus valley civilization used to be, then gradually migrated into the Central North India around the Ganges Valley, bringing with them the Vedic rites, customs and the basic knowledge of Sanskrit. Slowly over time, the cultural exchanges were integrated into a fusion, in terms of the principles (moral values, social, cultural and political structures), mostly between the Aryan people and the Dravidian indigenous people, resulting in a rather rigid ruling system. The social caste system, along with the Vedic Sanskrit so-called the great tradition was subsumed to spread over all the north and central regions of India, until it reached the southern areas as well.

Then it came the Macedonian, Alexander the Great in 326 B.C.E. commonly put as the Greek invasion into the northwest and western regions of India. But fate might have dictated it, Alexander became ill and had to retreat many months later, therefore the impact of this aggression was quite minimal. Until the medieval period, from around 1,000 C.E. onward, the Islamic power had landed over the North India and had widely asserted, slowly permeating into the existing native cultures. Overwhelmingly, these Muslim warriors had successfully managed to establish themselves as the ruling class. That is why the synthesis of Islamic elements with the Hindu social values and spiritual principles occurred, while also including the integration, a hybridized process of the North
Indian various musical cultures to become the so-called Hindustani, as a different system or a variant form of the more indigenous Carnatic/ Karnatic of South India.

When the Bhakti movement swept through the North of India, many more new elements along with some new ideas, philosophical concepts and musical practices of the Muslim, Sufi, Zoroastrian, Buddhism, Sikhism among others were then infused into the devotional poetry and songs. The adaptive influences are embedded in the brief accounts of these selected renowned representatives of the north and central India. Here are the names of such notable poet-saint-singers/ philosophers listed chronologically as follow:

**Vidyapati** (c.1352-1448 CE) – He was born in a village in the district of eastern Bihar. His father served at the court of Hindu kings near today’s Darbhanga, and through his father Vidyapati got a chance to serve Kirti Simha, the Maithil king. As a proficient Sanskrit scholar, Vidyapati composed a long poem *Kirtilata* for his patron king. Later when the king’s son, Deva Simha, inherited the throne, Vidyapati took up residency at the court. That was the time he started to pioneer a new literature, writing in the vernacular of Maithili instead of the brahmin’s Sanskrit. Following the influence of Jayadeva in the acclaimed great Sanskrit poem, *Gita-govinda* portrayed love story of Krishna and Radha in the tradition that used the language of physical love to describe spiritual love. It was the turning point from earlier Bhakti tradition, for the sake of empowering the common man to experience the divine directly through the intense desire of a lover for a love partner (God/ Krishna). Vidyapati had written more than 500 love songs, Krishna-Radha poems in Maithili, an Indo-Aryan language spoken in the northern Bihar region in India and also in eastern Nepal. Since the year his patron, king Siva Simha vanished in a military defeat to the Muslim attack. Vidyapati had continued to
write other complicated Sanskrit treatises. Beyond all that, Vidyapati also wrote poetry
dedicated to god Shiva, and today there are many people who worship Shiva while still
singing the devotional songs by him.

Kabir (c.1440-1518 CE) – One legend has it, that he was born to a Brahmin
widow who abandoned him for fear of being dishonored due to the birth without a father.
But it is generally reliable to accept that Kabir was adopted and raised by a Muslim family
in weaving craft. As an Indian devotional mystic, the name Kabir comes from the Arabic
al-Kabir, meaning ‘The Great’ which is the 37th of the 99 descriptive names of God in the
Islam faith. There were no details about Kabir’s spiritual training in depth, except that he
was linked to Ramananda, a Vaishnava saint at the early age until 13 years old. Evidently,
Kabir had no formal education and therefore, he was kind of illiterate. So in practice, his
poetic works were orally transmitted in the vernacular Hindi language, that also mixed in
occasionally with words borrowed from the Persian and the Arabic variants used at the
time in the north. As known, Kabir chose a balanced lifestyle as both a householder as a
weaver and a mystic as a contemplative one. His poetic teachings are easily accessible to
the poor and the oppressed. His language seemed like a protest on social discrimination
and the economic exploitation. He rejected some rigid dogmas, both in Hinduism and in
Islam. He opposed to the caste system and idol worship of the Hindu, while embracing
the Bhakti and Sufi spiritual ideas. However, he did accept the law of Karma (cycle of
rebirths) and the concept of reincarnation from Hinduism, as well as the absolute single
almighty God (the formless divine essence) in the Islamic belief system. Salvation
according to Kabir comes from the union of Jivatma (individual soul) and Paramatma
(God or the Divine Principle).
Kabir’s greatest work known as Bijak (the seedling) is a long set of poems, voicing the universal view of spirituality. One good example is this English translation, a verse said by Kabir, popularly posted online as: The Lord is in me, the Lord is in you, as life is in every seed, therefore, put false pride away and seek the Lord within. Today, Kabir’s legacy has continued on through the Kabir Panth (Path of Kabir) grounded on the egalitarian basis, as one of the Sant Mat (Saint Movement) sects mostly active in the North India.

Nanak (1469-1539 CE) – Most commonly called Guru Nanak, was the founder of Sikhism, one of the Indian spiritual traditions. Nanak was the first of the ten Sikh Gurus, the eleventh is revered as the living Guru, referring to “Guru Granth Sahib” the Sikh sacred scripture that is a vast collection of verses in the Gurmukhi scripts of the Punjabi language, spoken mostly in the northwest region of India. Nanak’s father was an accountant, working for a Muslim landlord. When he was about 16 years old, he went to live with the family of a married sister, herself a very pious person. That turned out to be a formative period for a spiritually inclined Nanak. Commentaries on his life had shed some details about Nanak’s childhood, for examples – Nanak had shown special interest regarding any divine subject matter since the age of 5, and one other notable story about the young Nanak described to his teacher the symbol of the first letter of the alphabet, which is almost a straight stroke in Persian and Arabic languages looking like the number one in math, therefore it implies or points to the oneness of all gods. According to the Sikh tradition, Nanak at the age of 30, he had experienced a mystical vision. While he was taken to God’s abode and was given a cup filled with amrita (sweet nectar), he was blessed then with a calling to teach others to rejoice in the oneness of God’s many names.
From that vision onwards, Nanak became a Guru, and Sikhism was born. Guru Nanak proclaimed that God is neither a Hindu nor a Muslim, and there is only one God who resides in everyone and in everything. The eternal truth is that all creation belongs to God. After that, Nanak had traveled extensively, taking at least five missionary journeys to as faraway places as Ceylon (Sri Lanka), Kamroop (Assam), Mecca, among others, beyond covering widely inside the homeland of India. The main purpose of Nanak’s numerous stops was to teach, spreading God’s messages of peace, compassion, righteousness, truth, love and joy for all mankind.

Surdas (c.1478-1573 CE) – He was born blind, and became one of the most celebrated devotional poets of North India. Surdas was well known for his enormous collection of songs called Sur Sagar (Ocean of Melody) believed to have over hundred thousand padas (lyrical poems), but only about 8,000 songs survived to the present time. Surdas was neglected as a blind child, living with his parents in the area of Braj, near Mathura (city associated with Krishna). A chance meeting with Vallabhacharya (master-teacher) near the river Yamuna in his teens had changed his life thereon. Since then, Surdas became Vallabhacharya’s student and disciple. Surdas learned meditation and Hindu philosophy that put him on the spiritual path of his master. He was soon capable of reciting the entire scripture of Srimad Bhagavatam, while also proved himself to be quite musically adept. Vallabhacharya then advised him to sing the ‘Bhagavad Lila’ – that contains devotional lyrical ballads in praise of Lord Krishna and Radha (his consort). In a traditional way, Surdas had been living in Vrindavan compound with his Guru Vallabha, until he was appointed to be the resident singer at Srinath Temple in Govardhan. As his fame spread far and wide, reaching the Mughal Emperor Akbar (1542-1605) who had also
eventually become his patron. Interestingly, Surdas made use of Braj Bhasha, a western dialect of Hindi language in his songs/poetic compositions. That had raised the status of Braj Bhasha from a previous crude dialect to become a literary language, rivaling the literary languages of Sanskrit and Persian prevailing in the North India at the time. Among the so-called Eight Disciples of the Master-Guru Vallabha, Surdas achieved the honor of being ranked the foremost importance of all.

**Chaitanya** (1485-1534 CE) – Also called Caitanya Mahaprabhu, or Sri Krishna Chaitanya, he gained respect throughout India for his Krishna-Radha devotional songs in the form of community singing, these immensely popular musical activities known as a *Sankirtan*, or collective singing while walking and chanting the *kirtan* (songs of praise). Originally from Bengal, he traveled to the southern region, spreading the practice of group *kirtan* singing to a variety of communities, in villages, towns and temples. The idea of *bhakti* (devotion and love for gods) was then growing more and more appealing, along with the concept of egalitarian ideals. For simplified *kirtan* songs are the most natural and the easiest way to revel in experiences of devotional love toward one’s choice of gods, whether in the images of Rama, Krishna, or Shiva, etc. However, Chaitanya’s devotional practices applied exclusively to Krishna-Radha as a union of divine pair, symbolizing the union of God with human. Chaitanya was viewed as the founder of a new tradition called Gaudiya Vaishnava, which was a branch-out from the extant Vaishnava pan-Indian tradition.

Born into a Bengali Hindu family, Chaitanya was attracted to chanting/singing at a very early age. In his youth, Chaitanya was considered to be an erudite scholarly lad who also for some of the time, having his own private tutor. According to his biography,
Chaitanya was transformed when he traveled to Gaya to perform the Shraddha ceremony for his departed father, and met his ascetic guru Ishvara Puri who initiated Chaitanya with the Gopala Krishna mantra. Then at some point later, Chaitanya received an entrance into the Sannyasa order by Keshava Bharati. For several years, he was traveling to many places in India, carrying with him divine messages and chanting divine names of Krishna along the way. During the last 24 years of his life, Chaitanya had settled in the great temple city of Jagannath in Puri, Orissa. Chaitanya’s teachings were codified in his only written record in Sanskrit called Sikṣaṣṭakam, or ‘Eight verses of instruction.’ These verses are now seen as the condensed philosophy of the Gaudiya Vaishnavism. However, Chaitanya did select some among his followers who are known today as ‘the six Gosvamis of Vrindavan’ to do the systematizing work, written down the theology of Bhakti that Chaitanya had taught them. Most of the ideas and concepts in Chaitanya’s Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition derived from the ancient roots of the Vedas, the Purana epics, and the Bhagavad Gita embedded in the Mahabharata. Evidently, traces of these elements can be found in Sai Bhajan songs.

Tulsidas (c.1532-1623 CE) – As a reformer, philosopher, poet-saint-singer during the reign of Islamic Mughal Empire, Tulsidas was renowned for his devotion to Lord Rama. His most celebrated work ‘Ramcharitmanas’ or ‘The Holy Lake of Rama’s Deeds’ is the retelling story of the Sanskrit epic poem called Ramayana in a vernacular language of Awadhi, an eastern Hindi dialect in the North. It was meant for common folks to relate to more easily. Besides, he also started the folk theater for the performance of the adapted version of Ramayana play called ‘Ramlila’ that said to have attracted huge crowds. Because of his tremendous popularity and fame, Tulsidas was acclaimed as a
reincarnation of sage Valmiki, traditionally accepted as the author of the original Ramayana in Sanskrit.

The facts of Tulsidas’s early life are illusive and scanty. He was supposedly born into a Brahmin family in the town of Rajapur in today’s Uttar Pradesh. Somehow, he was separated from his parents, having a difficult childhood, surrounded by poverty and even perhaps a local plague. But according to some accounts, Tulsidas insisted that the divine name of ‘Rama’ had saved and protected him. However, in his adult life based on Andrew Schelling’s statement, he writes: “Early in his career as a poet – one widespread story has it – he loved his wife so desperately, or felt so insecure in his passion, that when he returned home from a journey and discovered she’d gone to her parents’ house, he went nearly insane. A river swollen by rain separated him from his beloved wife, and he crossed it by commandeering a corpse for a raft. Reaching the house of his wife’s parents, he drew himself up to her bedroom, mistaking a snake for a rope. His wife, appalled at the passion with which he’d clawed his way to her, greeted him with, ‘If you felt for Lord Rama half the ardour you show for my body – bones covered with dirty skin – you would cross the ocean of samsara and know eternal bliss.’ Stunned into a recognition of the futility of earthly love, Tulsi is said to have renounced family life, and left for Varanasi to take up a life of austere devotion.” Ever since, Tulsidas had spent most of his life in Varanasi, composing some major and many minor literary works, at least 22 altogether as known today. Most of which presented is a reconciliation of the Nirguna (formless god without attributes) and the Saguna (personal god with attributes/qualities). Also, the collection of his works represented Tulsidas’s prime effort to project the fundamental

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compatibility of Vaishnavism and Shaivism. To some extent, Tulsidas’s success came from his ideas at transcending the sectarian differences, as well as at synthesizing the diversity of the Hindu little/local traditions. Nowadays, one of Tulsidas’ minor work lives on quite actively in the extremely popular forty verses of the ‘Hanuman Chalisa’ – devotional hymn dedicated to Hanuman, the divine devotee of Lord Rama. Beyond that, he had also founded the Sankatmochan Temple, dedicated to Hanuman in Varanasi.

In summary, I had selected many related prominent historical figures (poets, saints, singers, philosophers, reformers) from both the south, west, north, east of India – all associated with the Bhakti movement one way or the other – incorporated each of their ideas, lives and works derived from their biographical accounts. Presenting in chronological format, as the South India Origin and the North India Influence, the bigger picture of the overall and some specific historical contexts are unfolding bits by bits through the stories of these rigorously chosen poet-saint-singers.

Sathya Sai Baba playing Manjira (finger cymbals)
CHAPTER THREE

SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT

Pan-Indian Principles of Life

As elaborated to some extent in the previous chapters that India as the largest
democratic country in the modern world, this nation has evolved out of the very complex
past in a long history of different racial, cultural groups of people living within today’s
political-geographical border. Since the Independence in 1947 from the British ruling
domination for over a hundred years, the effect of this prolonged control of India and her
people was profound and enduring even till these days. In fact, I have noticed and sensed
the Indian wounded psyche that still exists within my circle of connection, mostly among
the older generation, those who have lived through the process of struggling upheaval of
India to become a free nation whether directly or indirectly since the Gandhi era. In this
section, a mingling of description and some analyses of how the Indian diverse roots have
been negotiated and compromised into creating one modern nation like India, under a
central government coexisted by many commonly shared principles of living. Evidently,
the mainstream Indian culture derived from Hinduism, a religion that the majority of over
80% of the Indian population belong to. In a nutshell, the following quote is a portrayal of
the Indian socio-cultural scenario in general, some of which will be re-examined as more
directly related elements to the Sai Bhajan music. According to this Indian born author,
Burjor Avari, he writes:

The Hindu myths consist of everything encompassed within
human, divine and cosmic universe: nature, creation, planets, the earth,
gods, animals, birds, reincarnation of the soul, heroism, morality, lifestyle and countless themes besides. These myths have been transmitted, in India, by word of mouth over four millennia; but the public appetite for them has never waned or been fully sated, because the great storehouses of myth and legend, such as Ramayana and Mahabharata epics or the ancient texts of the Puranas, are interwoven in Indian life through folklore, festivals, literature, music, dance, drama, and now the cinema, TV and the Internet. They are reflections of human experiences and aspiration, constantly reworked through thriving media outlets. They occupy an inner sacred space. Geography has its boundaries, but the human ‘inscape’ is limitless and infinite.\footnote{Burjor Avari, \textit{India: The Ancient Past} (New York: Routledge, 2007), 11.}

Most of what mentioned in the quote above are linked to the so-called ‘Great Tradition.’ It is generally agreed by many Indian writers and western scholars that the Great Tradition is the corpus of knowledge and practices acquired through the ancient Vedic Sanskritic roots, i.e., divinely inspired texts, written records, literary works along with the socio-cultural traits, sacred rituals, including other successive derivatives that were composed in Sanskrit language since around 2,000 B.C. that is when the Aryan people came into the northwest region of India, began to organize and codify their ways of life to become a dominant factors from then and there onward. On the other hand, the little traditions are those socio-cultural, linguistic traits belong to the local and/ or indigenous tribal people living in many different regions of India. For various linguistic divisions seem rather obvious to me now, because I had observed at the weekly interaction and on special occasions among my Indian friends and acquaintances mostly in the Sai Bhajan circle. Consistently in many ways, as I had seen and witnessed my South Indian friends are more conservative and more strict about their customs, clothing, foods, family ties, ritual performance and religious worship, than those among my North Indian friends.
For the Indians by and large, most are psychologically and culturally infused with these principles of living, the ideas that were handed down from the Great Tradition over generations after generations. These tenets for a good life in a good society are still pertinent as part of the Indian socio-cultural foundation today. Based on my observations and interactions with the Indians both in South India and in the U.S., I am now convinced and ready to confirm of the underlying effect within the Indian communities that these axiomatic concepts and practices are adhered to by the majority. As a result, I would like to isolate the commonly mentioned concepts within the Sai Bhajan communities into the six principle areas, and each is separately discussed in the following:

1. **DHARMA** – This word has no exact English equivalence. Although the Sanskrit root of Dharma is *dhari*, and it means “That which maintains the stability and harmony of the universe.” A line-up of meanings and definitions include virtue, duty, morality, conduct, path of righteousness, piety, law, rule, justice, ethics, way, right conduct, right action, etc., and therefore, it seems to me that it can be rather confusing for the non-Indians to really comprehend such a deep-rooted concept of Dharma. However, the term is used often in various circumstances, and for the most part, it takes some conscious effort for human beings to follow his/ her Dharma. The soldiers’ Dharma is to fight the enemies, while Dharma of the monks and the nuns is supposed to instill peaceful environment around them. Usually it is an internal sense of knowing, something like conscience that human beings are born with, and simply follow one’s own righteous path. Then, that is what the Indians simply accept this principle of proper living, by actively do what meant to get done. This concept of Dharma is engaging and applied ubiquitously as a main
theme of the Indian culture, as it encourages the right action from people instead of passively doing nothing. In fact, what is known as Hinduism, one of the world religions today, has always been known among the intellectual Indians since the ancient time as “Sanatana Dharma” which means “Eternal law/ Eternal righteous duty/ Eternal path” and indeed, I came across at least one of my Indian acquaintances who told me, “We didn’t call ourselves Hindu, it’s the other people who called us Hindu.” This fact was reaffirmed later on when I searched the Indian historical sources.

2. KARMA – Another Sanskrit word that is difficult to translate, so it has become a borrowed term to be used as part of the English language. The definition listed in the English dictionary as fate, destiny, and this is only partially correct. Most of the Indians interpreted Karma as action, which had happened in the past that is influencing the present, or the present action that will be influencing the future. For what we call the Law of Karma, it can be understood in this popular phrase, “You reap what you sow.” In other words, it is law of action begets reaction or a consequence. Being culturally infused in this Karma concept, the Indians among others have used this term frequently enough, whenever a person gets stuck in a particular situation, or one can’t seem to find solution to a problem, then it must be his or her Karma. It is a good way to avoid blaming others for what happened to a person’s life. The idea helps keeping peace and acceptance in a society.

3. ASHRAMA – The stages of human life as a guideline in the main Indian culture, the idea seems to help all age groups of Indian people focus on what they should be spending their time on, throughout one’s lifespan. Appropriately to each stage,
the purpose is to maximize the potentials of human life at different age levels. It is also a way of organizing the Indian community. Many Indians I know, do feel comfortable and follow the Ashrama guideline, especially the top three stages in today’s world. According to the Indians, there are four stages of a human life:

a.) Brahmacharya Ashrama, begins when a child enters schooling in the early age and continues until he or she has finished all the academic pursuits. The goal is to focus on learning, acquiring knowledge, building character and good habits, to eventually become a responsible person.

b.) Grhastha Ashrama, begins at marriage when a person obtains the status as a householder. This is the most demanding stage, one must be responsible not only within one’s own family life, but also that he or she is expected to pay three debts according to the traditional Indian moral codes. The debts owed to one’s God, saints & sages as one’s guru, and one’s ancestors that should be done by way of directly serving them, offering essential services on their behalves. All the while, he or she can now enjoy good things in life, i.e., acquiring wealth (Artha), fulfilling the physical desires (Kama), and practicing one’s way to liberation (Moksha).

c.) Vanaprastha Ashrama, begins after one’s children reach the adulthood. Now he or she can gradually withdraw from the active lifestyle, should start devoting more time to study scriptures, practicing contemplation and meditation. It is the stage to become a wiser human being, living as a role model for the younger generation. A person’s success, achievement, and one’s overall behavior should inspire others in the community.
d.) Sannyasa Ashrama, begins when a person has mentally renounced all the worldly ties. He or she now spends time mostly in meditation, pondering over the mystery of life and the universe. This is a complete retirement stage of one’s life. A person may decide to become a mendicant as others had done in the past since the ancient time in India. For the globalize world today, however, the substitute for a mendicant would be a traveling retired person who freely offers his/her wisdom and expertise to help the world wherever, whenever it is needed.

4. MAYA – This word is often translated as ‘Illusion’ and perhaps, as similar to a dream, a bubble, a mirage, a moon’s reflection in a pond, etc. It can also be said that the phenomenal universe of perceived dual reality, and a lesser reality lens superimposed on the ultimate reality that is Brahman, cosmic pure consciousness. *Maya* is impermanent, illusory to the senses that cause human to draw a false conclusion. In Advaita (non-duality) Vedanta philosophy, *Maya* is limited to purely physical and mental reality in which our ego-consciousness has become entangled. Culturally and spiritually within the Sai Bhajan circle, we often talk about and practice going beyond the ego, so that one can pierce the veil of *Maya* in order to get a glimpse of the transcendental consciousness, the ultimate truth. Being aware of *Maya* effect in everyday life, most Indians around me do not take the material world seriously. Therefore, the material wealth accumulation is not the goal of living a good life. Most do spend extra time and energy to volunteer helping others in need. Practicing selfless service and giving back to the society
that sustains humanity are very common among the members of Sai Bhajan groups everywhere including the one in Pittsburgh, USA.

5. SAMSARA – The word has at least two related meanings: First, it plays a part in ‘continuous flow’ which is the repeating cycle of birth, life, death, rebirth, also known as reincarnation. Second, it refers to the world of human senses, all the worldly activities which occupy human’s time and energy, the various sufferings of ups and downs, including the agitated unsettling minds through which all perceivable things enter. Both of these meanings and their principle ideas have great influence on how the Indians behave and live their lives. Samsara arises out of ignorance (Avidya, literally not knowing). The subjective knowing oneself is more important than the objective knowledge, so human beings are not trapped or enmeshed in one’s own false sense of self. To consistently cultivate one’s higher awareness to steer clear or away from the Samara of worldly senses, will also help one achieve the cessation of reincarnation, or liberation from the sentient world.

6. MOKSHA – The other equivalent term is ‘Mukti’ meaning ‘release’ similar to the Christian’s idea of salvation. This should be the ultimate goal of human beings, and the Indians within the Sai Bhajan communities do consider this Moksha, as liberation from the Samsara cycle of reincarnation to be the highest goal in life. It is the emancipation of the individual soul, merging back to the cosmic pervasive consciousness, the absolute truth that is also called God by many. Moksha can be achieved through Bhakti (devotion), Jnana (knowledge) and Karma yoga which is the path of selfless service to subvert the ego as well as to reinforce the idea of unity in diversity. Moksha can be attained through non-attachment as not to
identify oneself with the body and mind which are transient, impermanent and subject to constant changes. Moksha is possible by removing Avidya (ignorance), and it is seen as a final release from Maya (illusion). It is said to be the ending of all human sufferings.

Evidently, all the above ideas, concepts, principles mentioned, are the cultural values that came from the Sanskrit Vedic Great Tradition. The overlapping quality in all these ideas is ubiquitous to the Pan-Indian culture, as well as truly a part of the subculture of the Sai Bhajan communities.

A souvenir shop among other stores, both indoor & outdoor
A few blocks from Prashanthi Nilayam, Puttaparthi
Shared Socio-Cultural Ideals and Practices

Among all adult Indians I have come to know personally, none will hesitate to acknowledge that the two great Indian epics, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* are the most influential as the Indian literary heritage in terms of the cultural portrayal of the Indian ideal models for proper behaviors. Therefore in this sub-topic, these two Indian poem epics are subjected to be analyzed and summarized to reveal many of the ideal conducts of the characters, and the many ways they are still in practices within the Sai Bhajan circles. Each of these well-known works are hereby presented separately in the following:

**RAMAYANA** – This is the story of Rama, the main character’s name + ayana (going, or advancing). The title was translated as ‘Rama’s journey or Rama’s way’ and the story was eventually written down following the folk tales about Rama within the Indian oral tradition had already been going on for a very long time. The Indian traditionally claimed the historical root went back to at least 10,000 or more years ago. According to the Indian ancient cosmology on ‘Yuga’ meaning ‘eon, age, epoch’ – there are four Yuga time cycles, occurring as a part of the world creation. Each Yuga may last somewhere between 3,000 to 6,000 years long, mainly because there is no clear consensus among the various experts at this juncture in time. Although, it is clear that Rama’s story happened in Treta Yuga (Silver Age), followed by Dvapara Yuga (Bronze Age) when Krishna was the heroic figure, and the current epoch is called Kali Yuga (Iron/ Dark Age) in which Sathya Sai Baba was claimed as the main influential figure by the estimated fifteen millions of his followers. To further clarify the concept of Yuga, here is how Dallapiccola described this term:
yuga (s) ‘age of the world’ There are four yugas in each cycle of creation. These are the KRITA of Satya yuga, the TRETA yuga, the DVAPARA yuga and the present KALI yuga, or age of Kali, at the end of which the universe will disappear in an enormous conflagration; after a period of rest, the cycle will recommence. After the first yuga, which is a ‘golden age’, progressive deterioration sets in: the yugas become shorter, as does human life, and moral standards decline. The sum total of the human years constituting a complete cycle, or mahayuga, is 4,32 million. One thousand mahayugas make up a KALPA.18

Presumably to be so ancient in an Indian oral tradition, the legendary Rama’s story was first written down through smriti (from memory) and the work was attributed to a sage named Valmiki. Sage Valmiki’s Ramayana was originally composed in 24,000 Sanskrit verses in rhyming couplets called Slokas, and these verses were organized into 500 chapters called Sargas, then all chapters were grouped into a total of seven books called Kandas. A notable feature of these Sanskrit verses is the arrangement of a 32 syllable-meter called Anustup that has become an important influence on later Sanskrit poetry on Hindu life and culture. From a genuine classical Sanskrit poetry of North India, the Ramayana had subsequently spread throughout other regions of India, then variegated and evolved into several regional linguistic versions. Beyond India however, Ramayana epic has also taken roots in many Southeast Asian countries, particularly in Thailand, Cambodia and Indonesia. The Thai adapted version called ‘Ramakien’ had been absorbed into the Thai culture, as an integral part of educational curricular in Thai school systems. From my time of growing up in Thailand, I can still remember learning how to recite with few tonal chanting of the Ramakien poetry during my middle school years there. Thai classical arts, dramas, theaters, literatures, even the current king and also the Thai Royal

Dynasty had the word ‘Rama’ attached to their honorific titles. Undeniably, the Indian strong deep-rooted culture along with the story of Rama had been seamlessly weaved into many other cultures in the Southeast Asia over the past centuries.

For a synopsis: the story is about Prince Rama whose fate from a background narrative of twist and turn due to his father’s promise to his stepmother’s wishes, Rama chose to abdicate his claim to the throne of Ayodhya Kingdom. As the main character with noble quality, Rama exiled himself into the forest accompanied by his faithful wife Sita and his devoted stepbrother Lakshmana for fourteen years. During his exile, Rama had confronted with other minor characters, good and bad in the guise of part mythical, part magical of various kinds. Rama somehow managed to overcome and fought off the demonic world around him. But then as a revenge, his wife Sita was eventually lured and abducted by the monstrous demon, king Ravana of Lanka, which referred to the country Sri Lanka, an island off the southern tip of India. However, while searching for Sita, and with the help of a special creature (Jatayu the vulture king), Rama and Lakshmana found out exactly where Sita was imprisoned in Lanka. So Rama along with Lakshmana made an alliance with the mighty monkey leader, Hanuman assumed a generalship in charge of an army of monkeys in thousands. A plan to rescue Sita was in place, and the monkeys helped building a causeway across from the mainland to Lanka. The scenes of fierce battle ensued, and they fought with all kinds of power and magical tricks. Then, based on the explanation by Nooten who writes, “In the end, as can be expected, the good are victorious and it is at this point that Rama discovers his divine antecedents. He is an incarnation of the great god Vishnu who has come on earth to save mankind from
oppression by demonic forces.”

Indeed, all the Indian sources on Ramayana that I have come across, deified Rama as the 7th out of 10 incarnations of Lord Vishnu (one of the highest Trinity, or Trimurti of Indian gods), the other two are called Brahma and Shiva.

For the epilogue: After the 14 years in exile, Rama and Sita returned to Ayodhya in a glorious fanfare. Rama was finally crowned the king who ruled with exemplary model in justice and fairness. But then the gossip about Sita’s purity during the abduction had spread, creating doubts in peoples including Rama’s mind. Sita was asked to exile on her own into the forest. While living among other kind ascetics, Sita gave birth to Rama’s two children, Kusa and Lava. Both of these Rama’s children were taken care of by the great poet-sage Valmiki himself, who over time had taught both to recite the great story of their father in the Ramayana. Interestingly, this is how the writer Valmiki became on the characters, Valmiki put himself as part of the story itself. How fascinating!

In today’s modern India, the story of Ramayana continues to inspire people of all regions in India. There are two popular national festivities linking to the two events in the Ramayana epic. One is called Dasara, or Dussehra – based on the Sanskrit Dasha-hara meaning ‘remover of bad fate’ which is a 4 to 5 day celebration happening annually in October, with regional favors. It is the occasion to commemorate the siege of Lanka and Rama’s victory over the demonic Ravana, symbolized the triumph of good over evil. For most Indians, it is the time to re-tell, re-enact, re-watch the drama, theater, and the movies dealing with the story of Ramayana all over again. Typically, toward the end of the festival, bonfires are built so that the paper or wood effigies of the evil Ravana can be burnt to ashes. In the spirit of the good winning over the bad, the Sai Bhajan communities do celebrate the

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Dasara as a special event in India being a part of the mainstream. Another second popular event as the all Indian national day of celebration is called Diwali, or Deepavali – derived from the Sanskrit Deepa-avali meaning ‘a row of lights or lamps’ which also plays a part as a culmination of the 10 day Navaratri spiritual observation. Usually according to the Indian calendar, Diwali is celebrated 18 days after Dasara. It is the festival of lights and fireworks, partly as a celebration of Rama and Sita’s homecoming to their kingdom in Ayodhya after 14 years in exile. Many big cities in Indian are festively decorated with lights everywhere. It also coincides with the ending of the harvest time. However, the Sai Bhajan communities tend to celebrate with an inward significance in mind, concentrating on the awareness of the inner light, as the awakening of the divinity within oneself rather than getting trapped in the external illusive world.

The word ‘Rama’ is particularly very special to Sai devotees, and by adding the word ‘Sai’ to ‘Rama’ becomes ‘Sai Ram’ is constantly used whenever the Sai devotee greets one another. Also, this compound ‘Sairam’ has become a mantra to lots of Sai followers. During my first few visits to the ashram of Sathya Sai Baba, I was so intrigue to hear this ‘Sairam’ uttering everywhere around me. I did not understand why so often the word ‘Sairam’ was repeated as substitute for saying excuse me, thank you, etc. but now I can really appreciate that practical purpose and sometimes even use the word as a mantra myself, in order to ward off the evil spirit. Textually, the Sai Bhajan songs encompass a huge proportion dedicated to Lord Rama, with his righteous action (Dharma), which means one can see the words ‘Rama, Sita, Ayodhya’ in the lyrics of Sai Bhajan songs from the musical transcriptions in the last chapter.
Why is the story of Ramayana so captivating? Beside the aesthetics of the classical Sanskrit rhyming poetry, it is a story that most of ordinary Indian people can relate to. It teaches the values of devotion, duty, relationships, as well as a portrayal of ideal characters, like the ideal son, ideal brother, ideal wife, ideal king, and ideal servant. Here again, it is best summed up, as described in the following by Nooten:

What can this popularity be attributed to? Among several factors, perhaps the most important is the characterization of the Ramayana. It is a work of exemplars, of models of good behavior which people in distress and frustration, when doubts assail them, can follow and imitate with beneficial results. We have Rama, the noble and virtuous prince whose supreme heroism lies not so much in the fact that he conquers his enemies, but in the fact that he stoically and dispassionately endures the greatest hardships, including rejection and calumny on the part of his nearest family. Sita too is a non-heroine: she is the constant victim of fate but all through her tribulations she remains faithful to her husband and does what he wants. She has become a model that pious Hindu women attempt to copy down to the present day.\(^\text{20}\)

**MAHABHARATA** – This is a unique work, one of a kind that achieves the status of the longest epic in the world literatures. According to the Hindu historical tradition, the current Kali Yuga began with the death of Krishna (one of the main characters in the Mahabharata) more than 5,000 years ago. Many Indian scholars put the date at 3102 B.C.E. as the beginning of the Kali Yuga, also referred to as the Dark or Iron Age. The title *Mahabharata*, literally meaning ‘the great story of India’ contains the main theme centering on a heroic narrative about the struggle for sovereignty between the two related clans. The Pandavas and the Kauravas were the two groups of cousins at war with one another. Even more intriguing is the fact that Vyasa, meaning ‘compiler’ was attributed as the author who also appeared in the story as the grandfather of these two adversarial clans.

\(^{20}\) Ibid, xvi.
The twist and turn of life were so complex that Vyasa, not only compiled the story but was also aware of the past and the future of all characters and even assisted them with solutions when dilemma occurred. Therefore, one can treat the *Mahabharata* to be a moral and philosophical tale, over the centuries has been woven into the fabric of the Indian culture concerning the meanings of life. The story probes into the moral, ethical principles through characters that include heroes, villains, saints, kings, beautiful women, the rich and the destitute personalities, etc. Such human drama displaying recognizable various human qualities like extreme endurance, powerful spirit, incredible strength as well as sinister behavior, tremendous weakness, all these and more against the backdrops of the ancient royal capitals, forests, mountains and other real natural settings. As many Indian scholars have mentioned that it is commonly known, whatever happened here could be found elsewhere, and whatever is not here, is probably nowhere else. Being the longest epic poem ever, the *Mahabharata* according to most Indian scholars, was composed and compiled from around 300 B.C.E to 300 C.E., it contains 100,000 verses (couplets of two line stanza). All these were grouped into 18 parvans (books), in which the main story culminated in an 18 days of the ancient great battle among the 18 armies. The total length of *Mahabharata* is about 7 times the length of the famous Greek epics, the Iliad and the Odyssey combined.

Aside from the main story of war, the *Mahabharata* contains also many side roads and detours of other human stories that may or may not related to the main story. Some of which are entitled, *The Story of the Deluge, The Story of Nala and Damayanti, The Story of Savtrri and Satyavan*, but the most important of all is *The Bhagavad Gita* which is related to the main story. Highly esteemed as one of the sacred scriptures, the
Indians generally adhere to the teachings of Krishna in the Bhagavad Gita. Literally, the title means The Divine Song, or Song of the Lord, which is presented in a dialogue format between Krishna, an Avatar (God) incarnated and Arjuna (a warrior) as an individual soul, all verses are reflected as a long pause of conversation in the face of the inevitable killings in the battle field of Kurukshetra. The significance of Bhagavad Gita, which contains a basic philosophical system of the Indian practical spirituality becomes one of the most popular references, and frequently quoted material whenever there is a dilemma in everyday life of most Indians. For the Sai Bhajan communities, not only it is often talked about and referred to in short as the Gita, the lyrics in some of the Sai Bhajan songs actually used the word ‘Gita’ while Krishna as god is one of the main focus of the song text. Further details on the core values and practices based on the Bhagavad Gita will be discussed in the next chapter on the spiritual context.

In the end, all the main characters and more than one hundred other minor characters in the Mahabharata had died off, all in their own karmic ways. According to Narayan who writes, “Krishna himself departed as he had prophesied. On the bank of a river, while he was resting in deep thought, lying on the sands, a hunter from a distance mistook the soles of his feet for a bird and shot an arrow, thus ending the tenure of the eighth avatar of Vishnu on earth.”21 One interesting fact that has emerged in the past few decades, concerning Krishna’s City of Dwaraka that sank into the sea mentioned in the story of Mahabharata, has been confirmed by the underwater archaeology project in the recent time, which indeed, had found a massive structure of a city submerged in the Gulf of Arabian off the southern shore of India. Undoubtedly, there existed today, some real

physical evidences of the historical origin of the \textit{Mahabharata}. The Hindus believed and deified Krishna as one of the highest ranking of God in human form called \textit{Purna Avatar}, who had lived in the Dwapara Yuga (the Bronze Age) following the previous reign of Rama, also considered to be a \textit{Purna Avatar} during the Treta Yuga (the Silver Age) in the story of \textit{Ramayana}.

Because it is a prolong length of time for the \textit{Mahabharata} being composed from the beginning to the completion of this beautifully written Sankrit epic poem. Most western scholars including me can reasonably argue that there were more than one author, most likely many writers who assumed the name of Vyasa to compose this epic over the centuries. Besides, the given timeframe of the \textit{Mahabharata} overlapped with the \textit{Ramayana} when both of these epics were composed. In part, it is the fact that the Sanskrit language had been fully developed around that time also. The \textit{Mahabharata} was dubbed as the heart of the Indian culture, while the \textit{Ramayana} was said to be the soul of the Indian culture. The central values are the integral part of the Indian noblest heritages. Similar to the \textit{Ramayana}, the Indians look to the \textit{Mahabharata} as a guiding force that contains code of living, philosophy of social and ethical standards. The ideas of Dharma and Karma are reinforced in the \textit{Mahabharata} through the acceptance of one’s life slot, a tendency assigned at birth, then simply acting out one’s role to the best possible within one’s own capacity as part of this inter-related worlds. The ultimate goal is to attain the everlasting peace, freedom from rebirth, achieving Moksha (the final liberation of a soul) merging back to the supreme divine principle, the Brahman.
As an anecdote to conclude the dominant Indian multi-layers of thoughts influenced by the *Mahabharata*, the illusory nature of human life and other worldly phenomena must be experienced and recognized. Narayan explains:

When Vyasa had the epic all complete in his mind, he invoked Brahma, the Creator, and explained, “I have composed a poem which is vast. Therein are revealed the mystery and the subtleties of the Vedas and Upanishads; descriptions of creeds and modes of life; the history of past, present, and future; rules for the four castes; the essence of the Puranas, of asceticism, and rules for the acolyte; the dimensions of the sun, moon, and stars; a description of the four yugas; the definition of charity, the subject of the incarnation of souls for specific purposes; the sciences and the healing of sickness; also a description of places of pilgrimage, of rivers, mountains, and forests, and of heavenly cities and palaces; the art of war; descriptions of different nations, their languages, and their qualities; and of the all-pervading universal spirit.” And at this stage Brahma said, “Call on Ganesha. He is the one fittest to take Down your poem as you recite it.”

To me, the *Mahabharata*, not only is a reflection of the Indian inquisitive minds, but also applied well to the sophistication of the human mind in the quest to pursue knowledge, to understand our own complex selves as well as the surrounding natural environment, and the phenomenal world of our own existence.

![The emblem of the Five main Human Values based on Sathya Sai Baba’s Teachings](image)

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22 Ibid, x.
Human Values, Educare and Selfless Service

One of the primary attractions for me about the socio-cultural context around Sai Bhajan songs beyond the music itself is the emphasis on the five main human values of the Sathya Sai worldwide organization. These five human values are: Truth (Sathya), Love (Prema), Peace (Shanti), Right Conduct (Dharma) and Non-Violence (Ahimsa), and all had been etched to become one the representative emblems of the Sathya Sai Centers. The other emblem is consisted of the five symbols of the world major religions, viz., Zoroastra, Hinduism, Buddhism, Islam, and Christianity. Each of these five main values also contains a long string of sub-values. For examples, some of the sub-values of Love are Caring, Compassion, Consideration, Dedication, Devotion, Empathy, Forbearance, Forgiveness, Sacrifice, Selflessness, Sharing, etc. Some of the sub-values of Truth are Accuracy, Discrimination, Honesty, Integrity, Intuition, Reason, Self-awareness, Self-reflection, etc. Some of the sub-values of Peace are Calmness, Contentment, Equanimity, Gratitude, Humility, Patience, Self-acceptance, Self-control, Self-discipline, Self-respect, etc. Some of the sub-values of Right Conduct are Courage, Conscience, Dependability, Duty, Manners, Efficiency, Endurance, Helpfulness, Kindness, Perseverance, Ingenuity, Resourcefulness, etc. Some of the sub-values of Non-Violence are Justice, Citizenship, Cooperation, Equality, Interdependence, Loyalty, Morality, Service, Unity, etc. All the good qualities that all human should cultivate throughout one’s life are for achieving an ideal life and a foundation to attain the next stage which is the merging with the divinity.

In practice on a weekly basis, every Saturday afternoon at Sathya Sai Center of Pittsburgh, the adult members are collectively holding a session called ‘Study Circle’ for an exchange of experience, knowledge, ideas that will help each other to become a better
human being, usually related to the human values mentioned above. Meanwhile, the children from all grade levels, divided into four groups of 1-3, 4-6, 7-9, 10-12 grade levels for classes dedicated to study Human Values in a sequential format as follows:

1.) Quotation/ Thought for the Week
2.) Silent Sitting/ Tuning In
3.) Group Singing
4.) Story Telling
5.) Group Activities/ Life Application

So then, what is Educare? The concept of ‘educare’ which means ‘to reveal from within’ is like the internal education as opposed to the external education (worldly education) that is limited to bookish intellectual knowledge, information and facts. With ‘educare,’ which is directly related to the human values, it is a process of developing fine human character. It fosters genuine goodness from within. It helps cultivating/ refining good thoughts, good feelings, good actions and eradicating harmful tendencies. It is also internally heartfelt, action-oriented, and ultimately it evolves into a transformation. Here, the difference between ‘educare’ and worldly ‘education’ are explained by Sathya Sai Baba himself this way:

The word “Educare” has a sacred inner meaning. That which is manifested by “Educare” cannot be seen by the eyes, cannot be heard by the ears, and cannot be felt by the mind. But all that education confers can be seen, heard, and felt. Education fosters desires and leads to rebirth, whereas “Educare” confers immortality. There will be no rebirth. The innate divine qualities like truth, righteousness, peace, patience, forbearance, and love cannot be seen by the naked eye and they lead to no birth. Modern education is giving rise to desires, which form the basis for rebirth. You need to develop detachment to control desires. Attachment leads to bondage and restlessness. The innate values alone can control the desires. Inner voice leads to detachment. You have to inquire into the difference between attachment and detachment. To attain detachment, you must obtain release
from worldly bondage.\textsuperscript{23}

The socio-cultural aspect of education as an integral part of the Sathya Sai organization has spread widely not only in India, but there are many flourishing ‘Sathya Sai Schools’ in other countries as well. Today, the ideas of integrating human values into the curricular in the regular schools outside the Sathya Sai communities have been widely explored and some, such as the Thai Educational Ministry has implemented many levels of moral studies in the grade schools as a part of the national policy. By adopting the outlines of Sathya Sai’s teachings on human values, any school anywhere can offer a more complete education for building characters alongside with the intellectual pursuit.

Based on my direct observation at the Sathya Sai Center in Pittsburgh, I have seen how the classes on human values are interwoven with the Indian cultural heritage. Children members usually play important part during many special events marked in the calendar of the Sathya Sai organization. Children are taught to sing Sai Bhajan songs, learn to act, dramatize, play the roles of the iconic figures such as Rama, Krishna, Jesus Christ, etc. This type of cultural programs is organized throughout the year for a specific occasion in the Pittsburgh area. However, the main head quarter in India, at the ashram of Sathya Sai Baba called Prashanti Nilayam, the cultural programs are presented by groups of pilgrimage as a routine from all over India and from other countries, almost daily these days, usually in the late afternoon before the Sai Bhajan singing session involving the congregated mass happens.

Officially organized, Sathya Sai Baba had established three wings, namely Devotional Wing, Educational Wing, and Services Wing, as equally important in terms of

\textsuperscript{23} Sathya Sai Speaks on Education: A Compilation of the Teachings of Sathya Sai Baba on Education (Tustin, CA: Sathya Sai Book Center of America, 2002), 96.
opportunities provided and their operations. These three wings correspond with the three pathways to God, which are mentioned in the *Bhagavad Gita*, so-called *Bhakti Yoga* (path of Devotion), *Jnana Yoga* (path of Knowledge), *Karma Yoga* (path of Action/Services).

All the three branches of Yoga (meaning ‘Union with God’) are the processes that human can access to reach the realization of God within. Since the Sai Bhajan singing belongs to the path of Devotion, the other two wings or paths can be seen as socio-cultural context that is operating supportively with one another.

To further expound on the link between culture and education, here is how Sathya Sai Baba again, put it in the following perspective:

> Education with culture brings about the blossoming of human personality. Good thoughts, good feelings, and good behavior together constitute culture. Man’s conduct should be sacred. Man’s thoughts should be noble and refined. Man’s feelings should be oriented towards bringing about society’s welfare, nay the welfare of the entire humanity. It is not sufficient if the student is endowed with the physical, scientific, and worldly knowledge. He should have moral, ethical, and spiritual knowledge also. The Indian culture aims at developing human beings with such a total personality. The main aim of education is to bring about such a total personality development of the students. Education should make all virtues emerge and shine forth in students.\(^\text{24}\)

The two most popular sayings, used often together as a motto for the Sathya Sai organization is “Love All Serve All – Help Ever Hurt Never” which emphasizes the practical aspect of a human life that is given for serving and helping one another, it is the guiding post for the right conduct. Another one of Sathya Sai Baba’s sayings that has a huge influence on motivating people to perform services for the welfare of the society is “Hands that help are holier than lips that pray” - as I have witnessed many service projects by the Sathya Sai Center in the Pittsburgh area. Almost on a weekly basis, there are Sai

\(^{24}\) Ibid, 79.
members who volunteer as a group to do services on Soup Kitchen for the needy, packing medical supplies to the poorer countries, visiting nursing home to talk and sing with them. On the regional, national and worldwide levels, the selfless services rendered by the Sai Organization are impressive, especially in the medical field for the humanitarian purpose. As I have witnessed, Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings have attracted plenty of medical doctors into the fold. My estimate is that about one third of the members at the Pittsburgh Sathya Sai Center came from variety of the medical profession. Another one third came from the high-tech, scientific profession. The rest came from a mixed, various other backgrounds.

Sathya Sai Baba repeatedly said that he is always more concerned about the quality, rather than quantity. Hereby, I would like to sum up this section with Sathya Sai Baba’s own words concerning service, “You have to engage yourselves in Seva (Service). Service does not mean mere rendering help to others of one kind or another. True service means participation in social activities after ridding yourself of egoism and possessiveness and manifesting your qualities of compassion and kindness. The aim is the refinement of your own good nature rather than giving succor to others.”25 Lastly, one more additional phrase derived from Sathya Sai Baba’s discourse that I find it to be worthwhile mentioning here, “In rendering service, see that you do it for the satisfaction of your conscience and not to impress others. Treating service as an offering to the Divine, do it perfectly. Remember that God is watching every one of your actions. Be your own watchman to scrutinize what

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you do. When you do everything to satisfy your conscience, you are well on the way to Self-Realization.”

For a pertinent conclusion to this Chapter Three, the following is a beautiful axiomatic saying by Sathya Sai Baba that can be both idealistic and inspirational at the same time, in which I love to contemplate on. The words became lyrics in a simple tune:

When there is righteousness in the heart, there is beauty in the character
When there is beauty in the character, there is harmony in the home
When there is harmony in the home, there is order in the nation
When there is order in the nation, there is peace in the world

- Baba -

An entrance gate into the city of Puttaparthi, displaying the symbols of The 5 major world religions: Christianity, Hinduism, Buddhism, Zoroastrian, Islam

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CHAPTER FOUR

SPIRITUAL CONTEXT

Ancient Indian Scriptures

The most ancient texts written in the Vedic Sanskrit language, known widely among the Indians are these four collections of the so-called the Vedas, namely:

1. Rig-Veda, which concerns mostly on the hymns about our universe
2. Yajur-Veda, which deals more about the proper sacrificial formulas
3. Sama-Veda, which is a treatise on the chants and tunes in music
4. Atharva-Veda, which probes into the magic and scientific speculation.

As a visionary source, the Vedas began with the oral tradition among the Aryan people who settled in the northeast of India since around 3,000 B.C.E. The word ‘Veda’ derived from the Sanskrit root ‘Vid’ meaning ‘to know’ and therefore ‘Veda’ means ‘knowledge.’ Originally, the Vedas were generated through ‘Shruti’ meaning that which had been heard or revealed to the Aryan bards, sages and seers of the past. Most historians put Vedic period roughly from 1,500 to 600 B.C.E. to be the timeframe during which the Aryan settlers of the priestly class began to observe the universe around them, along with its natural phenomena like the sun, the moon, thunder, lightning, fire, etc. Their awe struck encounters gave rise to contemplation, intuitive ideas that became knowledge. Then later, the deification of the natural forces is a way to make sense of the cosmological worlds they perceived. Thus, the hymns or mantras in praise, in prayer and in meditation arise and have since been recited, chanted and sung ever since, for many
millennia as an offering to their various gods of natural phenomena. For example, some of the names of their gods are: Indra (god of rain, thunderbolt and lightning), Agni (god of fire and sacrifice), Varuna (god of sky, heavens and sea), Surya (the sun), Savitri (Illuminating sun-god), Pushan (god/guardian of flocks and herds), Usha (goddess of dawn), Rudra (god of healing, caring for disease and disaster), Vishnu (one of the solar god, later was promoted as the preserver of the worlds), Mitra (god of vows associated with Varuna), Soma (god of vision and joy derived from drinking intoxicated juice came from Soma, the native plant as a part of the rituals), etc.

The names of these gods are mentioned in the Rig-Veda that comprised of 1028 hymns (mantras). The word Rig means ‘to praise’ and traditionally, Rig-Veda holds the foremost important position among all the Vedas. The collections of the Vedas were written down in Vedic Sanskrit texts from around 500 B.C.E. and eventually the Hindu Indians accepted the Vedas as a part of their authoritative sacred scriptures among others. In my observation, most of the Sai Bhajan musical-ritual practices derived from Hinduism and Brahmanism, that is why the chanting of Vedic hymns are highly encouraged as a Veda revival within the Sai communities. Ubiquitously, what has now become the most relevant chant is called ‘Gayatri Mantra’ that came from the Rig-Veda texts. Indeed, this chant is also very popular as the pan-Indian mantra, especially for the Pittsburgh Sathya Sai center where consistently, it is chanted during the concluding segment every Saturday, as the integral part of the Sai Bhajan session. Today the Gayatri Mantra can be claimed as globally known among the spiritual aspirants, and therefore the following sample is meant to illustrate that claim of its neutrality. These short versified phrases below are the version I have been chanting with the Sai Bhajan groups over the past several years:
Om Bhur Bhuvah Svaha Tat Savitur Varenyam
Bhargo Devasya Dhimahi Dhiyo Yonah Prachodayat

Om Shanti Shanti Shantihi

My interpretive translation of the above five phrases that had now been incorporated into chanting this English version immediately after the Sanskrit version, as accepted by the Pittsburgh Sathya Sai center is as follows:

Om - Lord, you’ve wakened my intellect, you have dispelled my ignorance.
As powerful sunlight shines on darkness, I pray to be serene and bright.

Om Peace Peace Peace to all

The appeal of Gayatri Mantra chant is due to the fact that no specific god’s name is mentioned and hence, it is called the universal mantra. Clearly, the notion of a super powerful single force and/ or the idea of one supreme God have already been recognized since the Vedic time or earlier, even among many various gods’ names that were created for specific ritualistic purposes. This same idea of the One supreme Reality as a principle has lingered on, a sustaining thought recurring throughout the long history of the Indian spiritual-philosophical development until the present time. Ultimately, this leads to the concept of gods that has two aspects: Saguna (God appears in different names and forms) and Nirguna (God is a formless entity). These two mutually complementary perspectives have been scrutinized and frequently expounded for centuries in the Indian spiritual-philosophical literatures as inspired by the Vedas. In fact, when I did examine closely to the Indian words of the Sai Bhajan texts, the two aspects or qualities of God are often reflected in the lyrics of my transcriptions in the last chapter.
Rig-Veda being the most ancient text has been revered as the mother (root) of all other Indian knowledge and wisdom. That is why Rig-Veda was looked upon as the ultimate, authoritative, spiritual source that was followed by a vast corpus of other Indian spiritual/philosophical literatures. The versified texts imbedded with poetical sublime of the Rig-Veda was construed as so powerful in its words and the visionary images, that it has inspired tremendous amount of other literatures, i.e. in commentaries, summaries, and the different interpretations of the Vedas. Generally accepted, these later three principal, complementary texts include Brahmanas, Aranyakas and the Upanishads (considered to be the cream of the Vedas) that represent the important stage of the development of the Indian spiritual-philosophical thoughts. All of these three branches are classified as part of the Vedic literatures. Although there are over 200 with the Upanishad as part of the titles, only about a dozen of them are widely recognized as being seriously studied by the prominent Indian experts and some international scholars. The Brahmanas, Aranyakas and the Upanishads are often overlapped, according to the Indian author, C. G. Kashikar, who writes:

The *Aranyakas* are so called because they were works to be studied in the forest in contradistinction to the regular *Brahmanas* which were to be studied in the village. These also contain ritual explanations and allegorical speculations. The *Aranyakas* form a natural transition to the speculation of the *Upanishads*. Thus these three classes of works, the *Brahmanas* proper, the *Aranyakas* and the *Upanishads* mark three consecutive Stages.

In form and spirit, both the *Aranyakas* and *Upanishads* constitute a literature of transition; the *Aranyakas* approach towards the forest, search for knowledge and asceticism, for as yet they do not clearly spell out any doctrine as the *Upanishads* of the succeeding age sometimes do.\(^{27}\)

Furthermore, the Upanishads are also called the Vedanta (as the ending part or the culmination of the Vedas) and many Indian religions can be traced back to the source of principal doctrines found in the Upanishads. Whereas the Brahmanas (mostly written in prose) are seen as the elucidation and interpretations of the Veda and while Aranyakas are all about the esoteric meaning of rituals and sacrifices. The Upanishads generally express the spiritual meaning and human journey toward the divine essence, as the vehicles for self-knowledge and illumination. Indeed, it is the highest wisdom of the Upanishads that is very much alive as they are still relevant to the human spiritual progress today. In my own experience with the Sai Bhajan music and the extension in the study circle groups, selected topics and the passages derived from the Upanishads as explained by Sathya Sai Baba are often shared, discussed and contemplated on. Not surprisingly, many reputable Indian spiritual sages, seers and scholars, viz., Shankara, Ramanuja, Madhava, Vallabha, Nimbarka, Sri Aurobindo, Vivekananda, Sri Sathya Sai Baba, among others had already expounded extensively on the complexity of many spiritual concepts that are considered to be worthwhile, profound and useful knowledge as extracted from the Upanishads.

Beyond the Vedas and the Upanishads, two other significant sources that have a direct impact on the Sai Bhajan song texts, are Bhagavad Gita, and the Puranas. Each of these is summarized as follows:

**Bhagavad Gita** – These two words can be translated literally as ‘The Lord’s Song’ or as ‘Song of the Glorious One’ and sometimes as ‘Song Celestial’ to some people. This was treated almost like the Indian Bible because of its popularity among the Sai spiritual aspirants. The instructional text is a dialogue between Krishna (God incarnated) and his
closest devotee named Arjuna in the middle of the battlefield at Kurukshetra, as a part of
the long story of the famous Mahabharata epic. When the fighting was about to begin,
Arjuna was stricken with sorrow and confusion about his duty to kill as a warrior. So
Arjuna asked Krishna for guidance and also as the charioteer who answered Arjuna’s
questions on things that troubled his mind. These questions and answers probe into the
meaning of human life, which became the basis of spiritual lessons not only for Arjuna,
but also a way to liberation (Moksha) similar to the Christian’s idea of salvation for all
other spiritual seekers. Sathya Sai Baba himself often talked about the Gita, in short for
Bhagavad Gita with highest regards in his numerous discourses. Over time, there are so
many interpretations of Gita by various scholars, but the one most applicable to human
experiences is the allegorical treatment of the field as inner self, in which the battlefield
being interpreted as human mind struggling with the moral, ethical problems in everyday
life. Whenever the good and the evil forces stand in confrontation with one another in
human mind, then the spiritual insight from the Gita becomes an illuminating guide for
self-discovery. Gita contains 18 chapters in 700 verses, and each chapter has the title
ending with the word ‘yoga’ meaning ‘union with God’ through many methods. The main
three progressive paths are Karma (action/duty), Bhakti (devotion/worship), and Jnana
(knowledge/wisdom). The author of Gita was ascribed to sage Vyasa, the same compiler
of the Mahabharata epic, and scholars put the date between 5th – 2nd centuries B.C.E. when
it was written. The text was classified as a ‘Smriti’ meaning ‘that which is remembered’
from the story previously told in the oral tradition. During this timeframe, the emergence
of Jainism and Buddhism are a threat to the Vedic Brahmanism, therefore, Gita is a Hindu
synthesis of the authoritative Vedas with the integration of other Indian traditions,
emerging thoughts and religions based on a common analysis among many historical scholars. Clearly, Gita has contributed to the adaptive, progressive stage of Hinduism with additional timeless spiritual values for all.

**Puranas** – The title ‘Purana’ means ‘old, ancient’ is considered to be another important Indian quasi-historical works. It is classified in the ‘Itihasa’ meaning ‘historical sources’ similar to the stories of Ramayana and Mahabharata. It contains some essence from the Vedas, and it aims at reaching the minds of the masses, to more ordinary people who may not have the intellectual capacity to grasp the lofty concepts of the Vedas and the subtle complexity of philosophy in the Upanishads. Evidently, Puranas written in a simpler and easier style to understand for most Indians are very popular and often quoted from. But each Purana (total around 18-20 books) may have varying degrees of difficulty. They are part of the Sanskrit ‘Smriti’ works, derived from various local oral traditions alongside the Vedic Upashadic roots. In general, scholars estimate the date from 4th century B.C.E. to about 1,000 C.E. as a composite range when Puranas were written down. Puranas may be looked upon as the encyclopedia of Indian religions and various local cultures, primarily because some elements of Jainism and Buddhism are included in some of the stories. The Vedic gods are at this point transformed or evolved into the Hindu Trinity, or Trimurti of Brahma (creator), Vishnu (sustainer) and Shiva (destroyer/transformer) and these three main gods of Trimurti are mentioned in many of the Sai Bhajan texts. Indeed, Puranas contain a vast collection of Hindu lore along with spiritual-social practices such as, yoga, chants, prayers, puja worship, ceremonies, festivals, pilgrimage places plus everyday arts, crafts and customs. Although traditionally, Puranas are most concerned with five themes: 1) primary creation/cosmology; 2) secondary recreation after periodic destruction; 3) the
reign of Manu (First human); 4) genealogy of gods, goddesses, kings, saints & sages; and 5) history of solar and lunar dynasties. Moreover, according to this Indian author, TRS Sharma, he writes – “From the puranas, their focus on the glorification of a particular god, it is an easy slide to stotra literature. The puranic and the post-puranic hymns, in a way, continue the tradition of the Vedic hymns but innovate to combine the lyrical and the devotional. Here the concept of bhakti plays an influential role in the shaping of the hymn.”

Conventionally, most scholars refer to Maha-Puranas (total of 18 great major collections) and Upa-Puranas (subsidiary, or minor collections) in which each of the 18 books is matched with the 18 major Maha-Puranas. They are further divided into three groups, each consisted of six Puranas. Each group is allotted to glorify Brahma, Vishnu and Shiva (three main gods in Trimurti). On the other hand, there are few scholars who preferred to sort through Puranas based on the three Gunas/ basic qualities of, 1) Sathwa (purity, light, calm, balance); 2) Rajas (attachment, restlessness, passion), and 3) Tamas (inertia, heavy, dullness). All of these qualities are usually applied to the three stages, or natural tendencies of all things, especially human beings. The goal of human life is to attain the quality of Sathwa, as a preparation to the next higher stage of spiritual progress. For many Indian religious traditions, the final goal is Moksha (liberation), to be free from the cycles of birth and death, merging back to the Absolute Supreme (the One Reality or One Divine Principle that most Indian people called God).

The variety of subject matters in the Puranas can be practical, instructional, and more easily accessible to the minds of Indian people then and now. One can find

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something there captivating and useful for one’s own purpose, or for different types of like-minded population. Above all, Puranas are credited for keeping the spiritual, social and religious life of Indians strong and thriving. But the most pertinent part linking to the Sai Bhajan music, is the idea of Bhakti (devotion and love toward gods) that had initially been disseminated. The Puranas has been one of the factors contributed to the pervasive spread of the Bhakti movement ever since.

Banners displaying Sathya Sai Baba’s popular quotations in Puttaparthi

A banner in Japanese language along the main street in Puttaparthi
The Teachings of Sathya Sai Baba

The word ‘Sathya’ means Truth; ‘Sai’ breaks down to ‘Sa’ means Divine and ‘ai or ayi’ means Mother, while ‘Baba’ refers to Father. Therefore, Sathya Sai Baba’s name and his mission can be interpreted as ‘A Divine Mother Father whose mission is to teach his followers about the Absolute Truth and the ways to get there.’ Sathya Sai Baba was born in a small town called Puttaparthi as Sathya Narayan Raju. At the age of 14, this precocious boy declared himself to be ‘Sai Baba’ as the incarnation of ‘Shirdi Sai Baba’ who had passed away eight years before Sathya Sai Baba was born in 1926, and had lived until 2011. The next Sai incarnation will be Prema Sai Baba who has yet to come. The phenomena of the Sai Triple incarnation had been foretold according to Sathya Sai Baba who had mentioned this in his discourses. Because of Kali Yuga, the current epoch of humanity, it is the worst of all time when humanity has spiraled downward to moral and spiritual decay. Therefore, the Sai Avatars have to come back in three successions to lift humanity up toward the divine principle again, in order for human to become like God and ultimately, to merge in One with God. The general purpose of Sathya Sai’s mission on
earth is to re-establish a god-ward way, paving a firm foundation for humankind to reach and achieve supreme divine Love (Prema), Truth (Sathya), Peace (Shanti), Right Conduct or Righteous Duty (Dharma), and Nonviolence (Ahimsa). As a process of achieving these five goals, Sathya Sai Baba had established three wings for operations within his growing International Sathya Sai Organization. These three interrelated wings are Devotion wing, Education wing and Service wing. Overall, the most popularly heard and seen quotes of the Sathya Sai organization are these catch-words: LOVE ALL, SERVE ALL and HELP EVER, HURT NEVER, a part of a long list of other sayings by Sathya Sai Baba. As a divine Guru (teacher), Baba had talked, explained, expounded on various spiritual matters, in person, in groups, in discourses. After about 70 years of very active teachings since he was at a tender age of 14, many major collections of his talks or discourses had long been organized into publications. These collections include 42 volumes of Sathya Sai Speaks series, 16 volumes of Vahinis (Stream of Thoughts), 14 volumes of Summer Showers on Spirituality and Indian cultures, etc. Besides, he was a founder of the monthly magazine called Sanathana Sarathi (The Eternal Charioteer) that began in 1958 and still on-going.

For a better understanding into Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings, in which he had drawn from many of the ancient Indian Sanskrit heritage, i.e., the Vedas, the Upanishads, the Puranas, Ramayana, also the beloved Bhagavad Gita that is inserted as a part of the Mahabharata epic. Eloquently, Sathya Sai Baba had managed to present a fresh look into the old ideas in his own interpretations with a modern twist, so his teachings are readily applicable to the modern man. His organization operates under the three wings, effectively in administration for different goals. Each wing is further explored below.
DEVOTION WING – The main functions of this branch are concentrated on the Sai Bhajan singing and the Study Circle groups in the communities. It is organized to provide the basic guidelines how to conduct these functions. Based on Sathya Sai Baba’s sayings that are often mentioned in a wide variety of publications, below are some examples:

* Unless you sing Bhajans for your own joy, you cannot bring joy to others. It is only when the devotional feeling arises in the heart that the song will appeal to the hearts of others, I am pleased only when love is the key-note, when feeling of unity prevails, when the melody comes from cleansed, God-loving hearts.
* Bhajan is a sadhana (spiritual discipline) for all who share in it. Sing familiar bhajans, so that all can share the Ananda (bliss).
* When you sing Bhajans, dwell also on the meaning of the song and the message of each name and form of God.
* Bhajans have to be sung and offered to God in an attitude of utter humility. They are not to be taken as exercises in an exhibition of talents and as a competition for mastery of musical skill. They have to please the Lord, not your fans.29

To me, the above instructions show how Sathya Sai Baba conveys messages in a down-to-earth manner, and the style of language he employs to explain certain things is easily accessible to the masses. For the most part, evidently, Sathya Sai Baba speaks in Telugu (his native South Indian language) with an English translator by his side for the regular public discourse, followed by Bhajan singing. As I still remember during the time I had visited Puttaparthi, Sathya Sai Baba himself also led one or two Bhajan songs after the talk, and truly, his singing voice was vibrant, beautiful and expressive. In fact, Sathya Sai Baba had composed many Bhajans himself. His first most well-known Bhajan entitled “Manasa Bhajore” which intended to teach his followers to focus their minds steadily on

29 Quotes as part of ‘Swami’s Guidelines for Devotional Singing’ in Sai Devotional Songs, p. 2 (a compilation of Sai Bhajan’s lyrics) published by the Sathya Sai Book Center of America in Tustin, California.
one Guru as/or their choice of gods. For the sake of spiritual progress, Sathya Sai Baba’s major teaching themes frequently encompass the idea that human has monkey mind that needs to be tamed, and the idea that all names and all forms of gods came from the same One Absolute Reality which is the Supreme Universal God. These concepts are reflected widely in the lyrics of Sai Bhajans that I have transcribed, shown in the last chapter.

The Study Circle in a group environment is another important component in which Sathya Sai Baba had included within the Devotion Wing, for the sake of sharing knowledge and spiritual experiences with one another among his followers. To encourage the company of the like-minded people called Sathsang, a group of 12-15 adults sit in a circle format with one facilitator who prepares in advance the topics or subjects derived from Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings or other spiritual masters. The facilitator then presents by reading out loud or projecting on a screen, a selected passage to be discussed by ways of taking turn one after another around the circle. Each participant is encouraged to talk about what one knows and understand or share one’s personal experiences associate with the topics. Sometimes one participant may raise an open or specific question so that other participants can contemplate on a deeper level, then anyone else in the group can take their turns to respond, with or without the answer. The facilitator keeps the flow of viewpoints going without any judgment, so long as everyone in the group understands that this is not a debate in external knowledge but a way of spiritual process to develop self-knowledge and self-confidence. The main purpose is to enhance and accelerate spiritual growth for all involved by putting into real life practice what is learned from the Study Circle. An emphasis is toward the concept of Unity in Diversity that must be applied to living one’s life in a cooperative harmoniously manner among the group members, as a model for a
peaceful world. For the Sathya Sai Center of Pittsburgh, a study circle session is a vital, integral part of the organization, and it is conducted weekly for about an hour long, after the Sai Bhajan singing session has ended. Beyond speaking, the chanting of AUM and Gayathri mantra are sometimes practiced during the Study Circles for the added benefits.

A gathering of Indian children at a special function at Sathya Sai Center of Pittsburgh, they are taught to sing Sai Bhajan songs early in life

EDUCATION WING – The ideal of Sathya Sai Baba’s educational principles is well represented through the Sai Spiritual Education (SSE) program that is conducted as part of the overall activities of the official Sathya Sai Centers around the world. Currently, there are approximately 1,200 Sathya Sai centers in 126 countries. The basic foundation of five main Human Values – Sathya (Truth), Prema (Love), Shanti (Peace), Dharma (Right Conduct) and Ahimsa (Non Violence) – had been established by Sathya Sai Baba as the ideal principles that can be achieved through educational process. From the year 2004 to 2008, I was selected to become a coordinator of SSE program at the Sathya Sai Center of Pittsburgh. During those years and until now, I have learned how, what and why the SSE
program is needed for moral and character development of school age children. Because the public school systems have no provision in the curricula for teaching self-knowledge while nurturing the human inner quality, the weekly SSE program is meant to fill the gap. The goal is probably similar to the Christian Sunday school, except that the Sai Spiritual Education is neutral about any particular faith, but the emphasis is on the understanding of all the existing world religions, viz., Zoroastrian, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam. In fact, each of the symbols for these five religions is incorporated into the design as one of the emblems for the Sathya Sai organization. An alternative emblem design is to put all the five main Human Values, viz., Truth, Love, Peace, Non-Violence, and Right Conduct in place of the five main religions. These two official emblems became logo for the organization, as a constant reminder of the spiritual unity and the ideal human quality.

Essentially, Sai Bhajan seen as the repertoire of Indian inspirational songs is one of the regular activities in the Sai Spiritual Education curriculum. However, other sources of inspirational songs are also utilized in addition to the Sai Bhajan songs. Children who had learned to sing well enough, are encouraged to be the lead singers among the adults in the regular Bhajan session. Besides, a wide range of difficulty levels in the Sai Bhajan repertoire is a wonderful source of music education for children at various stages. For me, the challenge is to know the meanings of the Sai Bhajan lyrics. But I can always find the answer when it is needed for the teaching purpose, and sometimes, I even put the English lyrics based on my interpretation to the Indian tunes. This is the opportunity to hone my musical skills as a part of Sai Spiritual Education, as it is a rewarding experience for me.

Other aspects of the Sathya Sai educational wing pave ways toward the highest standard for the integrated secular and spiritual knowledge. In other words, both students
and teachers must develop self-awareness, and the end result of Sathya Sai Education is a conscientious moral character as well as achieving the competency in one’s chosen field of study. For these reasons, Sathya Sai Baba had founded several different institutions for the higher learning (colleges & universities) on four campuses, all situated in various parts of South India. The first Women’s College at the Anantapur campus was inaugurated in 1968, followed by the Arts and Science College for men in Puttaparthi in 1978, then the Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning (name changed to Sri Sathya Sai University in 2007), and a joyful addition of Sri Sathya Sai Mirpuri College of Music in 2000. Also, the latest development was the opening of the Muddenahalli campus in 2012, as a part of now the Sri Sathya Sai’s extension of the high quality educational system. The best and most impressive of all, these colleges and universities have an open policy, equally accessible for all qualified students and completely free of charge.

In which ways, the establishment of the above-mentioned higher education has affected the Sai Bhajan music? My exposure to the music activities by the current and the former students of these Sai colleges on a daily basis via online access, that I can see the influence by Sai students who are well trained musically, has great impact on the growth of Sai Bhajan music toward the global communities. Sai Bhajan music has so far attracted people from various countries that I have already heard the tunes of Sai Bhajan in English, Spanish, Chinese languages. With the advance of technology and easy access to social medias, a stream of good Sai Bhajan performances by Sai students is regularly broadcast to the world. It is a dynamic process that can propel the Sai Bhajan music to become more and more global as a genre.
SERVICE WING – This is a more flexible branch of Sathya Sai organization that deals actively with the intention to reach out, it is an opportunity to practice selfless service to benefit both the inside and outside the Sathya Sai organization. Individually or as a group, Sai devotee is encouraged to spend time and energy in helping those in need. As love in action, it includes any sincere selfless service toward one’s own family, friends, neighbors, society, environment and the world at large. When these voluntary activities are performed with the attitude of love while doing selfless service, it transforms work into worship. As one of the Sathya Sai Baba’s most frequently quoted phrase goes, ‘Hands that help are holier than lips that pray’ and this is a reminder of a spiritual nature of selfless service that derived from the spiritual path of action (work & service) called Karma Yoga. For the best possible outcome, this path is practiced in conjunction with the other two spiritual paths, i.e., Bhakti Yoga (Devotional path) and Jnana Yoga (path of knowledge and wisdom).

The idea of doing something good and being helpful to others is not new. It is common to see variety of social services operated as a part of the local community by the government agencies or other non-profit organizations. However, as mentioned in the Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings, the difference between selfless service and social service has to do with the mental state while performing services. One must be humble in rendering service with love and without expectation of any reward, then simply offering the result of one’s action to God, so that the work gets sanctified and transformed into worship. Selfless services done with the right attitude is a spiritual discipline to minimize and can even wipe out the false sense of one’s ego. One must strive for unity and harmony through selfless service, while seeing everyone as equally valued as God’s children with latent divinity inherent in all. On the other hand, I can imagine social services provided by some other
organizations have similar approach like the Sai organization. But perhaps, it is a matter of degrees and intensity of love in action that I have directly observed in the field among some Sai devotees. Seeing this kind of selfless service, it had affected me positively in a big way. Whether the service is done internally for the smooth operation of a center or externally for the benefit of a community or a society, Sathya Sai Baba had always insisted on the quality that must come before the quantity. Besides, it is a strict prohibition, as per Sathya Sai Baba’s instruction, that there must be no solicitation for donation of any kind in his name. Anyone who feels like giving to the Sai organization may initiate it from his or her own pure heart of intention. Occasionally, I contemplate in wonderment of how the Sathya Sai Center of Pittsburgh has been running for over 15 years without a treasurer.

How then, did Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings on selfless service link to Sai Bhajan music? In truth, the overall functions of Sathya Sai organization rely completely on the stream of volunteers to keep all the activities running, whether locally at the center in Pittsburgh or at Sathya Sai Baba’s headquarter in India. As I recall my experiences during the trips when I was accommodated inside the Prashanthi Nilayam (Sathya Sai Baba’s ashram), there has always been hundreds and hundreds of volunteers from far and near to keep huge crowd of visitors, in thousands normally, maintaining order of functions in a peaceful atmosphere. Beyond the internal operation, Sathya Sai Baba himself had initiated and successfully completed many large-scale projects, including building several hospitals at various locations to treat all patients free of charge, and of course, one super grand water project that keep water accessible to at least 700 villages located in the nearby area.

As I have witnessed more closely at the Sathya Sai Center in Pittsburgh since 1996, somehow almost every week when the Sai Bhajan singing session is scheduled for,
and at least a few volunteers are needed to help set up the room, the altar and the sound system in a rental hall, because the center does not own any real property. Without such selfless service by so many volunteers, Sai Bhajan music would have never been possible or recognized. Truly, it is the motivation from Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings on the spiritual discipline of service that Sai Bhajan music has become more and more popular today. For the external outreach within the Pittsburgh area, the Sai group volunteering works include - a monthly volunteer at the soup kitchen (prepare and serve lunch or dinner), the occasional visits to the selected nursing homes, a regular service for sorting those left-over medical supply from the local hospitals to be shipped to the poorer oversea countries as operated by the Global Links organization.

Last but not least, it is a lifelong selfless service of Sathya Sai Baba himself that became the best example for his followers across India. For this reason in 2013, the Indian government issued an official stamp in recognition of Sathya Sai Baba’s contribution to the welfare of the Indian population throughout the country. Indeed, this is a testament to the importance and success of the Service Wing of Sathya Sai Organization, and indeed, the social-spiritual-cultural impact is quite widespread overtime.

Commemorative Stamp issued by Government of India in 2013
Spiritually Significant Dates

Because of the lunar-solar intertwined system in the traditional Indian calendar that is slightly different from the western Gregorian calendar, this makes the dates of each significant observation day shifted from year to year. Also, there are some global festive occasions, such as, New Year Day and Christmas Day, both are consistently observed at Sathy Sai Baba’s ashram and other Sai centers around the world. Each of the important date is marked on the 2014 calendar of the Sathya Sai Organization, selectively from the listing that is applicable more or less to the Pittsburgh Sai center as well. In this section, the quoted description of each observed significant date, derived primarily from articles in a series of Sathya Sai Speaks publication presented for the deeper understanding of the spiritual meanings linking to these special dates. Comments from my direct participatory observation are included whenever and wherever it is applicable.

JANUARY 1 – New Year Day

Sai movement has always been adaptive to the process of globalization from early on, and definitely due to the universal ideals of Sathya Sai Baba’s teachings, the Sai organization has celebrated the festive New Year Day of Gregorian calendar as a part of the world’s family. On New Year Day, the Pittsburgh Sai Center celebrates with a special extended Bhajan singing session along with extra festive foods at the home of one of the Sai devotees. At the same time, it is a wonderful way to socialize and spiritualize oneself among the like-minded people, a gathering at the start of a new year. However, this is what Sathya Sai Baba said during one of his talks on January 1, 1994 at the Poornachandra Auditorium in the Prashanthi Nilayam compound – “On this New Year day, you should make the resolve that you will start everyday with love, spend the day with love, fill the
day with love, and end the day with love. There should be no difference of caste, color, religion or nationality. Love knows no distinction of any kind. You must wish everyone to be happy. Fill the heart with love. The country will prosper and the world will prosper and everyone will be happy.”

JANUARY 14 – Sankranthi Day

The day of Sankranthi marks the ending of the harvest time in India. As the sun begins the northward journey, an individual should turn toward inner self. To some certain extent, Sankranthi is a family celebration, enjoying the newly harvested crop. So far, Sai devotees in Pittsburgh observe this occasion by choice on their own, and there is no Sai group special activity. Although, Sathya Sai Baba’s explanation about Sankranthi shed some light on its significance, as he said on January 15, 1996 at Sai Kulwant Hall in Prashanthi Nilayam – “Bharathiya (meaning Indian) festivals are full of inner significance, imparting bliss, and not ostentatious shows. Every festival has a unique significance of its own… Sankramana is the time when the inward journey toward a pure and unsullied heart is made. Just as the sun embarks on his northward journey, Sankranthi is the day on which the intellect should be turned toward the Atma for Self-realization. The Veda has declared the Uttharayana (northward journey) as a sacred period. In the movement of the sun from house to house in the Zodiac, the entry into Capricorn is most important. Capricorn is a sign of peace and contentment… This confers a kind of mental and physical peace… During this month, farmers enjoy peace of mind and body. Few people understand the true

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significance of festivals like *Sankranthi*. Man cannot secure enduring bliss through physical pleasures. He has to discover that the source of this bliss is within himself."31

FEBRUARY 28 – Maha Shivaratri Day

For this year, the Pittsburgh Sai center has organized a 12-hour overnight Sai Bhajan singing session at a Sai devotee’s home. Usually it starts in the early evening of Maha Shivaratri, and ends the next morning. The night (ratri) of Shiva, one of Hindu’s main gods in the Trinity (Trimurti) is observed especially as a highly auspicious night. Maha means ‘Great’ – hence, the great night of Lord Shiva. To really understand and appreciate the significance of this occasion, Sathya Sai Baba’s talk on March 7, 1978 at Brindavan (Sai Baba’s secondary residence in Bangalore), reveals some of the true meanings this way – “*Shivaratri* is a very auspicious day for all. It is the fourteenth day of the lunar fortnight, when the Moon is waning and the Sun is in the sign of Aquarius. The festival is, however, related to the Moon rather than the Sun. That is the reason why it is called *Shivaratri* (the night of Shiva). Unlike other nights, this particular night is the night of consecration, of dedication, of illumination. The mind is intimately associated with the Moon. *Chandra* (the deity of the Moon) is the presiding deity of the mind… The night-long *bhajan* (congregational singing of devotional songs) is significant of the life-long consciousness of the Divine Presence that everyone should cultivate… There are three types of men: the multi-centered, the uni-centered, and the non-centered. The first group, who allow their senses, mind and intelligence to wander where they will, is a very populous group. So also is the third group, which comprises people who flit from one object to another, hop around from one thing to another in listless flippancy. For earning the

concentration and single-centeredness characteristic of the second group, the festival of *Shivaratri* is very propitious. The *bhajans* and the ceaseless flow of *kirtans* (songs) and *namasmaran* (remembering God’s name) on this occasion help in the attainment of single-centeredness… With a lump of salt on one’s tongue, how can anyone relish the sweetness of honey or fruits? With a lump of candy on the tongue, how can the taste of salt and savory be known? Immerse your mind in good thoughts and the world will be good; soak it in bad thoughts and the world will be bad for you. So, recollect only good, think, plan and do only good, speak and act only good. Then as a result you will approximate God, the source of all goodness. This is the message of *Shivaratri.*”

MARCH 31 – Ugadi Day

The fact that Sathya Sai Baba’s native tongue is Telugu language of South India, the Ugadi as the New Year day for the Telugu people is especially relevant. Even though there are more Telugu Indian participants in the activities of Sathya Sai Center of Pittsburgh, Ugadi is not organized as the official function of the Pittsburgh Sai center. Partly also, there is a separate Telugu Association in Pittsburgh area that has event for the Ugadi celebration. Then, it is a matter of consideration for other Indians from different language groups, such as, Tamil speaking people that have a different date for their New Year day in April. It is interesting, however, to find out what Sathya Sai Baba speaks about on the Ugadi day among predominantly his native Telugu people in India. The following quotes are taken from Sai Baba’s talk on March 28, 1979 at the Shivam in Hyderabad – “Today is the holy Ugadi day. We bid farewell to the year gone by and welcome the new year… When one reviews the past year within oneself, one can realize how much time was spent selfishly and how much in

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32 _Sathya Sai Speaks_, Volume XIV: Discourses of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba (Tustin, CA: Sathya Sai Book Center of America, 1999), 1-3.
service… Do not misuse time which is precious. Time flees fast. The span of life is like a porous pot. Not to realize this is the basic ignorance. Make good use of time by recognizing what is permanent and true in human life… We should cultivate the higher spiritual feeling of ‘Oneness.’ The fatherhood of God and brotherhood of man become meaningful only then. Today is the holy Ugadi day. It is not enough if we wear new clothes and partake in feasts. Launch a new movement to mark the new year. People in the villages have no medical and educational facilities. They have no drinking water, no sanitary arrangements. They have no food to eat. Provide these facilities for them and thereby realize Divinity. The need of the hour is the man of action, not the one who only talks… Members of Sathya Sai Organizations must tour every village and improve the lot of the rural folk. This is a new challenge for the members of the organization. I shall visit every village along with you, serve them without any discrimination of caste, creed, race and class… There are 25,500,000 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 japa and Sadhana and uplift such people through service and sacrifice.”

APRIL 8 – Rama Navami Day

It is the day to honor Lord Rama, one of the great Avatar (god in human form). In Pittsburgh, the Sathya Sai center has been observed this special occasion each year by requesting all the Sai Bhajan lead-singers that same week to choose the songs that have the name ‘Rama’ in the lyrics, and the topic for Study Circle is all about Lord Rama life as lessons and examples. According to Sathya Sai Baba, his discourse on April 14, 1989, at Sai Sruti Hall in Kodaikanal (Saibaba’s summer residence) described the importance of Lord

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*Sathya Sai Speaks*, Volume XIV: Discourses of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba (Tustin, CA: Sathya Sai Book Center of America, 1999), 113-116.
Rama’s spiritual ideals to the Indians this way – “There is no Bharathiya (Indian) who has not heard the story of Rama, nor is there a village in Bharath (India) without a Rama temple. From time immemorial, every individual in Bharath (India) has regarded Sri Rama’s life as an ideal and has sought to sanctify every moment of his life by living up to it. Bharath has always considered the life of anyone devoid of spirituality as utterly valueless… In the Ramayana, Sathya (Truth) and Dharma (Righteousness) are the most important concepts. The Vedas, which are regarded as their very life-breath by Bharathiyas, have proclaimed: “Sathyam Vada; Dharmam Chara” (Speak the Truth; Act Righteously)… When you utter the word “Ram,” you first open the mouth with the sound “Ra.” All your sins go out when your mouth is open. When you utter “M” by closing the mouth, the entry is barred against the sins that have gone out. Everyone should recognize the sweetness, the sacredness and the divinity enshrined in the name “Rama.”… Having been born in this sacred land of Bharath, having before you the ideal example of Rama Avatar, you must seek to redeem your lives, by living up to Rama’s ideals and proclaiming them to the world. Remember the name of Rama with love. God can be realized only through love and by no other means.”

APRIL 24 – Sri Sathya Sai Aradhana Mahotsavam Day

For Sai devotees, this is the day that Sathya Sai Baba left his physical body in 2011. But his formless universal spirit lives on. Traditionally, the Indians really know how to remember and celebrate their past great men/heroes in a grand way. The Indian term ‘Mahasamadhi’ referring to ‘great soul merging with the universal consciousness’ is used for the passing on of Sathya Sai Baba in the event of his physical death. Eventually, the Mahasamadhi day has now evolved into ‘Aradhana Mahotsavam day’ meaning ‘Holy and

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34 Sathya Sai Speaks, Volume XXII: Discourses of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba (Tustin, CA: Sathya Sai Book Center of America, 1999), 56-63.
Grand Festival of Adoration and Homage,’ for Sathya Sai’s followers to re-dedicate their effort to continue practicing Sai’s teachings and to serve as a part of Sai’s mission within their best capacities. On the Mahasamadhi day since 2011, a special extended Bhajan singing session has been organized by the Sathya Sai Center of Pittsburgh which I have also been a part of, at a Sai devotee’s home. To me, a chance to participate in the Sai Bhajan singing is always a good opportunity to learn more about the repertoire and the music itself.

The message that came from the top-rung officials of the International Sathya Sai Organization regarding the Sri Sathya Sai Aradhana Mahotsavam Day is a suggestion for the local, regional, and national levels of the Sai organization to do the following:

- Sharing experiences/ telling stories by devotees about life and mission of Sri Sathya Sai
- Have a special Bhajan devotional singing program
- Organize cultural programs
- Performances by Sai youth and children involved in Sai Spiritual Education
- Initiate and participate in the Sai service projects
- Audio visual presentations of Sathya Sai’s lifetime of works, his discourses and other humanitarian services, etc.

MAY 6 – Easwaramma Day

The name ‘Easwaramma’ refers to the ‘Chosen Mother’ of Sathya Sai Baba. This is how Sathya Sai Baba gives an honor to his physical mother after her passing more than 30 years ago. Today, the celebration of the Easwaramma Day is mostly involved around the school age children within the Sai Spiritual Education (SSE) programs. Partly it is an opportunity to highlight the importance of respecting and honoring one’s own parents as well as other concepts that has the word ‘mother’ attached to it, like Mother Earth,
Motherland, etc., and the children should learn about them early on. The focus on educating children, so they will become the ideal citizens of the future world is another major mission, one of the three wings of the Sathya Sai organization. For about few months leading to the Easwaramma Day, SSE children are encouraged to be creative, in arts, in music and in writing. The children are assisted by their SSE teachers to come up with something positive associated with mothers. As a group, the children may work in teams to present their ideas, projects, dance, musical performances as the main event for the local and/or regional congregations. Indeed, this gives children a chance to blossom with their full potentials. A few points taken from Sathya Sai Baba’s talk on May 6, 2001 at Brindavan, about ‘mother’ are as followed – “It is impossible to describe the love that exists between the mother and her child. The Bharatiyas (Indians) consider the love of a mother as true love… Mother’s blessings can make anybody great. The children may be good or bad, but the mother always loves her children and aspires for their welfare. The mother’s heart is full of love and compassion for her children… Today we are celebrating Easwaramma Day to propagate the glory of motherhood. The world is sustained by the prayers of mothers. A woman’s prayer is more powerful than a thousand prayers of men because women are pure and tender-hearted. Never cause displeasure to your mother. Never hurt her feelings. Then God will help you in all your endeavors. One calls one’s country motherland and not fatherland. Thus, mother is given an exalted position in the world. Consider your country as your own mother and work for its progress. Under any circumstances, do not cause any harm to your mother and motherland. This is the significance and main teaching of today’s celebration.”

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35 _Sathya Sai Speaks, Volume 34: Discourses of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba_
JULY 12 – Guru Purnima Day

It is the day of remembering and honoring one’s spiritual guru (teacher/preceptor) that always falls on the full moon time based on the lunar calendar. For the Pittsburgh Sai center, a special Bhajan singing session is dedicated to all Guru songs. Sometimes, the Sai young adult and youth groups may organize other special programs at their discretion. Because the summer time is a vacation time for a lot of families, so naturally there are fewer participants in the Sathya Sai center’s functions. Besides, most Sai devotees consider Sathya Sai Baba as their Guru, and that means many of them prefer to visit Puttaparthi as a pilgrimage to honor Sathya Sai Baba in person, either on their own or as a group. In fact, I among many others had joined the Sai Orchestra and the Sai National Choir groups, on two separate years, both during the Guru Purnima week to perform in front of Sathya Sai Baba at his ashram ‘Prashanthi Nilayam’ in India.

To gain some insight into the interpretation by Sathya Sai Baba himself about what Guru means, this is Sai Baba’s explanation that derived from his discourse on July 30, 1996 at Sai Kulwant Hall in Prashanthi Nilayam – “The true meaning of Guru is ‘one who dispels the darkness of ignorance.’ Another meaning of the word is ‘one who is beyond attributes and forms, namely, the Supreme Self (The Brahman).’ When this Self is within you, where is the need to search for someone to teach you? A teacher who teaches others has had a teacher himself. The one who has no Guru above him is the true guru. The Sanskrit stanza which hails the guru as Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshvara (Shiva) and as Parabrahman is misinterpreted. The right approach is to consider Brahma, Vishnu and Maheshvara as the guru. These three are symbolized by the three gunas (attributes/
quality): Brahma is Rajas (active), Vishnu is Sathva (serene), and Shiva is Thamas (inert while also in latent state of the primal energy). The whole cosmos is constituted by the three gunas. The three gunas are present in man. The Trinity are present in the form of the three gunas in every human heart. Hence, you are your own guru. You need not seek him elsewhere… You are a guru unto yourself. All potencies are within you. This is indicated by the Gayatri Mantra. You have to feel at all time your inherent divinity, which is also present in everyone. When you help or feed someone you must feel that the Divine in you is feeding the Divine in others.”

AUGUST 17 – Krishna Janmashtami Day

Lord Krishna is one of the highest Avatar (god in human form). The name ‘Krishna’ is very popular and well recognized even among the westerners. The most widespread of Krishna’s image in visual and performing arts is the Krishna playing flute, which represents the power of music as a divine origin. As a special celebratory day to remember and honor Lord Krishna, the Pittsburgh Sai center dedicates the entire Bhajan singing session to all Krishna songs. Sometimes, a staunch devotee of Krishna has invited friends to his/her home for a puja (ritual worship) offering exclusively to Lord Krishna, usually followed by a feast afterward. For a higher knowledge, based on Sathya Sai Baba’s discourse on August 18, 1995 at Sai Kulwant Hall in Prashanthi Nilayam, he said – “The incarnation of Krishna proclaimed the doctrine of divine love, as manifested by the Gopikas (cowherd women who adored Krishna since his childhood). Man today is like an earthen pot filled with nectar. His body may be made of clay, but his spirit is eternal. The Divine has to be experienced through the body. Hence, human birth should not be treated as

something trivial. Human life is worth living, it should be cherished as something precious… You have come from the Divine with love. You have to base your life on that love. That love is a gift of the Divine. You must treat it as Divine property and not as your personal possession. As long as you entertain the sense of personal property, you can never understand the Aathmik (Atmic means pertaining to divine spirit/soul) principle. The feeling of ‘I’ and ‘mine’ is the root cause of all man’s troubles. Attachment and possessiveness cannot be totally eschewed. But there should be limits for them… To illustrate how attachment to bodily relations affects one’s judgment, I would relate the episodes in the Mahabharatha which preceded the Kurukshetra battle and the conduct of Arjuna had vigorously opposed Krishna’s attempts to hold peace parleys with the Kauravas as a futile exercise. But when he saw his preceptors, cousins, and other kinsmen ranged against him on the battlefield, he was despondent and did not wish to fight. It was then that Krishna taught him that the Spirit is immortal and bodies are perishable and one should not give way to bodily attachments in the performance of one’s duty (Dharma). The body has to be taken care of, but not excessively. It should be dedicated to the service of God. One may claim to surrender all his wealth, kith and kin and power and position to God. But this is not real surrender. One must realize: ‘I am in You, You are in me.’ God is one. The sense of separation between God and the individual should go.”

AUGUST 29 – Ganesh Chaturthi Day

Commonly seen and adored by the Indians, is the Ganesh deity that made up of elephant head on human body. Ganesh has many other different names, each representing various aspects of the same deity. Several of Ganesh’s names, such as, Gajavadana,
Vinayaka, Ganapati, Lambodhara, Gajanana, Vigneshwara, are all mentioned in the Sai Bhajan lyrics. Primarily, Lord Ganesh is known to be the remover of all obstacles, which is why Ganesh song is always the first song to be sung during the Sai Bhajan session. In other situations, many Indians pray to Lord Ganesh before the beginning of each workday, sometimes at the start of a journey. Students usually pray to Lord Ganesh before going to school, classes, especially before the exams.

Practically each image of Indian gods is called by many names, which causes bewilderment for the non-Indian like me. But over time, I have come to understand that there are deeper meanings behind all names and forms. The external manifestations of gods can expand, grow and branch out, as far as human mind can imagine. However, a constant proliferation of a deity’s names and forms can be traced to the same One source, which is the Absolute Reality, called Brahman by the Indians. On this special Ganesh honoring day, one whole Sai Bhajan session is dedicated to sing only Ganesh songs at Sathya Sai Center of Pittsburgh, and the topic related to Ganesh is a part of the Study Circle. For a better deeper understanding of the inner meanings of Ganesh worship, the following passages came from Sathya Sai Baba’s talk on August 25, 1998 at Sai Kulwant Hall, he said – “What, it may be asked, is the reason for endowing the deity with an elephant’s head? The elephant is well known for its high intelligence. Among animals it has a prodigious size. No other animal is cast in such a big mould. The elephant’s foot encompasses the footprint of the lion, esteemed as the lord of the animal kingdom. In the jungle, hunters follow the footprints of the lion to trace it to its lair. But if an elephant has walked over those footprints, they are totally erased. Moreover, the elephant is the pathfinder for human beings. In a forest covered with dense bushes, humans cannot easily find their way. But once an elephant has gone through the
jungle, its trail becomes a path for others to follow. All these traits of the elephants show that in the journey of life one can find one’s way if one has the intelligence of the elephant. Because he is endowed with the form of an elephant, Ganapathi is associated with the quality of intelligence… Today few persons understand the true spirit of the Ganapathi Tathwa (Principle). They are concerned about the outer forms and ignore the inner esoteric meaning… People look upon the Vighneswara festival as some routine affair. But Vighneswara embodies all the forms and all the powers of all the deities. It is not enough to worship Ganesha once a year. We must worship Him always.”

OCTOBER 4 – Dasara Day

This special occasion has a very ancient root, and so far, all I know today is that it is celebrated as the Navarathri festival. In Pittsburgh for the past several years, one family among the Sai devotees, had invited all members of Sathya Sai Center to celebrate the last day of the nine observing days at their residence for a special home Bhajan singing session and followed by lots of vegetarian foods for the evening. The Bhajan songs for that evening are mostly about Devi (goddess), especially Durga, Lakshmi, and Saraswathi. As confirmed by Sathya Sai Baba during his discourse on October 9, 1994 at Sai Ramesh Hall in Brindavan, he said – “Bharathiyas (Indians) have been celebrating the Navarathri festival from ancient times as a mode of worship of Devi, the Divine, as Mother. They worship Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswathi during these nine days. Who are these three? They are three forms which have fascinated man. Their esoteric significance is represented by three Shakthis (potencies). They are: Karma (action), Upaasana (contemplation) and Jnaana (discriminating wisdom). These potencies have been given other names… The significance

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38 Sathya Sai Speaks, Volume 31: Discourses of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba (Prashanthi Nilayam, India: Sri Sathya Sai Books & Publications Trust, 2001), 251-257.
the power of wisdom to discriminate). All the three are present in man. Thus, Durga, Lakshmi and Saraswathi dwell in the human heart.”

OCTOBER 23 – Deepavali Day

The increasing popularity of Deepavali (Festival of Lights) has become a kind of universal phenomenon. All humankind can relate well and understand the essence of light in a ubiquitous sense. It has become a pan-Indian tradition, celebrating Krishna’s victory over the evil force. Interestingly though, the Pittsburgh Sai center has not yet set aside any special program for this occasion as far as I know. Perhaps because there are already a few existing special functions at 3-4 other Hindu temples in the Pittsburgh area. So the Indian Sai devotees find it convenient enough to participate in the Hindu way of celebration. However, the observation of this occasion is marked with something special at Prashanthi Nilayam (the main residence of Sathya Sai Baba). Considering a deeper meaning behind the Deepavali Day, this is how Sathya Sai explained it on October 28, 1989 at Brindavan, he said – “When we enquire into the significance of the Deepavali festival which we are celebrating today, we find that traditionally it is a joyous festival to celebrate the destruction of the demon Narakasura by Sri Krishna. It is only when we first understand the meaning of the Krishna Principle that we will be able to understand the significance of the Naraka principle. Krishna is the embodiment of the Five Elements – ether, air, fire, water and earth… When we recognize that the Divine is immanent in the five elements, we will realize that there is no place in the cosmos where these five are not present. The human body is composed of the

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[Sathya Sai Speaks, Volume XXVII: Discourses of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba (Tustin, CA: Sathya Sai Book Center of America, 1999), 209-211.]
five elements. These elements, because they constitute the body, can affect only the body but cannot affect the Atma (spirit/soul) in any way… The celebration of Deepavali as the day of deliverance from Narakasura commemorates Krishna’s victory. The day is observed as an occasion when the Divine leads mankind from darkness to light… On Deepavali day, we light numerous lamps with one candle. The light with which other lamps are lit is a symbol of the Divine. The other lamps are Jivana Jyothis (individual lamps). They derive their light from the One Supreme Light. It is to teach this truth to men that the Festival of Lights is observed. Thus, every festival has an inner meaning and purpose. Forgetting this, the holy days are observed only as occasions for feats and fun. Holy days in Bharath (India) are all full of spiritual significance. Forgetting this, people are lost in meaningless observances.”

*The altar well-decorated at Sai Bhajan singing 24 hours continuously as part of the annual Global Akhanda Bhajan special function at Durga & Vasu’s residence in Pittsburgh*

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*Sathya Sai Speaks, Volume XXII: Discourses of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba* (Tustin, CA: Sathya Sai Book Center of America, 1999), 221-225.
NOVEMBER 8 and 9 – Global Akhanda Bhajans

For all those who love to sing and find Sai Bhajan songs to be fascinating, like myself, this is a 24 hours non-stop singing of Sai Bhajan, along with chanting mantras, such as, verses from the Vedic source among few others. Usually this marathon singing event starts from 6 p.m. on Saturday and ends on Sunday at 6 p.m., most Sai devotees look forward to the Global Akhanda Bhajan every year. Sathya Sai Baba himself had initiated this special occasion since around 1950’s among a small group of devotees, but nowadays it is a global phenomenon for approximately 1,200 centers in 126 countries. The idea is to generate positive vibration through singing Bhajan that contains various divine names, to purify the quality of spiritual energy for the world. Some of these points are described by Sathya Sai Baba in his discourse on November 8, 1986 at the Prashanthi Mandir, he said – “Not all realize the potency and efficacy of reciting the Lord’s name. The first requisite is purity of thought, word and deed. The name that is uttered by the tongue should be meditated upon by the mind. What is uttered and dwelt upon should be hailed by clapping the hands. This threefold concentration on the Divine name – unity of mind, speech and action – purifies the heart and nourishes the feeling of devotion… Guru Nanak was the initiator of the practice of community singing of devotional songs. He believed that through such community singing the common man can ennoble his life and experience the presence of the Divine in everyone… Community bhajans should not be treated as a pastime. When thousands of persons join in singing bhajans, they should be fully absorbed in the devotional process and the ecstasy of that experience. The singing should be vibrant and soulful and not mechanical ordrawling and uninspiring. It should combine bhava (feeling), raga (melody) and tala (rhythm). What delight can be experienced when all sing
in chorus, with the same feeling, in the same tune and to the same timing! When there is such unity the Divine can be experienced.”

NOVEMBER 23 – Sathya Sai Baba’s Birthday

As Sathya Sai Baba had sometimes alluded to, that his birthday celebration is mainly for his followers, since he did not need or want anything materially from anyone. The only gift he will accept is love from a pure heart. Nevertheless, Sathya Sai Baba’s birthday celebration each year had been a huge and grand occasion. Not only the Sai devotees from around the world came to join the celebration, usually the high-ranking officials of the Indian government also made ways to pay homage to Sathya Sai Baba. Indeed, I also had been there during his birthday celebration in 1995. It was a surreal experience to be among the extremely crowded areas everywhere. At some points, it was like side by side crowded situations with no room to walk anywhere. Then, I found out later that during the same week I was there, both president and prime minister of India had also visited Sathya Sai Baba within few days apart. Although most foreign visitors and the Indians from other regions would not have known in advance, so that means the huge crowd estimated over a million from the helicopter survey happened to be there on their own. For the local Sathya Sai Center in Pittsburgh, an advanced planning toward a special program has always been made for Sathya Sai’s birthday celebration each year, beyond a well-organized Sai Bhajan singing session for the occasion.

To further understand how Sathya Sai Baba had responded to his birthday celebration, for his name ‘Sathya’ means ‘Truth’ and the following words came from his talk on November 23, 1995 at the Vidhyagiri stadium in Puttaparthi – “Sathyam (Truth) has

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41 Sathya Sai Speaks, Volume XIX: Discourses of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba (Tustin, CA: Sathya Sai Book Center of America, 1999), 165-168.
manifested itself in the cosmos. Without Truth there can be no universe. Everything has emanated from Truth… The Vedhas, the Upanishaths and all scriptures have their origin in Truth. Truth is the proper abode of God. Truth and God are inseparable. Truth is God. The Upanishaths declare: “Raso vai Sah” (God is all sweetness). This means that God is present in subtle form everywhere, like sugar in sugarcane and butter in milk… God is not somewhere outside. He is the indweller in the body. Sin is the result of one’s own actions. Hence it is folly to seek God elsewhere. Man wants to know all about the world and ventures to explore outer space. But he is unable to know his own true nature. How is he to know his self? The self is called conscience. The spiritual quest means making use of the vibrations from the conscience to understand the truth. Today man follows only the body and the mind and becomes a prey to all kinds of troubles… Sow the seeds of such noble thoughts, let them grow into giant trees and let people take shelter under them. This is the only birthday gift I seek from you. Your welfare is your gift to me. Become exemplary persons… Make yourselves into a garland and I shall be the thread holding all the flowers together. Consider yourselves the children of one mother, belonging to the human family. Do not give room for differences of race, creed and nationality. All belong to the caste of humanity, the religion of love and the language of the heart. The same object, water, is called by different names in different languages. Likewise God is one, whatever the name that is used – whether Allah, Jesus, Buddha or Rama – have that faith. Don’t criticize any religion. By developing this universalism, bring joy to Bhagavan. Many overseas devotees greeted me in the morning with “Happy Birthday.” I am always happy. It is enough if you are happy. True happiness consists in union with God.”

42 Sathya Sai Speaks, Volume XXVIII: Discourses of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba - 99 -
DECEMBER 25 – Christmas Day

What a sweet memory during my first trip in 1987, to see Sathya Sai Baba at his ashram, Prashanthi Nilayam in Puttaparthi (then, a small village) at Christmas time! Now my reminiscence about that uplifting experience still makes my heart singing with joy. The Christmas celebration there was charged with divine energy, a large group of westerners sang Christmas carol with candle light in the early hour until the sun began to rise. It was quite a treat and a nice surprise, since I had no idea what to expect then. Whether it came from the Christmas caroling or the Sai Bhajan singing that I had heard, clearly then, the power of positive sound vibrations was all around in the atmosphere. That is one of the reasons I have been back there many more times. Indeed, it is quite popular among westerners to visit Prashanthi Nilayam around Christmas time. Sometimes, the organized groups from U.S.A and other European countries have gone there to perform music, dance, and drama with the themes related to Jesus birth and, or Christ teachings. All of these programs have made many foreign visitors feel at home inside Prashanthi Nilayam in India.

Back in Pittsburgh, the Sathya Sai Center has a special program to celebrate Christmas every year. Whether it is a short skit about Jesus’s teachings, or a children’s play about Jesus birth and sometimes a chorus or a musical performance on Christmas music, it has become a joyful occasion for all involved, as a shared spiritual experience.

Evidently, Sathya Sai Baba had always treated all religions with love, the following few passages came from his discourse on December 25, 1995 at Puurnachandhra Auditorium in Prashanthi Nilayam, where he said – “It was to teach mankind the greatness of divine love that Jesus came. His father passed away when Jesus was ten years old. Thereafter, with the

permission of his mother, he embarked on his ministry of service to the people. He resolved on three tasks: one, to be filled with Divine love and to share it with others was the main purpose of his life; two, he should not succumb to praise or censure in carrying out his mission; three, to inspire in others the conviction that the Divinity within is omnipresent. Jesus considered spreading the gospel of love as his foremost task… When Christ was born, three kings cam to see the infant. One of them declared that the child would be a lover of God. The second one said that he would be the beloved of God. The third one declared that he was God. A lover of God is a messenger of God. The one whom God loves is a “Son of God.” When one experiences both of these, he becomes one with God. “Father and Son are one”… Unity can be achieved only through love. This was the message of Jesus.”

One of the academic buildings, part of Sri Sathya Sai University on Puttaparthi campus, along the main road of the city

CHAPTER FIVE

MUSICAL CONTEXT

Understanding the Indian Musical Roots

First and foremost, the divine origin of AUM (Om chanting) perceivable from the pervasive vibration in the universe is the beginning of musical sound. For the Indians, this is their primordial root of music. The energy of the AUM vibration is the creative force that generates everything in the whole universe. Cosmologically, this idea evolved over time and gave rise to the Indian concept of Nada Brahma (Nada means sound, and Brahma refers to God the creator) which can be interpreted as ‘Sound is God’ or ‘God as sound.’ That is one the reasons why the Indians treat musical sounds and their musical instruments with such high reverence. Similarly, the Indian singers and musicians are generally regarded with so much respect. In fact, the art depiction of some Indian gods playing musical instruments is very common, such as, Krishna playing flute, Saraswathi goddess playing Veena (Indian chordophone), Shiva playing drum and dance, etc.

From a literary standpoint, the Sama-Veda (the third of the ancient four Vedas) is basically accepted by the Indian and the western scholars alike as the first known source of the overall Indian music. As a part of the Vedic heritage elaborated in The Music of India, by Reginald & Jamila Massey, who writes – “This early form of vocal music was known as Samagan from Sama meaning ‘melody’ and gan meaning ‘to sing verses.’ There were only three tonal accents – udatta, anudatta and svarita – which were later named swaras musical notes. Eventually, a total of seven swaras was identified and came into use. However, even today the Vedas can be heard chanted to the three accented musical
Indeed, the Vedic chanting is alive and actively utilized by the Sathya Sai organization, especially for the special occasions. My participation is limited to playing on the synthesized keyboard as a background support to many of the longer chants, because of the language barrier, I have yet learned to chant well. Although there are many shorter chants that I have learned to sing along with the Sai groups in Sanskrit, and indeed, I can testify to the current practice of singing with tones clustering around three or four pitches existing in the Vedic scriptures is still alive today. A good example is ‘Gayathri Mantra.’

Another aspect of the Indian musical roots, supposedly originated from nature, it is commonly cited as to how the swaras (musical sound that made up of seven singing tones) equivalent to the western solfege system, actually were inspired by the sound that many animals make. These swaras (musical notes) are: SA came from the peacock’s cry; RI came from the cow’s calling her calf; GA came from the goat’s beat; MA came from the heron’s call; PA came from the cuckoo’s singing; DHA came from the horse’s neigh; NI came from the elephant’s trumpeting. Each of the swara’s initial above came from these original terms: Sadja, Risabha, Gandhara, Madhyama, Panchama, Dhaivata, and Nishada. All these seven musical tones are sequentially organized into ‘Saptak’ or the Indian basic 7 tones scale system, similar to the western movable ‘Do’ system. Later, the formulated Saptak became the foundation for Indian musical system, which was first mentioned in the Bharata Natya Shastra, a treatise composed by a sage named ‘Bharata.’ This treatise is one of the most quoted oldest sources dated back to around 2nd century B.C.E. To the 3rd century C.E. and along with music, it includes the subjects on dance, drama, as well as criticism. Furthermore, Bharata also considered human voice to be the

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highest and purest form as the source of all other arts, while the expression of moods or sentiments (Indians called ‘Rasa’) in vocal music became the fundamental to the Indian aesthetics. There are nine basic moods corresponding with the colors and the deities as mentioned in the *Bharata Natya Shastra* (Nyaatsastra) treatise on the performing arts.

For me, a more fascinating question is: Where did the Indian principle of music theory which includes 22 Shruti (microtones) in an octave come from? It is conceivable that this concept came from the mathematical root. The fact that a number ‘zero’ was first used by the Indians making the modern math advances possible is good basis of this idea. Then, it is reasonable to assume that the microtones of 22 Shruti over the musical notes of 7 Swaras in the Indian scale were carefully calculated. In truth, it corresponds perfectly with the mathematical formula of a Pi (π) - ratio of the circumference of a circle to its diameter) equivalent to 22 over 7. Controversially, the word ‘Shruti’ meaning ‘that which is heard’ has been used in many different ways by the Indians, it is used ambiguously to refer to the western musical concepts of pitch, chord, key, and musical range based on my first-hand experience. Although the western scholars interpreted ‘Shruti’ as microtones, its complexity applicable to music is still a debatable subject among many Indian scholars up to these days. One logical idea is that Shruti can be best explained through the Indian expressive elements of Gamakas (musical ornamentations), which are considered to be the most desirable in the Indian musical performance practice. Many of the Indian ways for musical embellishment are expressed through glides, slides, shakes, pitch bending, etc.

The development of Indian music over the millennia has always been about constructing and improving the melodious sounds resulting in various Ragas or melodic frameworks, whereas the western music is mostly about the harmony aspect of the musical
sounds. Some Indian scholars described that the aesthetic principle of Indian vocal music since the ancient time, derived from the harmonic series (overtones or partials of tone), in which the *Tambura* (Indian chordophone with a rich overtone projection) is normally used as a drone to accompany singers. This should explain why the Indian music has naturally progressed along the melodic configurations. As an Indian author, T.V. Subba Rao succinctly put it this way, “A *Svara* or musical note is said to please by itself by reason of its harmonics. The richness of the note is due to the presence of its overtones. Thus each note is harmony to itself.”

When and how the Indian music that supposedly shared the common ancient root did diverge into the North *Hindustani* and the South *Carnatic* systems? Evidently, when the invasion of the Islamic domination over the northern part of Indian around the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and the North India was occupied by the Islamic rulers for centuries later, the differences in Indian musical development of the North and the South had also gradually become more and more prominent. The Persian and Arabic musical traits were mixed, and absorbed with the Raga (melody) system of the North; while the South had continued to remain creatively adhere to the Indian principle and styles. The linguistic component with the use of different musical terminologies becomes problematic for all involved with the study of Indian music in general.

Indeed, the Bhajan singing as the pan-Indian musical practices inherited much of the musical wealth from a rich Indian musical heritage. Although Sai Bhajan is seen as music for the masses, and its musical structures are a lot simpler than those of the Indian classical *Hindustani* and *Carnatic* variations, there are many musical elements borrowed

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from both the North and South Raga systems. Raga means ‘that which is colorful and delightful’ and it can be interpreted as a basic melodic framework for a song or a musical composition as well as an improvisation. Over the millennia of creating and practicing the Raga, the Indian musical heritage has a rich source of melodic materials and the Indian musicians have mastered the techniques of melodic construction to the highest possible quality and quantity. Some of these traits can be heard and seen in the Sai Bhajan music.

**Formats of Sai Bhajan Singing Session**

Literally, a Sai Bhajan session can happen anywhere, indoor or outdoor, for a group of several participants to over ten thousands organized for a special event. During the formative years (1940’s to 1960’s) which was the time when Sathya Sai Baba himself had actively involved in the singing and guiding his participant followers how to get the most out of an effective Sai Bhajan session. Spiritually, a group participatory singing like Sai Bhajan is a process to experience the divinity within a person’s higher self, as well as to praise, pray, contemplate, meditate on the Cosmic Truth that the One divine principle of the Absolute Reality is expressed through various names and forms of the Supreme God.

Ever since the gradual formation of the Sathya Sai organizations began in the 1970’s, and until today, the International Sathya Sai Organization is standing strong to issue directives and other guidelines for all the officially affiliated Sathya Sai Center to follow. The Pittsburgh Sathya Sai center was approved to become a part of this divinely inspired global network in 1996. However, there are some basic requirements that an official center needs to maintain and makes available to the public at all time. First of all, the selection from a general meeting among all Sai adult members who come to the center
on a regular basis, the selected 5 voluntary officers as President, Vice-President, Devotion Coordinator, Education Coordinator and Service Coordinator, all have a shared duty and other specific responsibilities to keep the functions of Sai center running smoothly. One of the requirements stated that a Sai Bhajan singing session should be organized at the same location and the same time on a weekly basis. Thus, out of a rental hall belongs to the Friends Meeting House (the Quakers), a weekly Sai Bhajan singing session happens in Pittsburgh on Saturdays from 4:00–5:00 p.m., and follows by a Study Circle from 5:00–6:00 p.m. while the Sai Spiritual Education is taken place in other rooms at the same time.

Due to my direct involvement with various aspects of activities regularly at the Pittsburgh Sathya Sai center, that is how my early years of observations and later as one of the main musical accompanists for the Sai Bhajan singing session, now had provided me with a thorough understanding of all the sequential descriptive outlines below:

- The Devotion Coordinator sends out emails to all members few days before the Sai Bhajan session of each week, reminding members of the date, time and place of the singing practice and the actual singing session. Meanwhile, a request for those who would like to sing as one of the leaders to send in their particular song’s title, via the Sai center’s website or email back to the coordinator by a specific date and time.

- Usually around 3 p.m. on Saturday before a Sai Bhajan session, a few volunteers set up and decorated the altar consisting of at least a picture of Sathya Sai Baba, a nicely decorated empty chair, candles, incense, Vibhuthi (sacred ash) in containers, a symbol of Sarva Dharma (all 5 religious emblems of Zoroastrian, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity,
and Islam) with the options of some fresh flowers and some foods as Prasad (to be purified and consecrated), etc.

- All the while, a few knowledgeable volunteers set up the portable sound systems, with two speakers and two microphones on each side of the hall. Then, a quick testing is done to make sure that all the sounds work well, adjusting the volume as needed.

- At around 3:30 p.m., the lead singers should be there to run through their selected songs, and to set the first pitch of those songs. Perhaps, a chance to warm up their voices and to be alert of some difficult spots in some of those songs. I personally would not call this a practice as in the western idea on musical practice because of a very limited time allotted to the effort of quality improvement.

- When the rest of all other members arrive, usually 5-10 minutes before the session begins. Women sit on the right side of the hall, and men sit on the left side. Children can sit alongside with either of the parents without restriction. The reason for the men and women in a separate sitting arrangement is for the purpose of spiritual benefits. Since it is a natural tendency of either male or female to be distracted by the opposite gender if they sit next to each other.

- Essentially, there are some sort of cushion fabric sheets spreading over sections of the floor usually a few feet from the altar, for those mostly Indians who used to sit crossed-legs in their culturally inclined habits. However, there are also the regular chairs arranged just behind the floor
sitters, toward the back part of the hall for those who prefer to sit on the
chair, mostly occupied by the elders and the non-Indian participants.
The average number of participants at each Saturday meeting seems to
fluctuate between 30-60 people including children.

- All voluntary musicians, mostly amateurs or semi-professional who
serve as the accompanists with their chosen musical instruments, such
as, Harmonium, Tabla, Kanjira, Manjira, Guitar, Accordion, as well as
Synthesized Keyboard, etc. are supposed to sit at the front row facing
the altar. All the lead singers should sit right behind, or alongside the
musicians, mainly for the easier access to the microphones.

- When all things considered are in place and ready, the singing session
normally begins promptly at 4 p.m. and always starts with the intoning
of AUM (Om chanting 3 times), then follows with a special Sathya Sai
mantra (Three short Sanskrit verses) that has only three pitches, as in
the Vedic citing tradition.

- The first Sai Bhajan song after the initial chanting has to be a Ganesh
song. Ganesh is an Indian popular deity that has the power to clear all
the obstacles to the higher gods as believed by the Hindu people.

- Each singing session may accommodate up to 12 songs, depends on the
length of each song’s duration that may last from 3-5 minutes.
Preferably, whichever gender sings the Ganesh song, then the opposite
gender sings the next one. So, alternating between a male lead singer
and a female lead singer is obviously for the balancing format.
Within the 10-12 main selected songs by individual lead singers, the category of the Guru song and the Sarva Dharma song are required. Sarva Dharma refers to the all-inclusive various names of God. The rest can be the songs devoted to any particular deity, viz., Krishna, Rama, Sathya, Brahma, Shiva, Vishnu, Hanuman, Durga, Devi, etc.

The general pattern of singing each song is usually the lead singer will sing each line of song, to be repeated by the congregation, similar to the call and response process. But the Sai devotees prefer to use the terms ‘lead and repeat’ instead, because it is exactly what has happened like rote learning. To me, this is an opportunity for a publicly available music education. Usually, the lead singer repeats each phrase twice in the first round, and when the entire song is sung the second time in a faster speed, each phrase is sung only once to be repeated by the group. The repertoire of Sai Bhajan songs is so vast that almost every session, there are songs I have never heard before which I still have to flexibly provide for the accompaniment on spot through the practice of an attentively focus listening skill. As always, the whole congregation is encouraged to participate, if not singing, then at least clapping hands along with the rhythms of the song. Most songs must end with the first phrase (beginning of that song) in a gradually slowing speed to a stop.

The concluding segment of the session consists of a few more required chants, viz., Gayatri Mantra, Asatoma chant, singing Arati (a ritual of waving light while singing praise to God for the blessings), Samastha
Loka, and ending with the Vibhuti chant while the two volunteers distributing the so-called Sacred Ash to the participants who wish to have that. Finally, the AUM is again chanted 3 times, gradually slow down to the complete ending of the weekly Sai Bhajan singing session.

**Musicians, Instruments and the Song Selection**

Most prevalently among many of the Sai Bhajan sessions I have seen outside the Pittsburgh Sathya Sai group, it is common for both young and older Indian musicians who can play Harmonium, Tabla, Kanjira and Manjira as the accompaniments for the Sai Bhajan selected songs. At this point, some brief introductory backgrounds of these top four Indian musical instruments are narrated as follows:

**TABLA** – Refers to a set of two drums (one big size and one small size) to which the Indians play with their fingers and palms. The small one is tuned to a specific pitch, while the bigger one projects a low non-pitch bass sound. Nowadays, the tabla is quite popular and well recognized as the Indian native drums that project the unparallel intricacy of percussive sounds. However, the origin of tabla was a fascinating one, as a legend is told that the Indian Sufi saint/poet/musician who served at the court of Delhi Sultanate around the late 13th century to early 14th century named ‘Amir Khusro’ who was supposedly involved in the development of tabla as well as in the invention of Sitar (North Indian string instrument, introduced by Ravi Shankar to the western world). Aside from his skill in Persian poetry, Amir Khusro was also regarded as the father of ‘Qawwali’ that is the devotional music of the Sufis. At some points, he saw the Pakhawaj (ancient Indian barrel drum) broken into halves, that was when the idea of each half put together as a pair, eventually became a low standing pair of a tabla set. The word ‘tabla’ was also assumed to
have derived from the Arabic word for drum ‘tabl’ as mentioned by many Indian scholars. Today, this unique percussion instrument is widely available and the instructions are very accessible in the U.S., as a result, there are sufficient tabla amateurish musicians among the Indian college students who have often come to volunteer as one of the accompanists for the Sai Bhajan singing session.

HARMONIUM – The Indian adapted version of harmonium was originally the invention of the western world. During the British rule over India in the nineteenth century, some missionary groups brought with them the ‘pump organ’ to enhance their works. It did not take long before the Indians especially among commoners, had adopted, then adapted to suit their musical needs as a support to already widespread devotional singing activities. Later, a few nice additional features and quality improvement that were built into their Indian version of the harmonium, even the classical Hindustani vocalists in North India have come to accept the harmonium as a chosen musical instrument to accompany their songs. However, the musicians of the classical Carnatic from South India still will not include the harmonium in their performance. Because the western equal-tempered tuning system is inherent to a harmonium and this limitation cannot support the subtle beauty of the pervasive ornamentations in Carnatic music. Aesthetically, musical embellishment is the integral part of sustaining microtonal system of 22 Shrutis. So instead, the classical Carnatic musicians have fully adopted violin with the Indian playing style into their fold. On the other hand, many common folk genres, such as – the Hindu’s Bhajan, the Sufi’s Qawwali, and the Sikh’s Shabad – all of which are devotional songs of Indian various faiths, have mostly been accompanied by the harmonium. In fact, the Indian musicians of these devotional genres actually prefer harmonium as the main instrument for all their
musical performance. Evidently, the status of harmonium has become and continued to be the chosen main instrument for the Sai Bhajan singing. Primarily because it is portable, reliable and easy to learn how to play a harmonium, therefore, finding someone among the Indian amateurish musicians who is willing to volunteer as one of the accompanists for the Sai Bhajan singing session is relatively accessible.

KANJIRA – This is an Indian term for a small hand-held frame drum, similar to the tambourine of the west. In fact, all the kanjiras I have seen around, that are played as a rhythmic support to the Sai Bhajan singing look more like the Indian version of a regular tambourine. Because when I did a research into the real native of Indian kanjira, all the descriptions along with the pictures and photos of kanjira I had investigated into, so far they are not the same as those I have actually observed during the Sai Bhajan session. Even though they are all related to the frame drum family, but a few crucial differences clearly exist. For example, the original native kanjira of India has a smaller size and the only solitary jingle attached to the hole in the frame, whereas the kanjira I have come across within the Sai groups is an imitation of tambourine with several jingles attached around the outer frame, and the membrane looks and feels like synthetic skin. For the practical purpose, the Indian version of tambourine, conveniently called ‘Kanjira’ that is available in a few different sizes, from about 7 inches to 12 inches in diameter, as I saw in the Indian musical stores during my several trips to India in the past. Amazingly though, sometimes I witness the incredible techniques of a skillful player who can manipulate and produce variety of great rhythmic sound quality out of the Indian synthetic tambourine, and it is a good substitute for percussive support whenever the tabla player is not available. In a normal situation, a kanjira musician should play as a support to the tabla player during the
Sai Bhajan singing. I actually know kanjira players who had told me they learn some of the drum techniques by listening and watching the trained musician’s performance without any real lesson. Occasionally, there may be more than one kanjira player in a Sai Bhajan session. Then each should take turn to accompany in different Bhajan song, one at a time, otherwise, it is too overwhelming with crashing rhythms in my participatory experience.

MANJIRA – A term for a pair of small finger cymbals, they are made of metals, such as, bronze, brass, copper and zinc. There are other names, i.e., kartal, jalra, etc. which refer to the similar pair of finger cymbals like manjira. The origin of manjira has an ancient root that can be seen on the wall of temples since the earliest time. Other cultures, mostly in the Southeast Asia, e.g., Thailand that had long been linked to the ancient India, also claimed finger cymbals as an important part of her musical culture. In any case, manjira may be small, but the metallic sounds out of a good player can contribute to accentuated effect in a big way. For the Sai Bhajan Singing session, manjira is a very important factor in making or breaking the overall musical atmosphere in a hall. That means the manjira player has to be very attentive to the balancing of sound dynamics. It is best to keep them away from the young children during the Bhajan session, and only the musically inclined adult should pick up this instrument. Because this is the only musical instrument that has been taken for granted and anyone can play them, therefore, there is no such concept as the specialized musician in finger cymbals. Perhaps it is only happen at the Pittsburgh Sai center, that I never know who might pick up the finger cymbals belonging to the center and begin to experimenting with them on spot. This had been my real life encounter that made me feeling uncomfortable due to my serious concern toward the overall musical quality.
Aside from the four Indian musical instruments mentioned, practically and flexibly, any other kind of musical instruments are welcome to be a part of the supportive accompaniment ensemble, as long as the combined sounds are balanced while the voice of the lead singers can still be heard. At the Sathya Sai Center of Pittsburgh over the past 15 years until the present time, I have witnessed from time to time that musicians had brought along their instruments such as, Pakhawaj (ancient Indian barrel drum), Dholak (a shorter Indian modern barrel drum), Bongo drum, accordion, violin, guitar, synthesizer keyboard, flute, etc. The fact that Pittsburgh Sai membership fluctuates between 40-60 people, small enough for an open-door policy, which means any average musician playing any musical instrument is encouraged to participate as part of the group accompaniments. As a result, the sound quality can be unpredictable sometimes. However, the on-going effort to keep improving the quality of the Sai Bhajan session has been steadily making progress. For many bigger Sai centers in some other cities, the stricter standard concerning who can join the group accompaniments has to be observed, as it should be.

Regarding the Sai Bhajan song selections for a regular weekly singing session, currently, an open-policy at the Pittsburgh center is applied to the potential lead singers as well. Out of courtesy at times, a lead singer may send me the online link of the selected song that is either new or difficult song to familiarize about few days in advance, for the up-coming Sai Bhajan session. Ideally though, I always wish that there would be a real western style practice at least 2 hours each week, preparing for the actual Bhajan session. As far as I know, the Sai Bhajan repertoire keeps growing globally at a steady pace. But normally, a Sai Bhajan song is short with simple lyrics, and that is a huge advantage for most people to learn the song on spot.
The most recent trend coming down from the regional devotional coordinator is the pairing up the lead singers for the same song whenever is possible. The purpose is to give more singers an opportunity to become lead singers and partly it is an experimentation that can help improving the song quality. Also perhaps it can slow down the proliferation of newly invented tunes, since it is more difficult for two persons to synchronize with the newly learned tunes. That means the more familiar older Sai Bhajan songs will have more chance to be selected as part of the Bhajan session. Already as I had observed, a number of Sai Bhajan songs I had learned at least 10 years ago, now rarely get included in the Sai Bhajan session. As many younger Sai devotees are attracted to the more recent publicly available tunes online that I realized some of the older tunes became things of the past. At least I am glad I had preserved many of them in my Sai Bhajan transcription project.

The author in front of Sri Sathya Sai Mirpuri College of Music, in Puttaparthi
An indication that music is an important part of Sai organization,
Inaugurated by Sathya Sai Baba in the year 2000
CHAPTER SIX

WESTERN MUSICAL NOTATION

Transcription Process and Products

How did I manage a long tedious process of musical transcriptions? It began with my own frustration with the seemingly easy and simple Indian Sai Bhajan tunes, yet I could not grasp some of the elusive melodic details that I thought I heard during the Sai Bhajan singing session to be registered in my memory. Since the year 2000, I decided that I should and had started to notate some of these fascinating tunes, as an attempt to become one of the lead singers while also accompanying myself on the keyboard synthesizer. I must admit here that it has been an extremely difficult task to transfer the musical sounds into any visual images. My initial instinct is to jot down each of the melodic phrases in the Chinese numbering system of musical notation I had learned from my father. It is quick and simple like a short hand style of writing. However, because of my music education background and now a music teacher, I want to use many of these Indian Bhajan tunes as a teaching tool. So the next step is to transfer my short hand writings into a western style notation by hand with staff paper and pencil. Later on, when I had learned how to use Finale software effectively enough, I then transfer my hand-written transcriptions into the computer for a printable clean look in a western notational system. Hence, I would like to elaborate on the procedure as well as to explain some of the non-standard symbols that I had creatively utilized to accommodate a few unique features of the Sai Bhajan songs, as an adaptation into the western staff notational system.
Several special characteristics of Sai Bhajan in performance practice are as follows:

- Like most other Indian musical performance, a slight flexibility for a lead singer to express a personal preference in terms of shaping the melodic contour and, or the rhythmic variety into singing a particular phrase is allowed. It is similar to the jazz singing style. The same song may already have a few variations in oral tradition as well as in the audio-recordings. This is why I chose to do prescriptive transcription to reflect my personal adaptive style into making notation for the Sai Bhajan songs.

- Because of the *Lead and Repeat* format in Sai Bhajan singing, the overlapping singing of two phrases happens naturally with harmonious effect at times. For this situation, I use the symbol ( ) as an indication on those overlapping words and notes. In conjunction with >> when it needs to move forward to the next phrase, or << when it needs to go back to the same phrase. For the parentheses without any arrows, that situation is flexible and optional.

- Sometimes I may use the star symbol * as an alert for a special attention to something out of ordinary, an uncommon situation within the Sai Bhajan practice.

- The grace notes I apply to Sai Bhajan songs should be interpreted as glides or slides toward the main notes in a flexible manner, not in a crispy quick stroke preceding the main note as in a western classical style. Intentionally, I also slur them for the smooth sliding effect with the main note, to reflect the Indian singing practice.

- As a vocal genre, all the words in the Sai Bhajan songs have a priority to be clearly seen. Therefore, I sometimes have to break away from the conventional way of notation as an adaptation to the unusually long Indian words.
• Currently, as Sai Bhajan music continues to expand and evolve, the majority of its vast repertoire derived from the existing Raga (melodic framework) within the Indian musical practice and its theory. Because of the popular use of Harmonium that was influenced by the western pump organ, this emerging global genre as Sai Bhajan seems to have gravitated more and more toward the western sounds, but usually without a definite sense of the main key of the entire song. Therefore, the use of key signature is only obligatorily notated, mostly for the adjustment of the vocal range in that particular song. A quick shifting between major and minor sounds, or seemingly in different keys for each phrase is especially intriguing to me. The chord symbols I apply to each song should be considered only as a relatively flexible guideline, as they are my preference for a keyboard accompaniment and as an aid to the popular use of the guitar to accompany the Sai Bhajan songs in recent time, preferably by many westernized singers among the younger generation.

**Procedure for notating the Sai Bhajan songs**

This is a step by step describing my notational techniques with Finale software, an input into the computer, following the preliminary repeated focus listening until all the melodies had been extracted into the transcription of a Sai Bhajan song on a staff paper.

1. To determine the key signature of a Sai Bhajan song, I visually analyze the highest pitch and the lowest pitch of that song. Then, I select the most comfortable vocal range for average people, usually a middle range so that I can fit the song into the staff notation in treble clef with the intention to have the fewest leger lines required, while also with the fewest accidentals needed. Most songs are sung in duple meter with a rare exception in triple meter (only 2 out of 108 songs in this dissertation).
2. Pre-screening and sorting songs according to the length of each Sai Bhajan song already transcribed on staff paper, then visually matching the two short songs to be notated on the same page, or the longer one in a full page. This step takes extra effort on my part, but it is done for the sake of efficiency to conserve as well as to minimize the waste of space in papers.

3. The title of each song derived from the first few words of the song text itself. It is a tricky situation when I try to fit two different songs on the same page, because the computer along with the Finale will treat the two songs, recognizing only as one composition. To manipulate this situation, it requires extra time, phrase by phrase, and note by note individually input, navigating through both speedy entry and simple entry, interchangeably throughout the process of the musical note entry.

4. After the page is filled with all the basic melodic notation input, I use ‘Type to Score’ function to click syllable by syllable for the lyrics entry, matching with each note or group of notes above. At this stage, some adjustments are made along the way so that all the words can be clearly seen.

5. To achieve the importance of the expressive values in musical embellishments, I apply grace notes where they are preferred through my listening analyses; while also, applying slurs to groups of notes where they should be. Seemingly, the slurs are extensively used, but that is when and where a Sai Bhajan song should sound very smoothly connected within a phrase, much more so than the western style practice (unless the song is sung by the westernized person). Traditionally, the theoretical aspect of the Indian music mentions that the only two stable pitches within an octave are the fourth and the fifth notes; all the other tones (notes) in the
same octave are considered unstable and always adjustable or bendable by the individual singer. Therefore, slurs should be interpreted as a stretchable smoothly connected sound of two or more notes. This is my attempt to fulfill the Indian style expressiveness in all Sai Bhajan musical notations.

6. A ‘Play Back’ mode in the Finale program is useful to double check for the accuracy of sounds in a particular song. If something sounded strange happens, then I know I need to revise some of the pitches or note values at this stage.

7. Now I inspect visually the almost finishing page, as I pay more attention to every syllable and word since the text is a foreign language to me. Also because my ability to learn the tunes is better than the words, as I have often stumbled over words rather than the tune itself, based on my past experience during the singing session. Meanwhile, some other details especially the spacing that should be balanced throughout the page, is adjusted click by click. Often times, I may have unintentionally ignored the conventional standard of western notations out of the obsession for a well-balanced looking page and the words stay cleared of blockage.

8. A step to print out the finish product, page by page, to test whether the notation can be easily read in singing with the keyboard or the guitar. At this time, I jot down the chords I believe are most suitable at particular points. I usually run through this testing stage over weeks or months before I am satisfy with the sound I heard when the western chords are used. Experimenting with different chords at the same point, or the same chord at different point are needed until I feel it sounds like the tunes I have heard before.
9. When it is all completed, now it is time to bring my notation to a live session of Sai Bhajan singing. At this point, I can sense experientially and intuitively that if the Indians within the Sai Bhajan circle have no problem following my singing with notation in front of me, then I know the product is good and ready to go public. Otherwise, any glitches happen during the singing session at all, I will go back and re-examine for the possible mistakes on that page. This is a procedural loop I have gone through over and over again for the past 10 years, to evaluate the Sai Bhajan collection in western staff notation, and perhaps for many more years ahead.

![A decorated Altar set-up at the Sathya Sai Center of Pittsburgh on the special occasion of Rama Navami Day celebration with an extended Sai Bhajan singing session in 2014](image)

**Note:** For this dissertation, I had managed to complete prescriptive transcription of 108 songs in western staff notational system, all of which are presented in the following pages.
Akhand Jyoti
Allah Tuma Ho

Transcribed by Praphai Boonsermsu Wong

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Amba Mandahasa

Parti Puri Mey

Transcribed by Praphai Boonsermsuwong
Bhajore Bhai

Bhajore Bhai Sairam Partipurisha

Sairam (Putta) Bhajore Bhai Sairam

Dwaraamaayi Sairam Sadasukhadayi

Sairam Partipurisha Sairam (Putta)

(Hey) Shirdipurisha Sairam

Bolo Narayana

Bolo Narayana Jai Jai Vittal Sairanaraya

Ranga Ranga Vittal Bolo Narayana Jai Jai Vittal

Govinda Krishna Nam Rukumayi Vittal Gopala Krishna Nam

Pandu Ranga Vittal Sairanga Vittal Sairanga Vittal

Transcribed by Praphai Boonsermsuwong
Bhajore Manava

C F C F G7 G7 C C G7 C C F C F G7 G7
Bha-jo-re_ Ma-na-va  Sad-gu-ru_ De-va_  Pa-ra-ma_ Kr'pa-lu_

C C G7 C C C F C C F G7
Sai Ma-ha-de-va  Bha-jo-re_ Ma-na-va  Sad-gu-ru_ De-va_

G7 C C G7 C C F G7
Ni-sa Din-a_ Dhyan-a Ka-ru_ Main_ Te-ra_ Ja-na-ma_ Ja-na-ma_ Ka_

C G7 C F C C Am G7
Mi-te_ An-de-ra_ Pa-ra-bram-a_ Pu-mesh-va-ra_ Ru-pa_

C D G Am G7 G7 C C G7 C
Pa-ra-bram-a_ Pa-ra-mesh-va-ra_ De-va_  Pa-ra-ma_ Kr'pa-lu_ Sai Ma-ha-de-va

Hari Hari Om

D D D D Bm A
Ha-ri_ Ha-ri_ Om_ Shi-va_ Shan-ka-ra_ Om_ Na-rya-na_ Ha-ri_ Om_

D D D D
Na-rya-na_ Ha-ri_ Om (Sai)_ Ke-sha-va_ Hey_ Shi-va_ Ma-dhava_ Hey

D D D D Bm A D
Na-rya-na_ Ha-ri_ Om  Na-rya-na_ Ha-ri_ Om (Sai)

D G D G Bm A Bm G D
Pa-ramat-ma_ An-ta-ra-ya-mi_ Na-rya-na_ Ha-ri_ Om

Bm A Bm A D
Na-rya-na_ Ha-ri_ Om  Na-rya-na_ Ha-ri_ Om (Sai)

Transcribed by Prophai Boonsermsuwong
Danava Bhanjana

Jai Sai Ram

Transcribed by Praphai Boonsermsuwong
Deena Dayala

Deena daya la Har i Par ma daya la

Ra-dha Ra-ma na Har i Go vin da Go pa la Deena daya la Har i

Para ma daya la Ma du ra Ma no ha r i Krish na Go pa la

Ra-dha Ra-ma na Har i Go vin da Go pa la Meera Ke Prabhu

Gi ri dha ra Ba la Brin da va na Har i Ma da na Go pa la

Bhola Bhandari

Bo la Bha nda ri Ba ba Shi va Shi va Shi va Sai Ba ba

A ra tha Raksha ka Di na Da ya la Pa ti ta Pa va na Sai Ba ba

Bo la Bha nda ri Ba ba Shi va Shi va Shi va Sai Ba ba

Yo gesh wa ra Sai Mu ra ri Yo gesh wa ra Hey Tri pu ra ri

Nit ya na da Brahma nan da Pre ma nan da Sai Ba ba

Transcribed by Prapthai Boonsermsu Wong
**Durga Bhavani**

```
D E m D A D7 D
Dur - ga Bhav-a-ni Ma J - ya J - ya Sai Ma
E D A D7 D
Ka - li Ka-pa - li - ni Ma J - ya J - ya Sai Ma
D E m D A D7 D
Dur - ga Bhav-a-ni Ma J - ya J - ya Sai Ma
D7 E m A m E m D7 D
Pa - ra - ma Shi - va - ya - ni Ma J - ya J - ya Sai Ma
D7 E m A D7 D
Ja - ga - do - dha - ri - ni Ma J - ya J - ya Sai Ma
```

**Keshava Madhava**

```
D E m D E m D D E m D E m D
Kesha-va Madhava Ja - ya De - va Madhu - su-da-na Ne-tra Ka - ma - la Da-la -
D E m A D D E m D
Ati-va Ma - no - ha - ra An - ta-ra - ya - mi Prabh - hu Pa - ra-mesh - va - ra
D D D D D D D D
Ma - ya Ma - nusha Ve-sha Li - la - dhava Ma - ya Ma - nusha Ve-sha Li-la - dhava
G D E m D D D E m D D D
Ma - ya Ma - nusha Ve-sha Li-la - dhava An - ta-ra - ya - mi Prabh - hu Pa-ra-mesh -va - ra
```

Transcribed by Praphai Boonsermsuwong
Durge Durge

Hara Shiva Shankara

Transcribed by Praphai Boonsermsuwong
Gajanana Hey

Gajanana Hey Shubhannana
Para-ma Niranjan Ga-java-da-na Va-kra-tun-da-dhara
Vighna Vinsha Prana-va Swara-pa Parti-purisha
Sid-dhi Vinya-ka Pa-hi Ga-jana-na Para-ma Niran-ja-na
Ga-java-da-na Para-ma Niran-ja-na Ga-java-da-na

Amba Bhavani

Amba Bhavani Shiva Sharna-bhu Kumara
Sri Gana Natha Shanta-ka-ra
Pura-nu Pura-sha Satya Sai Na-tha
Pra-nu-va Swara-pa Parti-sha

Transcribed by Praphai Boonemsuwong
Ganesha Charanam

Gajavadana

Transcribed by Praphai Boonsermsuwong
Gauri Ganesh

Atma Nivasi Ram

Transcribed by Praphai Boonsermsuwong
Govinda Bolo

Transcribed by Praphai Boonsermsuwon
Govinda Kr'ishna Jai

G  D7  C  G  C  G
Govinda Kr'ishna Jai Go-pa-la Kr'ishna Jai Go-pa-la Ba-la Ba-la Radha Kr'ishna Jai

G  D7  C  G  C  G
Kr'ishna Jai Kr'ishna Jai Kr'ishna Jai Kr'ishna Kr'ishna Kr'ishna Kr'ishna Jai

G  D7  C  G  C  G
Gopika Ma-la Ha-rIpyari Ma-yI Mi-ra Ma-na Vi-ha-ri Ma-da-na Mo-ha-na Mu-ra-li Dhari Kr'ishna Jai

G  D7  C  G  C  G
Kr'ishna Jai Kr'ishna Jai Kr'ishna Jai Kr'ishna Kr'ishna Kr'ishna Kr'ishna Jai

G  D7  C  G  C  G
Kr'ishna Jai Ra-ma Kr'ishna Jai Ra-dha Kr'ishna Jai Ba-la Kr'ishna Kr'ishna Kr'ishna Kr'ishna Jai

Ayodhya Vasi Ram

G  A  C  G  A  G
Ayodhya Vasi Ram Ram Ram Da-sha-ra-tha Na-nda-na Ram

G  A  C  A  G
Pa-tI-ta Pa-va-na Ja-na-ki Ji-va-na Si-ta Mo-ha-na Ram

G  A  C  A  G
Ayodhya Vasi Ram Ram Ram Da-sha-ra-tha Na-nda-na Ram

G  A  C  G  A  G
Pa-tI-ta Pa-va-na Ja-na-ki Ji-va-na Si-ta Mo-ha-na Ram

Transcribed by Praphai Boonsermsuwong
Guru Dev

Trancribed by Praphai Boonsermsuwong
Hara Hara Hara Hara

Jaya Jaya Jaya Jaya

Transcribed by Praphai Boonsermsuwong
Hara Hara Mahadeva

Rahimana

Transcribed by Praphai Boonsermsuwong
Hari Om Namah

Govinda Murahari

Transcribed by Prphai Boonsermsuwong
Hey Gananatha

Vighneshvaram

Transcribed by Praphai Boonsermsuwong
Hey Govinda

Am Dm Am Dm Am Dm Am
Hey Govinda__ Hey Gopa-la__ Hey Madhava Madhura-da-na

Am Dm Am Dm Gm Gm
Ao A-o__ Pra-bhu A-o A-o Mujhe-ya__ Kar-a Da-ra-shanti Ka-o

Am Dm Am Dm Am
Hey Govinda__ Hey Gopa-la__ Hey Madhava Madhura-da-na

Dm C Am Gm Am
Sathya Dharma Shan-ti Prem-a Swara-va

Am Dm Am Dm Am
Ao A-o__ Pra-bhu A-o A-o A-o A-o__ Pra-bhu

G7 Am Dm Gm Am
Ao A-o__ Mujhe-ya__ Kar-a Da-ra-shanti Ka-o

Shambho Mahadeva

D A D G D A D G A
Shambho Mahadeva__ Shiva Shambho Mahadeva

D G A G D G A D A
Samba Sada__ Shiva Sai__ Shan-ka-ra Shambho Mahadeva

G D G D G D D A
Ha-ra Ha-ra Shambho__ Bhava Bhaya Ha-ra Ha-ra Shambho

D G D G D D G A
Shiva Shiva Shiva Shambho__ Sathya Sai-shvara Shambho

Transcribed by Praphai Boonsermsuwong

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Jagadodharini Ma

Nandalala Yadu

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Jagado Dharini

Rama Rama Sai Rama

Transcribed by Praphai Boonersmsuwong

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Jagatpate Hari

Mita Smita

Transcribed by Praphai Boonsermsuwong
Jai Jai Jai Gana

**Bm** A Bm A A Bm A Bm
Jai Jai Jai Gana Na-ya-kā Jai Jai Vigh-na Vi-na-sha-kā

**Bm** A Bm A A Bm A Bm
Jai Shubha Mangala Da-ya-kā Vid-ya Bud-dhi Pra-da-yā-kā

**D** D D D D **Em**
Gaja-va-da-na Gauri Nanda-na Gaja-va-da-na

**Bm** A D A D A D Bm
Gauri Nanda-na Gan-ga-dha-ra Shi-va Shun-bho Nanda-na

Gauri Sutaya

**Bm** A Bm Em Bm A Em Bm Em
Gauri Sutaya Om Namah Om Lambodara-yā

**Bm** A Bm Bm A Bm Em Bm A
Om Namah Om Gauri Sutaya Om Namah Om

**Em** Em Em Em **Em**
Vighneshvara Om Namah Om Bha-va Duhka Bhan-ja-na

**Bm** A Bm Em Bm A Em Bm A Bm Em
Om Namah Om Bha-va Duhka Bhan-ja-na Om Namah Om

Transcribed by Praphai Boonsermsuwong
Jai Jai Jai Jaya Ma

Para Karo Udghara

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Jaya Jagadisha

Hey Brahma Hey

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Jaya Rama

Manasa Bhajore

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Kalatitaya

Gm Bb F Bb

Ka-la-ti-ya Sid-dhi-ru-pa-ya Yogesh-wa-ra-ya Na-mo

Gm Cm Bb Gm

Ja-ga-ti-ya Visht-ra-pa-ya Sai-shwa-ra-ya Na-rollo (Sathy)

Bb F Bb F Bb F Bb Gm

Om Namah Shi-va-ya Shi-va-ya Namah Om Om Namah Shi-va-ya Shi-va-ya Namah Om

Cm Bb F Bb Bb F Bb

Om Namah Shi-va-ya Shi-va-ya Namah Om Om Namah Shi-va-ya Shi-va-ya Namah Om

Bb F Bb F Bb Cm Bb F Bb Bb F Bb

Shi-va-ya Na-mah Om Om Namah Shi-va-ya Shi-va-ya Namah Om

Bhajo Madhura

Bm A E Bm A Bm A Bm A

Bhajo Ma-dhu-ra Har-i Nam Ni- ran- ta-ra Bha-jo Ma-dhu-ra Har-i

Bm Bm A Bm A Bm A Bm

Nam_ Sa- ra-la Bha- va Se_ Sai_ Bha-jo

Bm A Bm A Bm D A A E D E

Ma-dhu-ra Bha-va Se_ Ba-ba Bha-jo_ Har-i Hi Su-kha Hai

Bm E Bm Bm A Bm E Bm

Ha-ri Hi Shan-ti Ha-ri Pra-shan-ti Ni-va-si_ Ram

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Kali Yuga

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Kanhaiya

Hey Nanda la la Gopala Gopala Party

Ishwara Allah

Krishna Krishna Tere Nam Karna Sangra Sai Ram

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Krishna Bhajo

Antara Jyoti Namo

Transcribed by Praphai Boonsermsuwong
Kr'shna Mukunda

E A D A E D A

Krishna Mu-kun-da Go-vin-da Gi-ri dhra Mu-ra-li Mo-ha-na

D7 D A Am Am

Na-ra-ya-na Par-ti Pu-ran-da-ra Na-ra-ya-na

E7 Am Em Am Am Am

Ma-dhava Sri Har-i Man-da-ra Gi-ri-dha-ri Go-vin-da Mu-ra-ha-ri

E Am (>>) Am D Am D Am D Am D Am

Na-ra-ya-na (Sai) Par-ti Pu-raan-da-ra Na-ra-ya-na (Sai)

Am Am

Patita Pavana

Am G7 Am E m D m G7 Am (<<)

Pa-ti-ta Pa-va-ra Ram Par-ti pu-rish-wa-ra Ram (Putta)

Am G7 Am D m Am Am

Pu-va-na Nam Tha-ra-ka Nam Pa-pa Vi-mo-ch-a-na Ram

Am G Am G7 Am E m

Du-na-va Bhan-ja-na Ram Du-sa-ra-tha Nan-da-na Ram

Am G7 Am D m Am Am

Pu-va-na Nam Tha-ra-ka Nam Pa-pa Vi-mo-ch-a-na Ram

Transcribed by Praphai Boonsertsuwong
Madhuvana Sanchari

Sai Baba Pranam

Transcribed by Praphai Boonsermsuwong
Mana Eka Bar

Man-a Eka Bar-a Ha-ri Bol— Ha-ri Ha-ri Bol-

Ha-ri Bol— Ma-na Eka Bar-a Ha-ri Bol—

Ha-ri Pi-ta Ha-ri Ma-ta Ha-ri Gu-ru Gi-nna

Da-ta Chi-da-nan-da Ru-pa Ha-ri Pa-ti-ta Pa-vna

Ha-ri Eka Bar-a Ha-ri Bol—

Ma-na Eka Bar-a Ha-ri Bol— Ha-ri Ha-ri Ha-ri

Bo-lo Bha-va Sin-duhu Pa-ra Ka-ra-lo—

Ni-ya-nan-da Ru-pa Ha-ri Pa-ti-ta Pa-vna

Ha-ri Eka Bar-a Ha-ri Bol—

Transcribed by Praphai Boonsermsuwong
Mata Pita Guru

Punya Nam

Transcribed by Praphai Boosernuswong
Nacho Nacho

Dasharatha Nandana

Transcribed by Praphai Boonsermsuwong
Nityanandam

Dm Am Dm Am Dm
Nityanandam Sat-chida-nandam Hari Hari Hari Om
Am Dm F C F C Dm
Nara-yana Nara-yana Sai Nara-yana
Am Dm Am Dm Dm
Hari Hari Hari Om Nara-yana Premaswarupa
Dm Am F C Dm
Premananda Premananda
Am Dm Am Dm F C F C
Hari Hari Hari Om Nara-yana Hari Hari Hari Om
C Dm F C Dm Am Dm
Nara-yana Nara-yana Sai Nara-yana

Nirupama Guna

C F C C Bbm C
Nirupama Guna Sada ma Chara-na Neera Ya Da-la Nara- na
C Bbm C Bbm C Bbm C Bbm C
Kasha-bura Vesh Dhar Na Kal Yu Ga A-vat ara
Fm C C Fm C Fm C Fm C Fm C Fm C
Nitya Ranja na Nir ma-la Chori-ta Nirupa ma Yojina dra
Fm C Fm C Fm C Fm C Fm C Fm C
Maha Teja Nara-ja Vimja Asha Pasha Nagesha Sai-sha

Transcribed by Praphai Boonsermsuwong
O Bhagavan

Shiva Maheshvara

Transcribed by Praphai Boonsermsuawong
Om Namah Shivaya

Transcribed by Praphui Boonsermsuwong
Prashanti Nilaya

Prashanti Nilaya Ram Hey Party Puri Bhagavan
Ahalya-damka Ram Hey Dasratha Raghu Ram
Sri Ram Jaya Ram Sri Ram Ram Ram
Jaya Ram Sri Ram Ram Ram Jaya Ram

Radhe Mukunda

Radhe Mukunda Muraari Govinda
Govinda Govinda Ananda Govinda Govinda
Ananda Govinda Govinda Ananda
Bm Em Bm Em Bm
Radhe Mukunda Muraari Govinda
Giri-dhari Giri-dhari Ananda Giri-dhari Giri-dhari
Ananda Giri-dhari Giri-dhari Ananda
D G D A D G D A D

Transcribed by Praphai Boonsermsuwong
Prema Se Bolo

Prema Se Bo-lo Eka Bar Sai Ram (Jai Jai) Ram Sai Ram

Ram (Bo-lo) Ram Ram Sai Ram

Premna Se Bo-lo Eka Bar Sai Ram (Hey) Madhu-ra Ma-no-ha-ra

Ram (Hey) Mohana Murata Ram (Hey)

Ka-ru-na Sin-dhu Ram (Hey) Raghupa-ti Raghava

Ram (Hey) Patita Pavana Ram (Jai Jai)

Ram Sai Ram (Bo-lo) Ram Sai Ram

Jai Hari Krishna

Jai Hari Krishna Jai Hari Krishna Gowardana Giri-dha -

G7 C G7 C C C G7

G7 C G7 C G7 C

Manjula Kunja Vihari (Jai) Manjula Kunja Vihari

Transcribed by Praphei Boonsermsuwong
Rama Bolo

D Em D Em G D
Rama Bolo Jai Krishna Bolo Har Re Rama Har Re Rama
D Em D G D G D G D G D
Sai Rama Bolo Rama Bolo Jai Krishna Bolo Har Krishna Har Krishna
D Em D A D A D A
Sai Krishna Bolo Ram Ram Bolo Har Krishna Bolo
D A
Ram Ram Bolo Har Krishna Bolo Ram Ram Bolo Har Krishna
Em D G D G D Em D
Ha Re Krishna Bolo Ha Re Krishna Ha Re Krishna Sai Krishna Bolo

Ravikula

D Em A D
Ravi Ku La Man Da Na Ra Jiva Lo Cha Na Rag ha Va
D Em A D D
Vasu De Va Nu Da Na Ban Dha Vi Mo Cha Na Ke Sha Va Ra Vi Ku La Man Da Na
D Em A D D Em A
Ra Jiva Lo Cha Na Rag ha Va Ka Ru Na Ni Ke Tha Na Krish Na Ja Na r Dhana
D Em A D D Em A
Ya Da Va Sri Mal hu Su Da Na Mura Li Mo ha Na Ma Dhava

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Rama Hare Hari

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Triloka Palini
Rama Hare Sai

Chitta Chora

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Rama Sumira

A E7 A
Rama Sumira Mana Rama Sumira Mana

A E7 A
Rama Sumira Mana Ram Jana-ki Vallabha

A E7 E A E A
Dasharatha Nandana Rama Chandra Sri Ram

Bhajamana Sitarama Ram Bhajamana Sita Ram Bhajamana Radhe Shyama Shyam

Bhajamana Radhe Shyam Bhajamana Sai Ram Sai Ram

Sai Jagannatha

G D A m G D A m D7 A m G A m G
Sai Jagannatha Hey Sai Jagannatha Hey Sai Jagannatha (Hey)

D A m D A m G
Deena Bandhu Sai Natha Karuna Sindhu Jagannatha

G D G D D A m D7 G
Hey Sai Jagannatha Hey Sai Jagannatha (Hey)

G D A m G D A m D7 A m G A m G
Sai Jagannatha Hey Shirdi Jagannatha Hey Parthi Jagannatha (Hey)

Transcribed by Praphai Boonsermsuwoong
Ram Ram Bhaja

Mrityunjaya

Transcribed by Praphai Boonsermsuwong
Sai Avatara

MUSIC:

(G7) E♭ D♭ C C7 Am C E♭ F
Sai Avataram Yuga Avataram Dina Dayala

(C7) F E♭ F E♭ F C7 F E♭ F F B♭ Am
San-kata Ha-ra Sai Bhima Sai Vishnu Sai Maheshwa-

(C) B♭ D m F G7 E♭ D♭ C C7 Am C
ra Sai Avataram Yuga Avataram

(D m) E♭ F B♭ Am G7 D m E♭ B♭
Sathya Sai Prem Sai Sabha Dharwak Ke-

(B♭) Am E♭ F B♭ Am C B♭ D m
Baba Sai Sai Parameshwara

Guru Deva

MUSIC:

(D m) Am D m Am D m
Guru Deva Sharanaam Deva

(D m) Am D m D m
Pahi Prabho Sharanaam Deva Guru Deva

(A m) D m Am D m D m Am D m G7 A m G7 D m
Sharanaam Deva Sundara Ru-pa Sri Sai Deva

(D m) Am A m D m Am D m
Sharanaam Sharanaam Sath Guru Deva

Transcribed by Praphai Boonsermsuwong
Sai Bhajana Bina

Transcribed by Praphai Boonsermsuwong
Sai Hamara

D G A D G D Em D A A D
Sai Ha-ma-ra__ Ham Sai__ Ke Ai-so__ Pre-ma Ha-ma-ra__

D B m A A B m A B m
Sai Ram Ha-ma-ra__ Sai__ Ram Ha-ma-ra__ (Sai)

D G A D G D Em D A A D
Sa-thy Sai__ Hai Nam-a Tum-ha-ra Shír-di Sai__ A-va-ta-ri__

D B m A A B m A B m
Sai Ram Ha-ma-ra__ Sai__ Ram Ha-ma-ra__ (Sai)

D G A D G D Em D A A D
Hindu Mus-a-lim Sikh I-sai__ Sa-ba-ka__ Pa-la-na Ha-m__

D B m A A B m A B m
Sai Ram Ha-ma-ra__ Sai__ Ram Ha-ma-ra__ (Sai)

Shirdi Sai Shankara

F D m F D m Bb C D m Bb F
Shi-rá-dí Sai__ Shánk-á-ra__ Par-tí Vi-ha-ri Shánk-á-ra

F Bb Bb F Bb C F
Shánk-á-ra Abha-yánk-á-ra__ Bháva Bháya Ha-ní Shánk-á-ra

C C F C C D F F C F Bb F
Pa-ram-ma Shi-va Shánk-á-ra__ Pa-va-na Po-ru-sha Shánk-á-ra

C Bb F Bb F D m C F F
Sa-thya Swá-ru-pa Shánk-á-ra__ Sa-thya Sai__ Shánk-á-ra

Transcribed by Praphai Boosersmsuwong
Sai Kanhaiya

C G7 C

G7 C G7 C G7

Sai Kanhaiya Sai Kanhaiya Sai Kanhaiya

G7 C G7 C G7 C G7

Sai Kanhaiya Para Koro Meri hva na Nai ya

C G7 C

Em Am C

Tuma Ho Meri Ma Bap a Bhai ya Atma Niva si

C C Dm C7 C

Krish na Kanhaiya Atma Niva si Sai Kanhaiya

C G7 Am C G7 C G7 C

Para Koro Meri hva na Nai ya

Shankara Sadashiva

E B A E A E

E A E A B E A

Shan ka ra Sa da shi va Cban dra Shek ha ra

E A E A B E A

Chan dra Shek ha ra Sai Shan ka ra Ni la Kan tha Shu la dha ri

E A E A E

Sai Shan ka ra Pha la Ne tra Tri pu ra Ha ri

A E A E A B E

Sai Shan ka ra Chun dra Shek ha ra Sai Shan ka ra

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Sai Natha Bhagavan

Nandalala Navanita

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Sankata Harana

Eka Bara Kshama

Transcribed by Pruphai Boonsermsu Wong
Sathguru Sai

Sathguru Sai Surswathi Brahma Devi Sai
Bharathi Mangala Manjula Vaiga Vilsini
Veenavadi Kaivalvathi Hamasa Vahini
Vidyadayini Hamasa Vahini Vidyadayini
Veda Mata Srisai Bhagavathi

Parti Pate

Parti Pate Harina Narayana Om Guna Vahana Harina
Narayana Om Vishnu Janardhana Narayana Om
Sai Narayana Jaaya Hari Om Hari Hari Om
Hari Hari Om Sai Narayana Jaaya Hari Om

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Shambho Shankara Deva

Transcribed by Praphai Boonsermsuwong
Shiva Shankara

Jaya Guru Omkara

Transcribed by Praphai Boonsermsuwong
Tuma Ho Mere

Transcribed by Praphai Boonsermsuwong
Yuga Yuga Ke Avatar

Yuga Yu-ga Ke A-va-ta-ra Sai Ra-ma Sai Krish-na Sai Ba-ba
Ba-ba Sai Ba-ba Ba-ba Sai Ba-ba Yu-ga Yu-ga Ke A-va-ta-ra Sai Ra-ma Sai Krish-na Sai Ba-ba Al-lah Ye-shu Na-na-ka Sai
Bud-dha Zo-ru-str Ma-ha-vi-ra Sai Ram Ra-him Jai Ram Ra-him Jai Ram Ra-him Jai Ram Ra-him Jai Ram Ra-him Jai Ram

Gopala Gopala

Go-pa-la Go-pa-la Na-cho Go-pa-la Na-cho Na-cho Sai
Nan-da-la-la Na-cho Na-cho Sai Nan-da-la-la
Go-pa-la Go-pa-la Na-cho Go-pa-la Ruma Jhuma Ruma Jhuma Na-cho Go-pa-la
Ruma Jhuma Ruma Jhuma Na-cho Go-pa-la Na-cho Na-cho Sai Nan-da-la-la

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Musical Forms and Analyses

Simply scanning through the above staff notation of Sai Bhajan songs, there are varying degrees of difficulty in this sample collection. Most of the shorter songs are notated with two songs on the same page to save space. Because of the flexible nature of Indian music, I chose to notate Sai Bhajan songs as a prescriptive way (practical and repeatable) rather than in a descriptive manner (capturing all sounds happen in a particular performance), the concepts based on Charles Seeger’s analytical thoughts. In practice, Sai Bhajan songs are sung or participated mostly by people without any musical training. Naturally, I chose to use the simpler key signatures and simple time signatures - mostly in a duple meter that keeps the hands clapping - whenever it is possible. For example: If and when I learned about a few particular songs, originally derived the Indian classical genre that supposed to have a 12 beats per cycle, I will notate in a common time or 4/4 which is more practical to achieve the same rhythmic effect. Then, I also prefer to use simpler chords as a guideline for guitar as well as keyboard, mainly for the benefits of a quicker musical sight-reading. All the while, the notations had been carefully crafted with special attention to keep the ubiquitous effect of nuances in Indian musical style intact, i.e., through the strategic placement of grace notes to embellish the particular important or special pitches in each song as I have heard them during the listening and transcribing process. I see most of these grace notes, which start at different intervals from the main pitches as the stylistic essence and the best way to elicit the subtlety of Indian vocal-technical charms that reflect the Indian microtonal manipulation (Shruti concept). In other words, the Indian vocalists are expected to include slide, glide, or sound skating toward an intended pitch as seamlessly as possible, instead of attacking the exact specific pitch as accurately as possible like most of the western singing practices. The Indian
vocalists generally avoid a precise, crisp melodic leap either between two pitches or group of pitches (gliding or sliding between pitches are preferred by the Indians), since a western style of attacking directly at particular pitches seems to feel rather too rigid for the Indian musical-cultural aesthetics. One other unique feature is the use of repeat signs throughout each song to reflect how Sai Bhajan is normally sung one phrase at a time by a lead-singer, and then repeated by all others in the group or a huge congregation in a larger gathering.

Pertaining to the spirit of oral tradition in which Sai Bhajan songs had been handed down; none of these songs actually had titles like the western counterpart. So, each assigned title of the transcribed songs came from the first few words in the song itself, as commonly referred to, by and among all the Sai Bhajan singers. Even though Sathya Sai Baba himself had composed a number of original songs that are only known through some other documents, the names of composers are not directly attached or claimed to each song. Spiritually, this is a repertoire that supposed to belong to the world and all humanity without any reservation. Most of the songs as I understand them are incidentally derived from a myriad of poet-saint singers of the past and a mixture or fusion of various sources, influenced by the North Indian Hindustani, South Indian Carnatic Classical, Light-Classical (Indian scholars use this term for a hybrid style of the classical and folk genres), traditional, regional folk styles, and ancient Vedic chants. Therefore, many variants of song structure (forms) can be seen in these transcribed songs. Presented in the following, several samples of selected song analyses are included to reveal the hidden frame by frame of the inner workings in this music, the outlines of these various forms are:
Sample #1 – Akhanda Jyoti  on page 123

- 1\textsuperscript{st} phrase (4 measures) = A section, as an Introduction.
- 2\textsuperscript{nd} & 3\textsuperscript{rd} phrases (2 measures each) = B section, a Theme repeating twice.
- 4\textsuperscript{th}, 5\textsuperscript{th}, 6\textsuperscript{th}, 7\textsuperscript{th} phrases (2 measures each) = C section, developing
  musically to the highest point, or the higher range of pitches of the song.
- 8\textsuperscript{th} is a concluding phrase (4 measures) = D section, melodic contour moving in a downward direction.
- 9\textsuperscript{th} & 10\textsuperscript{th} are a Repeat of B section, recurring of the theme.
- After the second round of singing, the song ends with the same lyrics ‘Akhanda Jyoti Jalao’ in a unique feature of musical shifting, or layering process, repeating in the next 4 phrases (2 measures each) organized at different pitch ranges = *Coda.
- Again, repeating a concluding phrase of D section, along with B section as a reaffirmation of the dominant theme.

Therefore, this song’s abstracted form can be formulated as:

\[[: A / B / C / D / B :]] *Coda, D+B //

Note: all Sai Bhajan songs in common practice, each song is sung twice, the first round in slower speed (tempo) and the second round in faster speed. The ending section is marked with the asterisk (*) only sung in the second round, as a final conclusion of the song.

Sample #2 – Parti Puri Mey  on page 125

- 1\textsuperscript{st} phrase (4 measures) = A section, as an introductory theme.
- 2\textsuperscript{nd} phrase (4 measures) = B section, developing in higher pitch range.
3rd phrase (4 measures) = C section, moving higher to the highest note.
4th phrase (4 measures) = D section, when the melodic contour moving downward, to be near the 1st phrase in range.

The abstracted form of this so-called ‘through composed’ music can be formulated as:

[[: A / B / C / D :]] ending with A section, slowing down to a stop //

Note: This is a short song consisted of an even length in all four long phrases (4 measures each). However, each phrase is sequentially developed out of the previous ones. Such technique seems to propel this music the feeling of going somewhere. Then after the second round of faster speed, the song is concluded by repeating the 1st phrase in a gradual slow down ending. The practice of repeating the 1st phrase to end the song is the most common one when there is no clear-cut musical conclusion.

Sample #3 – Danava Bhanjana on page 129

1st phrase (4 measures) = A section, as the main theme.
2nd phrase (4 measures) = B section, as a second theme.
3rd phrase (4 measures) is a Repeat of A section, main theme.
4th phrase (4 measures) = C section, development in a higher pitch range.
5th phrase (4 measures) is a Repeat of B section with a slight rhythmic variation for the different lyrics in the first half.

The abstracted form of this song can be formulated as:

[[: A / B / A / C / B2 :]] ending with A, slowing down to a stop //

Note: The parentheses at the end of line 1 & 4, covering the two eighth notes are the pick-up notes to the next phrases.
Sample #4 – Krishna Bhajo  on page 155

- 1st phrase (4 measures) = A section, as the main theme.
- 2nd phrase (4 measures) = B section, echoing as a secondary theme.
- 3rd phrase (4 measures) is an exact Repeat of A, the main theme.
- 4th phrase (4 measures) = C section, a shift to the higher pitch range as a contrast to the A section.
- The last three phrases (5th, 6th, 7th) = D section, with different variations of music adapted to the same lyrics.

The song’s abstracted form can be formulated as:

\[
[: A / B / A / C / D_1 \ D_2 \ D_3 :] \] ending with A, slowing down to a stop //

**Note:** Even though this song is notated in a triple meter, but it can also be perceived and followed by the group with hand-clapping in duple meter without any problems. This one is a well-balanced symmetrical format with C section as a pivoting middle point.

Sample #5 – Jai Jai Jai Jaya Ma  on page 149

- 1st phrase (4 measures) = A section, as the main theme.
- 2nd phrase (4 measures) = B section, as a secondary theme.
- 3rd phrase (4 measures) is an exact Repeat of A section.
- 4th phrase (4 measures) = C section, an exhibition of much higher pitch range, in a more challenging rhythm with short, easy lyrics.
- 5th & 6th (2 measures each) = D section, as a conclusion with downward melodic contours.

The abstracted form of this song is as follows:

\[
[: A / B / A / C / D :] \] ending with A, slowing down to a stop //
Sample #6 – Shankara Sadashiva  on page 174

- 1st phrase (2 measures) = A section, a dramatic cascading theme.
- 2nd phrase (2 measures) = B section, a contrasting bold second theme.
- 3rd & 4th phrases (2 measures each) = C section, repetitive pitches in a lower range moving upward as a contrasting effect to the A section.
- 5th phrase is an exact Repeat of B section.

The structure of this song can be simply formulated as:

[[: A / B / C / B :]] ending with A+B, slowing down to a stop //

Sample #7 – Govinda Bolo  on page 136

- 1st phrase (4 measures) = A section, as the main theme.
- 2nd phrase (4 measures) = B section, as a secondary theme (responding to the main theme like an extension based on the lyrical clues in the text)
- 3rd phrase (4 measures) = C section, a dramatic contrasting melodic contour in much higher pitch range.
- 4th phrase (4 measures) = D section, a conclusion of downward melodic contour.
- 5th phrase (4 measures) is an exact Repeat of A, the main theme.
- 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th phrases (4 measures each) = E section, dramatically developing the higher and higher melodic contours with increasing complexity, then cascading down to the same pitch level as the A section, the main theme.
The formula of this song has an overall symmetrical shape and a balancing length in each phrase with the main theme repeated at the mid-point of the song, it is presented as:

\[ \text{[: A / B / C / D / A / E}_1 / E}_2 / E}_3 / E}_4 :] \] ending with A, slowing down to a stop //

Note: This song is considered to be quite difficult for most lead singers, not only it is a longer piece but the triple meter is also extremely uncommon in the Sai Bhajan repertoire.

Sample #8 – Hari Hari Om  on page 128

- 1st phrase (2 measures) = A section, as an introductory theme.
- 2nd & 3rd phrases (2 measures each) = B section, as an extended dominant theme, reinforced with a slight variation in the 3rd phrase.
- 4th phrase (2 measures) is the exact Repeat of A section, in terms of melodic contour but with different lyrics.
- 5th & 6th phrases (2 measures each) are the exact Repeat of B section.
- 7th & 8th phrases (2 measures each) = C section, developing of a contrasting melodic contours from the previous A and B sections.
- 9th & 10th phrases (2 measures each) are the exact Repeat of B section.

Therefore, the formula of this song can be abstracted as:

\[ \text{[: A / B / A / B / C / B :]} \] ending with A+B, slowing down to a stop //
Sample #9 – Kalatitaya on page 152

- 1st phrase (4 measures) = A section, as the introductory theme.
- 2nd & 3rd phrases (2 measures each) = B section, as an extension of the introductory theme, while developing abruptly to a higher range with a fresh melodic contour.
- 4th, 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th phrases (2 measures each) = C+ section, as a familiar layering, shifting process of the similar rhythmic structure with the same familiar lyrics to the higher and higher pitch ranges, to the conclusion with the 8th phrase that is the exact Repeat of the 6th phrase.

Therefore, the abstracted form of this song is as follows:

\[
[[: A / B / C+:]] \text{ ending with A, slowing down to a stop } //
\]

Note: As several of these sample analyses shown, various forms or structures are visually, musically, and textually analyzed to be abstracted into a formula. Most likely, if and when the transcribed songs are all analyzed, there will be songs with the same structural formula. However, this task is beyond the scope of this dissertation. The selected analyzed songs are meant to represent the variety of forms that exist in the Sai Bhajan repertoire. The most obvious simplistic beauty is the balanced representation of rhythmic and melodic materials that are mixed into the forms of these songs. Seemingly, one can employ some of these structural forms, then mix and match the sections from different songs together, to create a variant of the existing songs, analogous to the Lego pieces that can be shuffled and reconstructed into many more variety of structures and forms.
Overall Conclusion and Implications

- Sathya Sai Baba is responsible for the emergence, sustenance and the spread of this so-called ‘Sai Bhajan’ music.

- All the contexts of Sai Bhajan can be traced back to one of the earliest Vedic-Sanskrit civilization in North India, juxtaposed with the ancient indigenous cultures, especially the Tamil of the South India.

- The practical spirituality derived from observing natural phenomena, conceived and interpreted by human mental capacity, gave rise to the concept of ‘Sanathana Dharma’ (Eternal Righteous Duty) that is widely accepted by the Indians as one’s life path. Hindu as a religion of the Indian majority today was originated from the outsiders and applied to ‘Sanathana Dharma’ that Indian people have already been practicing.

- The subtlety of musical sound vibrations in our universe had long been detected and understood by the enlightened, realized souls since the ancient time, i.e., many sages and poet-saint singers in the Indian history.

- Sai Bhajan music has richly inherited many musical traits from various renowned musicians, composers, poet-saint singers of the past at different stages of the Indian historical-spiritual-musical-cultural development.

- The concept of Shruti, often a misused and misunderstood term, and it has been vaguely applied to a variety of the western musical concepts, such as, pitch, key, range, etc. The original meaning is ‘that which is heard’ but unfortunately, different pairs of ears heard different things. Evidently, at the microtonal level, only few people can actually perceive these minutest
nuances in music. Nevertheless, the microtonal embellishments seem like a mother-tongue, so naturally in use by the Indian vocalists.

- Raga (a pre-constructed melodic framework) has been an Indian musical heritage for thousands of years, still commonly referred to by most Indian musicians. This is one of the main factors that contributed to make the Sai Bhajan music so melodically fascinating to me.

- Tala (the intricate rhythmic cycles) is another factor that enriches the Sai Bhajan tunes. Although most of the songs in Sai Bhajan repertoire are short and simple, there are some challenging ones to conquer. To render the best singing practice, according Sathya Sai Baba who often said that all the three components of ‘Bharata’ (the term that Indians called their country); Bha – stands for Bhava (feelings, emotions); Ra – stands for Raga (Melody); and Ta – stands for Tala (Rhythm); all these three components must be interwoven into singing a Sai Bhajan song.

- As most Indian people have recognized the term ‘Nada Brahma’ meaning Sound is, or as God, and sound vibrations can link human directly to the Divine principle, that is God without form (Nirguna). However, most human beings cannot possibly imagine God without forms. Therefore, various forms of God (Saguna) are created by the Indians in their own ways to reach the ultimate formless God. For Sathya Sai Baba had mentioned that you may treat pictures or stones as God, but do not treat God as stone or picture. In any case, the Sai Bhajan lyrics reflect many levels of human thoughts on the Absolute Supreme Reality, so-called God
by many. Indeed, Sai Bhajan is rather open-ended and flexible for people who came from all kinds of spiritual and religious backgrounds. One can detect a long list of God’s names and forms in the lyrics of Sai Bhajan. But ultimately, as Sathya Sai Baba’s Teachings in a popular statement go:

There is only One religion, it’s a religion of Love;  
There is only One language, it’s the language of the heart;  
There is only One human race or caste, it’s a caste of humanity;  
There is only One God, and He or She is Omnipresent.  

Then, Sai Bhajan music is one of the ways that human can make connection to the Divine, to realize the divinity within ourselves.

Implications: The wealth of melodic materials from Sai Bhajan music as seen in many pages of visual representation in musical transcriptions, many of them can certainly be utilized as a teaching tool for the music educational purpose. Since most of these songs derived from the Indian long running from oral tradition, they are also a good source as melodic fragments for the art of musical composition. Possibly into the future, this Sai Bhajan sub-genre may become more attractive to the global community. As far as I know, many of Sai Bhajan tunes have already been sung in other languages outside India, namely, English, Spanish, Chinese, etc. Moreover, because of the positive vibrations exist as the inherent quality of Sai Bhajan music, the future of humanity in harmonious living and peace on earth are foreseeable. In every session of Sai Bhajan, the ‘Om Shanti Shanti Shantihi’ meaning ‘Om Peace Peace Peace to all’ is chanted at a few junctions and as a routine in most other Sai functions. For the final closing of this dissertation, I would like to chant ‘Samastha Loka Sukhino Bhavantu’ meaning – May all living beings in all the (three) worlds be happy!
Selected Bibliography


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**Selected Discography**

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