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Source: *History of Religions*, Vol. 54, No. 2 (November 2014), pp. 117-150

Published by: [The University of Chicago Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1086/677807>

Accessed: 04/11/2014 06:42

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Antonio Rigopoulos

THE CONSTRUCTION OF  
A CULTIC CENTER  
THROUGH NARRATIVE:  
THE FOUNDING MYTH  
OF THE VILLAGE OF  
PUTTAPARTHI AND  
SATHYA SĀI BĀBĀ

This essay analyzes the founding myth of Puttaparthi, a village in the Anantapur District of the South Indian state of Andhra Pradesh, through an exploration of its complex network of tropes, symbols, and reconfigurations over time. Puttaparthi literally means “multiplier of termite mounds,” and tales centered on termite mounds (Telugu *putṭa*, Sanskrit *valmīka*) are a characteristic of India’s pastoral and tribal areas, especially in the south.<sup>1</sup>

The legend portrays an originally prosperous locale, encircled by a bountiful nature. Its name was Gollapalle/Gollapalli, the “village of cowherds” (Gollas), who tended beautiful cows and flourished on their copious milk. The

I wish to thank the two anonymous reviewers of *History of Religions*, who through their valuable comments enabled me to reexamine and restructure this article considerably. I also wish to thank my colleague and friend Federico Squarcini for his careful reading of an earlier version of this article.

<sup>1</sup> Loans from Dravidian akin to Telugu *putṭa* are Sanskrit *puta* “hollow space,” “concavity”—the compound *pīpīlikapūṭa* designating the anthill—and *puttikā* “doll,” which is also the name of the termite, so named for its doll-like form; see the entries for these terms in M. Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary: Etymologically and Philologically Arranged with Special Reference to Cognate Indo-European Languages* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1988); T. Burrow, *Collected Papers on Dravidian Linguistics* (Annamalainagar: Annamalai University, 1968), 274. On termites and termite mounds in Indian mythology, see D. König, *Das Tor zur Unterwelt: Mythologie und Kult des Termitenhügels in der schriftlichen und mündlichen Tradition Indiens* (Wiesbaden: Steiner, 1984). See also G.-D. Sontheimer, *Pastoral Deities in Western India*, trans. A. Feldhaus (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 188–92.

story goes that once a Nāga (i.e., a cobra), emerged from a termite mound, raised itself on its tail, and, applying its mouth on a cow's teats, started sucking the milk that she willingly offered. This incredible scene caused the violent reaction of one cowherd, who hit the snake with a stone. This was the sin that brought upon the village the Nāga's curse and triggered its decline. The hamlet rapidly lost its lush vegetation and was turned into a poor and barren land. The soil became red and rocky, and cattle and cowherds diminished. It was therefore renamed Valmikipura and subsequently Puttaparthi, the "land where termite mounds abound."

Starting from the 1970s, Puttaparthi has become widely known as the birthplace and hermitage location of Sathya Sāi Bābā (1926–2011), a charismatic figure destined to become a pan-Indian hero. The latter's appropriation of the village's founding tale illustrates how an archaic myth has been reutilized in order to justify and foster a cult that epitomizes modern Hinduism. Along the years, this guru-centered, postsectarian movement has become a mass-mediated, transnational phenomenon. Indeed, by transforming the back-country hamlet of Puttaparthi into his global, cosmopolitan headquarters—a site visited yearly by hundreds of thousands of people from all over the world—Sathya Sāi Bābā has succeeded in making a veritable mountain out of a termite mound.

The essay focuses on a set of issues deemed to be relevant to both South Asianists and historians of religion. These include the relation between different understandings of a myth and differently situated communities/castes and cults; the interaction between the two poles of undomesticated space (*vana*, the wilderness) and domesticated space (*kṣetra*, the village); the accommodations and clashes within a village society of constructs such as traditional versus modern; and how cultic centers are effectively shaped, maintained, and expanded through narratives that are inherently multivalent and open to a variety of interpretative frameworks.

#### I. TERMITES MOUNDS, SNAKES, AND COWS IN INDIAN TRADITION

Termite mounds, often improperly called anthills, are found in or near forest areas, not far from water sources.<sup>2</sup> Their link with snakes is documented from Vedic times (R̥gveda 4.19.9; Atharvaveda 2.3.3), together with the idea that termites were the firstborn of creation (Yajurveda 37.4; Āpastambaśrautasūtra

<sup>2</sup> As in Varāhamihira's *Bṛhatsaṃhitā* 54, termite mounds are thought to indicate where underground water can be found; see National Institute of Hydrology, *Hydrology in Ancient India* (Roorkee: National Institute of Hydrology, 1990), 58–60. The myth of Viṣṇu's decapitation by means of his own bow, in which termites (*upadīka*), by gnawing the bow's string, helped the other gods in cutting off Viṣṇu's head, tells us that for this service termites were assured the power of finding water wherever they dug, even in deserts (Śatapathabrāhmaṇa 14.1.1.1–10).

15.2.1; Śatapathabrāhmaṇa 14.1.2.10). A common belief among tribal populations is that the world was created from the excrements of termites and that humans were formed from the clay of a termite mound.<sup>3</sup> In folk religion, these mounds are venerated as the home of various gods and goddesses, and first and foremost of the Nāga, a divine or even demonic being in the shape of a cobra. The network of galleries and humid ventilation shafts that termites build are ideal dwelling places for snakes. This is so much true that the termite mound is known as “abode of snakes” (*ahinilaya*).<sup>4</sup>

Snakes are worshipped across the Indian subcontinent, especially on the occasion of the Nāgapañcamī festival, falling on the fifth day (*pañcamī*) of the bright fortnight of the lunar month of *śravaṇa* (July–August). This holiday celebrates Śeṣa/Ananta, the serpent representing infinity, support of the earth, and resting place of god Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa during his cosmic sleep, as well as the victory of Kṛṣṇa—homologized with Viṣṇu—over the Nāga demon king Kāliya. Nāgapañcamī is characterized by fasting, the sketching of snakes, and the worship of Nāga stone images.<sup>5</sup> Food and drink, especially milk, are offered to both iconic and real snakes, the milk being poured into termite

<sup>3</sup> Termites, a specialized form of cockroaches, are eusocial insects classified in the *Dictyoptera* superorder by entomologists. The first termites originated about 175 million years ago, in the Middle Jurassic epoch. Popularly known as white ants they have among the most complex social, anatomical, and structural adaptations of any animal. In India, there are three varieties of termites that predominate, all of which are mound builders: *Odontotermes redemanni*, *Odontotermes obesus*, and *Hypotermes obscuriceps*. A colony living in a large mound can reach the staggering number of more than five million termites. Their number notwithstanding, termite colonies are best thought of as a single organism, or what has been termed a “superorganism”; see B. Hölldobler and E. O. Wilson, *The Super-organism: The Beauty, Elegance, and Strangeness of Insect Societies* (New York: Norton, 2009).

<sup>4</sup> See J. A. Dubois, *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies*, trans. and ed. H. K. Beauchamp (1906; New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1990), 641. On the relation between snakes and termite mounds, with a review of textual and scholarly sources, see A. L. Allocco, *Snakes, Goddesses, and Anthills: Modern Challenges and Women's Ritual Responses in Contemporary South India* (PhD diss., Emory University, 2009), 29–31, 49–71, 134–51, 196–204, 522–38. See also G. Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi, *The Self-Milking Cow and the Bleeding Liṅgam: Criss-Cross of Motifs in Indian Temple Legends* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1987), 84–98; E. Masilamani-Meyer, *Guardians of Tamilnadu: Folk Deities, Folk Religion, Hindu Themes* (Halle: Franckeschen Stiftung, 2004), 49–50, 141.

<sup>5</sup> In iconography, Nāgas are often represented as having a human upper body and a snake lower body, with a hood-covered head. Their subterranean world, the Nāgaloka, is a place that resembles the splendors of kingly palaces of urban India: it is said to be filled with gold, gems, and treasures, which they jealously guard. On the Nāgas, see M. Piantelli, “Il simbolismo dei nāga,” in *Bestie o Dei? L'animale nel simbolismo religioso*, ed. A. Bongioanni and E. Comba (Torino: Ananke, 1996), 123–35; A. L. Allocco, “Fear, Reverence and Ambivalence: Divine Snakes in Contemporary South India,” in *Charming Beauties and Frightful Beasts: Non-human Animals in South Asian Myth, Ritual and Folklore*, ed. F. M. Ferrari and T. Dähnhardt (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013), 217–35. For descriptions of and textual references to Nāgapañcamī, see P. V. Kane, *History of Dharmasāstra* (Poona: Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1974), 5:1, 124–27. See also R. E. Enthoven, *Encyclopaedia of Indian Folk Literature: The Folk Literature of Bombay* (1924; New Delhi: Cosmo, 2000), 2:127–40.

mounds' shafts. Nāgas are believed to be fond of milk, an association due perhaps to the milky appearance of the snake before it sloughs its skin.<sup>6</sup>

The sacredness of the termite mound is such that in rural India oaths are taken by touching it, and boundaries are marked by naming it. Taking refuge by embracing or even entering a termite hill was an ancient custom that even the gods are thought to have observed.<sup>7</sup> Remarkably, termite mounds may grow to a considerable height, to the point that a man can easily hide himself behind them, and in folk religion they are perceived as the prototype of the sacred mountain. As J. C. Irwin observed, "the cosmogonic mound was conceived as 'swelling' into a hill and eventually into a mountain. In other words, swelling, expansion, were of its very essence, and it therefore becomes all too easy to read 'mountain' where there was originally a 'mound.'"<sup>8</sup> The swelling is a real feature of the mound, which little by little expands itself thanks to the tireless termites' labor.<sup>9</sup> The deity living in the mound is often thought to have been born in it.<sup>10</sup> Moreover, the deity is also conceived as the mound; the "self-existing" (*svayambhū*) emergence of it is identified as the goddess' eruption from the earth or as Śiva's phallic symbol, the lingam, which at the same time is believed to abide in its depths.<sup>11</sup>

Yogis and renunciants are prescribed to live by termite mounds in the wilderness,<sup>12</sup> and, just as gods and Nāgas, some of them are said to reside within the mounds.<sup>13</sup> Thanks to the strength of their ascetic "heat" (*tapas*), they are able to remain motionless therein, absorbed in contemplation, while snakes coil harmlessly around their body.<sup>14</sup> Ascetics are also said to be turned into

<sup>6</sup> The propitiation of the Nāga—in South India often identified as a form of the goddess or of Śiva—is done in the hope of assuring offspring and the fertility of the fields: holding hands, women come to the termite hill and perform the rite of the circumambulation of the mound, while chanting mantras and singing devotional songs.

<sup>7</sup> See W. T. Elmore, *Dravidian Gods in Modern Hinduism* (1913; Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1984), 130–31.

<sup>8</sup> J. C. Irwin, "The Sacred Anthill and the Cult of the Primordial Mound," *History of Religions* 21, no. 4 (1982): 344.

<sup>9</sup> A maxim in the Mānavadharmasāstra (4.238) states: "One should slowly heap up virtue just as termites heap up a termite mound" (*dharmam śanañḥ saṃcinuyād valmīkam iva puttikāḥ*).

<sup>10</sup> See G. Oppert, *The Original Inhabitants of Bharatavarsa or India* (Westminster: Constable, 1893), 464–65; G.-D. Sontheimer, "Between Ghost and God: A Folk Deity of the Deccan," in *Criminal Gods and Demon Devotees: Essays on the Guardians of Popular Hinduism*, ed. A. Hiltebeitel (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1989), 322.

<sup>11</sup> At Periyapalayam, in Tamil Nadu, the goddess Bhavānī is identified with a termite mound; see Irwin, *Sacred Anthill*, 359, fig. 3.

<sup>12</sup> See Jābālopaniṣad 70–71.

<sup>13</sup> In India, even Sufi saints are represented as residing in termite mounds; see N. Green, "Oral Competition Narratives of Muslim and Hindu Saints in the Deccan," *Asian Folklore Studies* 63 (2004): 229–31.

<sup>14</sup> In the colossal rock sculpture of Shravanabelagola, in Karnataka, the standing Jain saint Gommatēśvara has a termite hill with snakes at each of his feet.

termite mounds (Mahābhārata 3.122). The celebrated Vālmīki, to whom the authorship of the Rāmāyaṇa is ascribed, is believed to have practiced austerities while remaining motionless for such a long time that a termite mound grew around him. His very name indicates that he was born out of a termite hill.<sup>15</sup>

Due to its conical shape, the mound is assimilated to the womb of a pregnant woman and indeed there is a strong link in popular belief between termite mounds, snakes, and fertility.<sup>16</sup> The soil of termite mounds is believed to cure sterility and termites themselves are eaten in the hope of inducing pregnancy. From Vedic times, termite mounds are also worshipped in the hope of warding off illnesses. The earth of a termite hill is said to cure fever, rheumatism, counteract poisons and drive away demons (Atharvaveda 2.3, 6.100, 7.56).

The termite mound is thought to nurture all sorts of riches. Reminiscent of the story of the gold-digging ants (*pipīlikā*) reported by Herodotus (*Histories* 3.102–105),<sup>17</sup> one finds references to gold and treasures hidden in termite hills. There are pastoral legends of golden items<sup>18</sup> (also golden animals)<sup>19</sup> as well as sheep seen emerging from the mounds.<sup>20</sup> The Nāgas residing within them are described as bearing a jewel (*maṇi*) on their hoods that emits rays causing the rainbow,<sup>21</sup> a jewel so powerful that it can resurrect the dead.

Termite mounds are understood as channels between the dead and the living, connecting the divine/demonic underworld to the world of men. On the

<sup>15</sup> On Vālmīki's legend, see Adhyātmarāmāyaṇa 2.6.65. On his figure in folk traditions, see G.-D. Sontheimer, "The Rāmāyaṇa in Contemporary Folk Traditions of Maharashtra," in *Essays on Religion, Literature and Law*, ed. H. Brückner, A. Feldhaus, and A. Malik (New Delhi: Indira Gandhi National Centre for the Arts and Manohar, 2004), 386–87.

<sup>16</sup> See E. Thurston, *Omens and Superstitions of Southern India* (New York: McBride, Nast, 1912), 132–33.

<sup>17</sup> See K. Karttunen, *India in Early Greek Literature* (Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society, 1989), 171–76, and "Phoebos vicinus Padaeus: Reflections on the Impact of Herodotean Ethnography," in *The Children of Herodotus: Greek and Roman Historiography and Related Genres*, ed. J. Pigoñ (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2008), 19–20.

<sup>18</sup> The goddess Pārvatī/Reṇukā, being pursued by a king, is said to have hid herself into a golden termite mound. After digging the mound, a golden net and a golden lamp were found; see Elmore, *Dravidian Gods*, 82–83, 100–101.

<sup>19</sup> See G.-D. Sontheimer, "Folk Deities in the Vijayanagara Empire: Narasiṃha and Mallāṅga/Mailār," in Brückner, Feldhaus, and Malik, *Essays on Religion*, 330.

<sup>20</sup> See G.-D. Sontheimer, "Some Notes on Birobā, the Dhangar God of Maharashtra," in Brückner, Feldhaus, and Malik, *Essays on Religion*, 72, *Pastoral Deities*, 190–92, "Some Incidents in the History of the God Khaṇḍobā," in *Asie du Sud: Traditions et changements (VIth European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies)*, ed. M. Gaborieau and A. Thorner (Paris: Centre national de la recherche scientifique, 1979), 112, "The Dhangars: A Nomadic Pastoral Community in a Developing Agricultural Environment," in Brückner, Feldhaus, and Malik, *Essays on Religion*, 87–88, and *Between Ghost and God*, 321–22. See also S. Visuvalingam, "The Transgressive Sacrality of the *Dikṣita*: Sacrifice, Criminality and *Bhakti* in the Hindu Tradition," in Hildebeitel, *Criminal Gods*, 437.

<sup>21</sup> See J. P. Vogel, *Indian Serpent Lore; or, The Nāgas in Hindu Legend and Art* (1926; Varanasi: Prithivi Prakashan, 1972), 29.

one hand, the mound is linked to the cult of the dead, and its galleries are thought to lead to the subterranean residence of one's ancestors (*pitṛ*);<sup>22</sup> offerings to them are solemnly poured over the mound as sacrificial oblations.<sup>23</sup> On the other hand, there are tales of gods and goddesses said to come out of or disappear into termite mounds.<sup>24</sup>

In folk religion, it is often in a termite mound that a deity first appears.<sup>25</sup> For example, at the famous site of Tirupati, in southern Andhra Pradesh, the origin of the cult of Veṅkaṭeśvara (Lord of the Veṅkaṭa hill) is said to have been a termite mound that rose beside a tamarind tree planted by the creator god Brahmā. It is within this mound that Veṅkaṭeśvara, identified with Viṣṇu, first manifested himself. Tirupati's chain of seven hills is said to be Śeṣa's body, upon which Viṣṇu rests. Tirupati's hills are also believed to represent the seven heads of the cosmic serpent.<sup>26</sup>

Especially important is the connection of termite mounds with sacrifice (*yañba*), which dates back to Vedic times. The appointed priests used the earth taken from the mounds in the solemn fire rituals of *agnicayana* and *agnyādheya*, as well as in the ritual of royal consecration, the *rājasūya* (Śatapathabrāhmaṇa 6.3.36, 16.1.2.10; Baudhāyanaśrautasūtra 10.1). The termite hill is valued as the receptacle of the remnants of sacrifice and is associated with the god Prajāpati in whom sacrifice, sacrificer, and object of sacrifice coincide (Taittirīyasaṃhitā 5.1.2.5; Taittirīyabrāhmaṇa 3.7.2.1). A termite mound with seven holes is even said to replace the head of the sacrificial human victim (Kāthakasaṃhitā 20.8; Taittirīyasaṃhitā 5.1.8.1).

In South Indian tales centered on the termite mound, the latter is thought of as a veritable sacrificial arena, as the locus where the fiery seed/remnant

<sup>22</sup> See W. Crooke, *The Popular Religion and Folk-Lore of Northern India*, vol. 2 (1896; Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1968), 256; D. M. Knipe, "Night of the Growing Dead: A Cult of Vīrabhadra in Coastal Andhra," in Hildebeitel, *Criminal Gods*, 134–37; G.-D. Sontheimer, "The Folk Festival (*Jatrā*) in the Religious Traditions of Maharashtra: The Case of Khaṇḍobā," in *Maharashtra: Culture and Society; Folk Culture, Folk Religion and Oral Traditions as a Component in Maharashtrian Culture* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2000), 131.

<sup>23</sup> Ethnographic accounts report that even termites are fed by the pious. Feeding them with sugar or flour is said to obtain the merit of giving a feast to a thousand Brahmins; see R. E. Enthoven, *Folklore of the Konkan: Compiled from Materials Collected by the Late A. M. T. Jackson, Indian Civil Service* (1915; Delhi: Cosmo, 1976), 84; M. H. Ali, *Observations on the Mussulmans of India*, ed. W. Crooke (1832; Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1974), 260–63.

<sup>24</sup> We are even told of a boy disappearing into a termite hill and later identified with the local god Nārāyaṇasvāmin; see Elmore, *Dravidian Gods*, 115–16.

<sup>25</sup> See Sontheimer, "Folk Deities," 333.

<sup>26</sup> See N. Ramesan, *Temples and Legends of Andhra Pradesh* (1962; Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1988), 58; A. V. Shankaranarayana Rao, *Temples of Andhra Pradesh* (Bangalore: Vasan, 2001), 86.

(*ucchiṣṭa*, *śeṣa*) of sacrifice is produced.<sup>27</sup> Termite mound myths typically involve a violent episode, a bloodshed in which the god or goddess dwelling in the mound is attacked and wounded either by a human or divine agent. In particular, the snake embodies sacrifice as rebirth from death: reemerging through its rejuvenating powers from the aged skin, the Nāga is the remainder of itself. Such residue is the essence of sacrifice being the seed of life's renewal.<sup>28</sup> The deity of the mound is therefore believed to remanifest itself in the future. Often, such remanifestation is ritually achieved through the consecration of a shrine in its honor, eloquent testimony of the deity's abiding presence.

Last but not least, termite mound narratives often involve the presence of another animal besides the snake, namely, the cow, which is the stock figure of Kāmadhenu, the divine cow fulfilling all desires,<sup>29</sup> and a form of Devī, the goddess.<sup>30</sup> A common motif in South Indian folk tales is the cow emptying her udders over a termite mound, an action through which the divine presence is revealed to cowherds.<sup>31</sup> As sacrificial sites, termite mounds incorporate an intricate symbolic network witnessing the role of a plurality of actors—divine, human, and animal—together with their precious bodily fluids: blood/semen and milk, the latter being homologized with the nectar of immortality, *amṛta*.<sup>32</sup>

## II. THE VILLAGE OF PUTTAPARTHI AND ITS MYTH

Surrounded by red hillocks, the village of Puttaparthi (Telugu: Puttaparti) is situated on the banks of the Chitravathi River at a distance of about three to

<sup>27</sup> For seed from a termite mound, see H. V. Nanjundayya and R. B. L. K. Ananthakrishna Iyer, *The Mysore Tribes and Castes*, 5 vols. (Mysore: Mysore University, 1930–36), 4:84.

<sup>28</sup> On the connection of the termite mound with violence and the sacrifice, see D. D. Shulman, "The Serpent and the Sacrifice: An Anthill Myth from Tiruvārūr," *History of Religions* 18, no. 2 (1978): 107–37; Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi, *Self-Milking Cow*, 77–83, 113–21; N. E. Craddock, *Anthills, Split Mothers, and Sacrifice: Conceptions of Female Power in the Mariyamman Tradition* (PhD diss., University of California at Berkeley, 1994).

<sup>29</sup> See W. Doniger O'Flaherty, *Sexual Metaphors and Animal Symbols in Indian Mythology* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1981), 241–44, 249–52.

<sup>30</sup> On such topoi, see Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi, *Self-Milking Cow*.

<sup>31</sup> See G.-D. Sontheimer, "The *Vana* and the *Kṣetra*: The Tribal Background of Some Famous Cults," in Brückner, Feldhaus, and Malik, *Essays on Religion*, 380–81 n. 80. See also E. Masilamani-Meyer, "The Birth of a Deity: Concepts in Folk Hinduism," in *In the Company of Gods: Essays in Memory of Günther-Dietz Sontheimer*, ed. A. Malik, A. Feldhaus, and H. Brückner (Delhi: Manohar, 2005), 108–9.

<sup>32</sup> On the snake and the cow, see K. A. Jacobsen, "Sacred Animals," in *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, 6 vols., ed. K. A. Jacobsen, with H. Basu, A. Malinar, and V. Narayanan (Leiden: Brill, 2009–14), 1:711–18. On the cow, see also A. Feldhaus, *Water and Womanhood: Religious Meanings of Rivers in Maharashtra* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 106–9. On the link between snake and semen, see J. S. Alter, *The Wrestler's Body: Identity and Ideology in North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 136–66. On the sexual symbolism of milk and blood, see Doniger O'Flaherty, *Sexual Metaphors*, 17–61.



four miles from Bukkapatnam and twenty-five miles from Penukonda.<sup>33</sup> Once included in the Penukonda Taluk of the Anantapur District, it is nowadays the headquarters of the Sri Sathya Sai Taluk.<sup>34</sup>

The Anantapur region is one of the poorest of Andhra Pradesh, having constantly suffered from famines due to the lightness of rainfall. Except for its northern part, the landscape is desolate looking, with barren hills and reddish-brown plains. Its soil is for the most part gravelly, and trees and vegetation are scarce.<sup>35</sup> The Penukonda Taluk is perhaps the hilliest taluk in the district and is especially unfit for cultivation.<sup>36</sup>

Sometime around the seventeenth century, with the weakening of the Vijayanagar Empire (1336–1646), Puttaparthi came under the control of the Pālegars, a class of administrative and military chiefs. It has been suggested that the place then became an *agrahara*, that is, a tax-free village gifted by the feudal lords to the Brahmin community. The fact that the hamlets surrounding Puttaparthi are clusters of non-Brahmin communities lends credibility to such a hypothesis.<sup>37</sup> In this connection, it should be noted that in Andhra Pradesh there are a number of Brahmin families that have Puttaparthi as their surname.<sup>38</sup>

Whether or not Puttaparthi was ever an *agrahara*, by the end of the nineteenth century its Brahmin population started to dwindle. By the time of the revenue resettlement in 1924, only one-tenth of the Puttaparthi lands were owned by Brahmins, and mostly by one Brahmin family. This was the family of the village Karnam, that is, the hereditary chieftain and revenue official in charge of land records and the collection of taxes, the traditional link between the village community and the district collector at Anantapur (the hereditary officialdom of the Karnam was abolished only in 1984).<sup>39</sup>

<sup>33</sup> A tributary of the Pennar River, the Chitravathi originates at Chikballapur in Karnataka and flows along the western and southern boundaries of Puttaparthi. Though it can swell in the monsoon season, even flooding the village, in the summer it dries up and vanishes into its sandy bed.

<sup>34</sup> There exists another village named Puttaparthi: it is located near Bagepalli (about sixty miles north of Bangalore) in the Chikballapur District of Karnataka; see R. Padmanaban, *Love Is My Form: A Biographical Series on Sri Sathya Sai Baba*, vol. 1, *The Advent (1926–1950)* (Bangalore: Sai Towers, 2000), 213, 225 n. 58.

<sup>35</sup> On the Anantapur District, see *The Imperial Gazetteer of India* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1908), 5:336–49; *Andhra Pradesh District Gazetteers: Anantapur*, rev. ed., ed. Bh. Sivasankaranarayana (Hyderabad: Government Secretariat Press, 1970).

<sup>36</sup> On the Penukonda Taluk, see *Imperial Gazetteer of India*, 20:104.

<sup>37</sup> The villages of Kammavaripalle, Peddakammavaripalle and Ravillavaripalle are mostly inhabited by Kammas; Karnatanagapalle and Nagireddypalle are inhabited by Reḍḍis; the inhabitants of Kavilaguttapalle are Balijas, a backward community.

<sup>38</sup> For the past century, one is reminded of the historian Puttaparthi Srinivasachari (d. 1963) and of the multilingual poet and literary critic Puttaparthi Narayanacharyulu (1914–90).

<sup>39</sup> For a tentative reconstruction of the village's history, see M. N. Rao, *Sathya Sai Baba: God as Man* (Tustin, CA: Sathya Sai Baba Society and Sathya Sai Book Center of America, 1985), 1–5. See also Padmanaban, *Love Is My Form*, 9.

In 1961, according to the *Census of India*, the population of the village was 3,471 made up of the following communities: caste Hindus (mainly Kapu, Bhatrāju, and Boya), scheduled castes (387), and scheduled tribes (64). The means of livelihood are reported to have been agriculture and other traditional occupations.<sup>40</sup>

Though nowadays Puttapparathi can be reached from Bangalore by road in less than four hours, back in the 1940s, the village—a conglomerate of about two hundred thatched houses with mud walls—was not easily accessible. From Bangalore one could go by train only as far as Penukonda. From there, an occasional bus took passengers to Bukkapatnam. From Bukkapatnam via Karnatanagapalli, one had to take a bullock cart and cross the Chitravathi in order to reach Puttapparathi. The journey of about one hundred miles from Bangalore took an entire day, and up to three days in the rainy season.<sup>41</sup>

The narration of Puttapparathi's termite mound myth is reported in several written sources with remarkable consistency. I here quote the one found in the 1961 *Census of India*:

There is a legend attached to the village. *Putta* means anthill and *parthi* means *vardhini* or multiplier. Long ago the place was known as Gollapalle, i.e., the home of cowherds. It was the abode of prosperous *gopals* or cowherds with strong and attractive cows yielding copious milk. One day a cowherd noticed that his favorite cow had no milk in her udder when she returned from the grazing ground on the nearby hills. He watched her movements on the following day, and hiding himself but never losing sight of the cow, he followed her till she stopped near an anthill. A cobra issued from the mound, raised itself on its tail and, applying its mouth gently to her teats, drank the milk.<sup>42</sup> Enraged at the sight, the cowherd lifted a big stone and heaved it right on the top of the cobra. The serpent then cursed that the village would be full of anthills that would multiply endlessly. The curse came true. The cattle declined in number. The village became full of anthills. The name of the village was thus changed to Valmikipura and in course of time to Puttapparathi. As a proof of this tragic legend, the villagers still show the very stone, thick and round, slightly dented on one side, which the enraged cowherd is said to have hurled at the wonder-snake. The stone has a long reddish streak over it, which is pointed out as the mark of the cobra's blood. At present, this stone is worshipped as Sri Gopalsvami, the Lord as cowherd, perhaps to avert the curse and help the cattle to prosper. The stone was installed in a temple in

<sup>40</sup> See *Census of India, 1961*, vol. 2, *Andhra Pradesh*, pt. VII-B (10), *Fairs and Festivals, Anantapur District* (Delhi: Government of India, 1963), 128.

<sup>41</sup> See Rao, *Sathya Sai Baba: God as Man*, 37–39; Padmanaban, *Love Is My Form*, 230–31.

<sup>42</sup> Apparently, such an event can actually take place as Captain Freddie Guest (1896–1962) of the Indian Eighth Cavalry reports having witnessed near Bangalore in 1944; see M. R. M. Rao, "Puttapparathi, the Bethlehem of Baba," in *Sai Chandana: Book of Homage*, ed. V. K. Gokak (Prasanthi Nilayam: Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning, 1985), 3.

the village by the then ruling Palegars and generations of men and women have reverentially bowed before it while passing that way.<sup>43</sup>

Like in many other South Indian legends, this story links wilderness and settled space. The anthill—or, more correctly, the termite mound—where the Nāga reveals itself is representative of undomesticated space (the *vana*, where deities are born and first manifest themselves), whereas the stray cow is part of the domesticated space (*kṣetra*, the village) inhabited by cowherds.<sup>44</sup> The *vana* is inherently ambivalent, being both fearsome (*ugra*)—bearing the characteristics of untamed nature—and the source of renewal, of divine power (*śakti*). In origin, the symbiotically interrelated realms of *vana* and *kṣetra* were clearly distinguished and this determined the village's prosperity.<sup>45</sup> The cow's pious offer of milk to the Nāga exemplifies the proper relation and exchange between the two poles, guarantee of order and harmony. By manifesting its presence, the Nāga demands attention, that is, offerings and a cult. But the cowherd's response is filled with hatred, and his act (*karman*) mirrors the refusal to acknowledge the numinous presence. His offensive behavior inevitably triggers the Nāga's curse; through the proliferation of termite mounds the wilderness extends itself to the pastoral area, bringing about the barrenness of the soil. In this way, the *vana* penetrates deep within the *kṣetra* with all its destructive force and dramatically reduces the latter's vital space, threatening the very existence of the village.

The violence of the enraged cowherd who hurled a stone and wounded the Nāga—or actually stoned the snake to death<sup>46</sup>—is understood as the root cause of all the evil consequences that ensued. In South India, to kill or harm a

<sup>43</sup> *Census of India, 1961*, vol. 2, pt. VII-B (10), 128.

<sup>44</sup> The *vana-kṣetra* conceptual framework was first worked out by G.-D. Sontheimer in his article "The *Vana* and the *Kṣetra*: The Tribal Background of Some Famous Cults," in Brückner, Feldhaus, and Malik, *Essays on Religion*, 353–82. On this subject, see also H. Kulke, "The *Vana* in the *Kṣetra*? Some Remarks on Günther Sontheimer's Concept of the *Vana* and the *Kṣetra*," in Malik, Feldhaus, and Brückner, *In the Company of Gods*, 273–82.

<sup>45</sup> The idyllic condition of this once bountiful land inhabited by cowherds, is captured by a song written by an anonymous poet of the past:

With the Chitravathi River descending the gorges  
And flowing as a moat on one side,  
Set like a green gem in a ring of hills,  
With temple bells pealing on the eminences around,  
Enriched by the tank built by Chikkaraya,  
Adjacent to the town that bears the name of Bukka,  
The far-famed Emperor of Vijayanagar,  
Puttaparthi is the abode of both Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī.

Quoted in N. Kasturi, *Sathyam-Sivam-Sundaram, Part I (1926–1960)* (1961; Bangalore: Sri Sathya Sai Books & Publications, 1980), 3. The goddesses Lakṣmī and Sarasvatī stand for wealth and learning, respectively.

<sup>46</sup> See Rao, *Sathya Sai Baba: God as Man*, 2; Padmanaban, *Love Is My Form*, 7.

Nāga is a sacrilegious crime that is believed to trigger a malignant influence (*nāgadoṣa*) and to entail the curse of infertility.<sup>47</sup> In our story, the cowherd's bad *karman* coincides with the village's *karman*, the individual being representative of the entire community. Thus the land turned arid, and the once prosperous Gollapalle was renamed Valmikipura and, in due course, Puttaparthi.

The local elders, in an effort to atone the sin of harming, or murdering, the Nāga, decided to worship the stone that hit it. The stone, bearing a blood-red streak, was installed in a small temple and came to be honored as the Nāga itself. The worship of snake stones—typically with offerings of milk—is regarded as one of the most efficacious remedies for countering the evil of *nāgadoṣa*. In this way, the deity of the undomesticated realm of the *vana* is ritually incorporated into the *kṣetra*'s cult, and this move is aimed at appeasing the Nāga and redomesticating the village's space. The temple, revered as especially old, came to be known as the Venugopālasvāmin temple, the stone being identified with the flute-playing lord as cowherd, that is, Kṛṣṇa Gopāla.<sup>48</sup>

According to the tale, the first inhabitants of the village were the Gollas, the pastoral caste of the Telugu people. The name Golla is a shortened form of Sanskrit *gopāla*, that is, protector of cows, cowherd. Caste traditions say that the Gollas descend from Kṛṣṇa Gopāla himself. Their hereditary occupation is tending cattle and selling milk and clarified butter.<sup>49</sup> In fact, they are a heterogeneous group composed of numerous endogamous subcastes.<sup>50</sup> Golla legends celebrate their glorious past and a dynasty of kings, which makes them claim a high rank in caste hierarchy: they think of themselves as belonging to the Kṣatriya *varṇa*, the warrior and princely class. It is important to highlight that Gollas are both *vaiṣṇavas* as well as *śaivas*. Besides the *vaiṣṇava* cult of Kṛṣṇa Gopāla, very popular among them is the worship of the folk god Mal-laṅṅa, believed to be a manifestation (*avatāra*) of Śiva. Kāṭamarāju, the hero

<sup>47</sup> See, e.g., L. S. S. O'Malley, *Popular Hinduism: The Religion of the Masses* (New York: Macmillan, 1935), 165–66. On the causes of *nāgadoṣa* and the ritual remedies to it, see Allocco, *Snakes, Goddesses, and Anthills*, 113–268.

<sup>48</sup> See Padmanaban, *Love Is My Form*, 11. The temple was renovated in the mid-twentieth century. W. T. Elmore reports a similar case in which the building of a Venugopālasvāmin temple in a village in the Nellore District of Andhra Pradesh was decided as a form of expiation in order to atone the consequences of one's sins; see Elmore, *Dravidian Gods*, 118–19.

<sup>49</sup> Though Gollas have been characterized as the epitome of left-hand castes, i.e., as traders—as opposed to right-hand castes, i.e., landowners—their nature is ambiguous. They themselves appear unwilling to be classified into one or the other division; see V. Narayana Rao, "Tricking the Goddess: Cowherd Kāṭamarāju and Goddess Gaṅga in the Telugu Folk Epic," in Hildebeitel, *Criminal Gods*, 117–18.

<sup>50</sup> There are two main divisions among the Gollas of the Mysore area: *ūru* (village), which one finds dispersed all over the Anantapur District, and *kādu* (forest).

of the Kāṭamarāju Kathā, which is their major oral epic, though being described as an *avatāra* of Kṛṣṇa is equally revered as Śiva and bears unmistakable *śaiva* traits.<sup>51</sup>

Unfortunately, in Puttaparthi the worship of the snake stone that came to be identified as Veṅugopālasvāmin was not enough to avert the Nāga's potent curse. Locals report that it was the goddess Sathyamma, their village deity (*grāmadevatā*), who told them what else they needed to do in order to try to appease the Nāga's wrath.

As in so many South Indian villages, Sathyamma (more correctly Sathyamma, literally, the "true/good mother") is represented by a crude idol kept within a small shrine. She is the mother of the place, since she is thought to have created it. She is perceived by all her sons and daughters (i.e., the local inhabitants) to be concerned with their needs and well-being; she is the most powerful guardian and, in return for the locals' worship of her, ensures fertility and protection from demons and diseases. The body of the goddess coincides with the microcosmos of the *kṣetra*, and villagers are understood to be living and moving within her body, the goddess being identified with Mother Earth.<sup>52</sup>

Especially on the occasion of religious festivals, select villagers are ritually possessed by their *grāmadevatā*. During possession they perform the function of mediums, that is, they speak for the goddess and act as intermediaries between the deity and the local people. On one such occasion, a medium of Sathyamma—apparently a woman known by the same name—revealed that in order to soften the Nāga's curse all cowherds were to be sent out of the village. Only in this way termite mounds would fade away. The Karnam therefore ordered the cowherds to leave the place and transfer to a hilly area outside of Puttaparthi. They did so and, as per Sathyamma's words, the ubiquitous termite mounds gradually diminished. The curse of the Nāga, though not eliminated, was partly eased in its sorrowful effects.<sup>53</sup>

<sup>51</sup> On the Gollas, see E. Thurston and K. Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, 7 vols. (Madras: Government Press, 1909), 2:284–96; Nanjundayya and Ananthakrishna Iyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, 3:197–242; Sivasankaranarayana, *Andhra Pradesh District Gazetteers: Anantapur*, 118; Sontheimer, *Pastoral Deities*, 8–10, 100–105; Sontheimer, *Essays on Religion*, 118 n. 9, 119 n. 11, 158–59, 173–74; M. L. K. Murty, "Ethnohistory of Pastoralism: A Study of Kuruvas and Gollas," *Studies in History* n. s. 9, no. 1 (1993): 33–41.

<sup>52</sup> In order to stress the symbiotic relation between the *grāmadevatā* and local people, irrespective of their caste, the goddess is even thought to be married to the village and thus to be the lady or mistress of the place; see H. Whitehead, *The Village Gods of South India* (Calcutta: Association Press and Oxford University Press, 1921), 48–70; D. R. Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988), 197–211.

<sup>53</sup> See Padmanaban, *Love Is My Form*, 11. Sathya Sāi Bābā apparently confirmed such story, see *ibid.*, 24 n. 2.

## III. MULTIPLE INTERPRETATIONS OF THE PUTTAPARTHI MYTH

The Puttaparthi tale belongs to a broad category of termite mound myths. A recurrent pattern in South Indian folk stories is that a shepherd or king sees the cow giving milk to the termite mound and approaches. He then beholds the deity of the mound coming out of it and drinking the cow's milk, or else he digs the mound or even pierces it with a stick, arousing the deity abiding within it. In due course, the shepherd or king becomes the deity's first devotee (*bhakta*). The god or goddess may also appear in a dream to the future *bhakta* and reveal his or her dwelling place in the termite hill.<sup>54</sup> In her comprehensive monograph *Das Tor zur Unterwelt* (1984), König offers an account of thirty-two myths relating to termite mounds, of which fifteen—including the Puttaparthi legend—concern the discovery of a deity residing in a termite hill (*Göttheiten in Termitenhügeln*).<sup>55</sup>

What distinguishes our story from most other South Indian termite mound myths is that it has no happy ending. The change of its name from Gollapalle to Puttaparthi identifies it as a cursed locale. The Nāga's malediction extends itself to the entire community of cowherds, condemning the village to a gloomy destiny. In particular, the founding tale does not tell us that the cowherd who hurled the stone against the divine snake was turned into a devotee of the deity. Though the element of repentance surfaces with the subsequent decision to worship the stone that hit the Nāga, this is not deemed sufficient to restore the *kṣetra* to its original welfare. Even the sending away of all cowherds from the village, as per goddess Sathyamma's will, is understood to soften the curse without actually vanquishing it.

Before tackling any interpretative effort, it should be stressed that "folk religion does not explain itself."<sup>56</sup> It is rather a sensuous experience, in which ritual and aesthetic dimensions play a key role. Each phase in our narrative is characterized by a distinct emotion that captures the listener's attention: the original happiness and prosperity of the Gollapalle cowherds; the love of the cow that nurtured the snake; the anger and violence of the cowherd who wounded or killed the snake; the counterviolence and wrath of the snake, who cursed the cowherd and the village; the sad fate of Puttaparthi; the villagers' repentance and their worship of the stone that hit the snake, in order to atone for their sin.

Orally transmitted narratives such as ours include very few explanations. In a village community, interpretations are eventually put forward by the liter-

<sup>54</sup> For a list of twenty-seven motifs characterizing termite mound myths, see König, *Das Tor zur Unterwelt*, 182–83. A list of temple legends that include termite mound myths is found in Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi, *Self-Milking Cow*, 220–34.

<sup>55</sup> See König, *Das Tor zur Unterwelt*, 266–77.

<sup>56</sup> See G.-D. Sontheimer, "Bhakti in the Khandoba Cult," in *Devotion Divine: Bhakti Traditions from the Regions of India; Studies in Honour of Charlotte Vaudeville*, ed. D. L. Eck and F. Mallison (Paris: École Française d'Extrême-Orient, 1991), 231.

ate members of the higher castes, especially male Brahmins, and their understanding does not necessarily coincide with what other segments of society think or feel.<sup>57</sup> Even though *bhakti*, or devotion, permeates both the folk and Brahminical components of Hinduism,<sup>58</sup> plural interpretations of the same tale coexist within different castes in any given locale. The meaning and relevance of any myth does not emerge in a vacuum but is dependent on the social context of both the tellers and hearers of the stories: it may reflect broader interests—such as the fostering of group identity—as well as particular socio-political agendas. Even in a given milieu, the details of a tale and its significance are not fixed but rather are subject to change over time, generation after generation, exemplifying culture-specific aims and needs, the instability and complexity of any society. As we shall see, Sathya Sāi Bābā's subsequent appropriation of the Puttaparthi myth—fused within a discourse of caste hegemony—is emblematic of its dynamism.

Within any community, a preliminary decision that storytellers must make in order to sustain their interpretative effort concerns the actual identity of the tale's protagonists (in our case, the snake, the cow, and the cowherd). Such a decision is made by the very first teller/interpreter of the tale—often thought to be a superior, divine, or semidivine being—and the subsequent storytellers of that social group most often than not tend to repeat it. By and large, in every particular milieu the tellers and the audience of a myth implicitly share the same basic assumptions regarding the identities of the various protagonists and thus take them for granted, without bothering to spell them out. But establishing the *dramatis personae* is not at all a neutral or obvious move, since this step is instrumental for setting the stage and orchestrating the tale's plot.

Here, I focus first on what appears to be the prevailing indigenous understanding of these identities, on the basis of fieldwork I conducted in Puttaparthi and the surrounding area in August and September 2001. I then explore two other possibilities concerning the identity of the actors involved, which are my own tentative proposals: the first one is based on an appreciation of Golla beliefs and mythology, on the assumption that the Nāga identifies the folk god Mallanṇa; the second one is based on a broader identification of the Nāga with Śiva or even a demon. I think that to postulate different identities—even plural

<sup>57</sup> On these issues, see A. Feldhaus, "Brahmans and the Representation of Folk Religion in Maharashtra," in Malik, Feldhaus, and Brückner, *In the Company of Gods*, 53–64.

<sup>58</sup> All components are not to be viewed in isolation but in their interplay, which always calls for historical contextualization. On the components of Hinduism, which in Sontheimer's view are five, i.e., the work and teachings of the Brahmins, asceticism and renunciation, tribal religion, folk religion, and *bhakti*, see G.-D. Sontheimer, "Hinduism: The Five Components and their Interaction," in *Hinduism Reconsidered*, ed. G.-D. Sontheimer and H. Kulke (Delhi: Manohar, 1989), 197–212. See also H. Brückner, "Some Reflections on Günther Sontheimer's Understanding of 'Folk Religion' and His Model of the Five Components of Hinduism," in Malik, Feldhaus, and Brückner, *In the Company of Gods*, 355–62.

identities—of the tale’s protagonists is useful precisely in order to explore the various ways the myth can be interpreted and appropriated over time by different castes and communities.

#### A. THE LOCAL BELIEF: THE NĀGA IS KRṢṢṢA

Although in similar myths the snake abiding in the termite hill is usually identified either with a particular form of the goddess or with Śiva,<sup>59</sup> in the village of Puttapparthi the prevailing opinion is that the Nāga is Krṣṣa. To be sure, this appears to be the simplest and prima facie interpretation.<sup>60</sup> The cow that fed the snake is understood to be none other than the goddess and more specifically Krṣṣa’s lover/consort, or even Sathyamma. This is why she is irresistibly attracted to the deity, to the point of offering her milk—that is, herself—to him. The Golla cowherd who hurled the stone is identified with a sinful human agent, who was nonetheless instrumental in activating the deity’s cult. The “sacrificial” stone that hit the deity and bears his blood is the god himself; the stone is Krṣṣa inasmuch as the blood is symbolic of the deity’s vital force. The appearance of Krṣṣa Gopāla as a snake finds its paradigm in the Krṣṣaite mythology of Mount Govardhana. As G.-D. Sontheimer observed:

“This Govardhana is but an anthill,” says one of the antagonists of Krṣṣa in the *Harivaṃśa*. The Krṣṣa who saved the cattle and the Ābhira cowherds, was, as Ch. Vaudeville has shown, originally a spirit of the mountain, simultaneously living amongst the cowherds in human form. . . . Local traditions in Govardhana . . . say that Krṣṣa lived in the mountain in the form of a snake.<sup>61</sup>

Moreover, he elsewhere noted:

Everywhere in the focal area of my research there are analogies to this prevaṣṣa god of herdsmen who lives on the mountain or in a termite mound, often in the form of a snake.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>59</sup> For a list of male deities involved in termite mound myths, see König, *Das Tor zur Unterwelt*, 194–97. Herein, the name of Krṣṣa appears only once and that of Viṣṣu only four times.

<sup>60</sup> See Eichinger Ferro-Luzzi, *Self-Milking Cow*, 51–52. The author, however, is misleading when she argues that the pristine name of the village was Valmikipura and when she concludes that the snake’s curse “left things more or less as they were, since the original name already referred to the anthill.” Even some devotees of Sathya Sāi Bābā identify the snake with Krṣṣa; see M. L. Adzema at [http://www.primalspirit.com/marylynn1\\_1baba.htm](http://www.primalspirit.com/marylynn1_1baba.htm).

<sup>61</sup> Sontheimer, *The Vana and the Kṣetra*, 371. See also C. Vaudeville, “The Govardhan Myth in Northern India,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 22 (1980): 5, “Multiple Approaches to a Living Hindu Myth: The Lord of the Govardhan Hill,” in Sontheimer and Kulke, *Hinduism Reconsidered*, 105–25, and “Govardhan, the Eater Hill,” in *Devotional Literature in South Asia: Current Research, 1985–1988*, ed. R. S. McGregor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 3–10. In Mahābhārata 2.38.9, Mount Govardhana is compared to a termite mound.

<sup>62</sup> Sontheimer, *Pastoral Deities*, 188.



The Puttaparthi legend strikes an observer as the specimen of an anti-Govardhana, mirroring an opposite outcome: whereas through the blessing of the Nāga who is Kṛṣṇa the Govardhana termite mound/mountain was made into a prosperous locale where cows abound—*govardhana* meaning “cattle increasing”—by means of the same deity’s curse, the originally prosperous Gollapalle was turned into *puṭṭavardhinī*, the place where “termite mounds increase.”

The association of Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa with the snake is well attested in Epic and Purāṇic mythology.<sup>63</sup> In the interval between two periods of creation following a cosmic dissolution, Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa sleeps on the thousand-headed serpent Śeṣa—“the Remainder,” on which the manifested universe rests—and is even identified with him. In the *Bhagavadgītā* (10.28–29), Kṛṣṇa solemnly declares, “Of serpents I am Vāsuki, and I am Ananta of the Nāgas.”<sup>64</sup>

The *vaiṣṇava* identification of the snake by Puttaparthi villagers immediately calls to mind the founding myth of the god Veṅkaṭeśvara in Tirupati.<sup>65</sup> Situated in the Chittoor District of Andhra Pradesh, not far from Puttaparthi, this ancient locale is the most important pilgrimage place of the region. Veṅkaṭeśvara is revered as Viṣṇu, though he is also worshipped by *śaīvas* since he bears attributes of both Hari and Hara, that is, Viṣṇu and Śiva.<sup>66</sup> In Tirupati, the story goes that when a cowherd tried to hit one of his cows that was inexplicably releasing her milk in a mound’s hole—thus feeding Veṅkaṭeśvara who lived within it—the god himself came instantly out of it, diverted the blow, and received the injury in lieu of the cow. As a consequence of his evil act, the cowherd died or was blinded.<sup>67</sup>

It is noteworthy that Gollas figure prominently in Tirupati. A representative of this community always takes the first *darśana*, that is, the “vision” of the

<sup>63</sup> On Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa’s link with the snake, see J. Gonda, *Aspects of Early Viṣṇuism* (1954; Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1993), 150–53.

<sup>64</sup> “Sarpāṇām asmi vāsukih; anantaś cā ‘smi nāgānām.” Vāsuki, a Nāga king, was used as a cord to rotate Mount Mandara at the churning of the ocean; Ananta (literally, “endless”) is another name of Śeṣa.

<sup>65</sup> The site’s fortunes were fostered by the patronage of the Vijayanagar kings between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries. For an introduction to Veṅkaṭeśvara and his temple in Tirupati, see V. Narayanan, “Veṅkaṭeśvara,” in Jacobsen, *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, 1:781–85. See also C. S. Vasudevan, *Temples of Andhra Pradesh* (Delhi: Bharatiya Kala Prakashan, 2000), 151–228.

<sup>66</sup> See Ramesan, *Temples and Legends of Andhra Pradesh*, 59; Shankaranarayana Rao, *Temples of Andhra Pradesh*, 86.

<sup>67</sup> See C. Radhakrishna Sharma, trans., *Tirupati Veṅkaṭeśvarar* (Hyderabad: Umashanker, 1973), 1–32; P. Sitapati, *Sri Venkateswara: The Lord of the Seven Hills, Tirupati* (1968; Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1989), 128. See also Sri N. Subrahmanyam, trans., *The Glories and Mysteries of Lord Venkateswara (Sri Venkateswara Leela Mahatmyamu)* (Tirumalai Hills P. O., 1962), 25–27. For another instance in which a cobra is injured in a termite mound and causes the death of his aggressors, see *Census of India, 1961*, vol. 9, *Temples of Madras State*, pt. XI-D (6), *Madurai and Ramanathapuram* (Delhi: Government of India, 1967), 164.

deity, since he has the privilege of accompanying the appointed priest when at dawn Veṅkaṭeśvara is woken up with the chanting of the *suprabhātam*, the wake-up prayer.<sup>68</sup>

#### B. SITUATING THE TALE WITHIN A GOLLA MILIEU

Since the original inhabitants of Puttaparthi belonged to the pastoral caste of the Gollas, it appears necessary to try to refer our story to their own traditions and beliefs. Within a Golla environment, the Nāga of our tale could easily be identified with Mallanṇa, the most popular folk god of Andhra Pradesh, who is believed to live as a snake in termite mounds and who presents striking continuities with the Vedic Rudra.<sup>69</sup> The legend says that Mallanṇa was discovered as a black stone lingam within a termite mound by a cowherd who had noticed how his favorite cow poured all her milk over it.<sup>70</sup> Mallanṇa is equated with Mallikārjuna of Śrīśailam in the Kurnool District of Andhra Pradesh, that is, with Śiva, and is highly revered among Gollas who often act as his temple priests.<sup>71</sup> Usually worshipped in the form of a *svayambhū* or “self-originated” lingam, Mallanṇa is also linked to Veṅkaṭeśvara: the latter is his brother-in-law, Mallanṇa being married to Veṅkaṭeśvara’s sister Balija Māḍamma (one of his five wives).

In the Golla traditions of Komarelli and Ailoni, in the northern Warangal District of Andhra Pradesh, Mallanṇa’s link to the termite mound is further evidenced.<sup>72</sup> The beginning of the main legend concerning his birth is reminiscent of the Puttaparthi story. We are told that Ādireḍḍi and Nīamma, the king and queen of Kollapuri Patnam, had been disrespectful toward Śiva and, as a consequence, were severely punished: their land became barren, their cattle perished, and their capital was turned into a ghost city. Ādireḍḍi and Nīamma were banished and had to move to the outskirts of Kollapuri Patnam and stay in the wilderness for twelve years. In the forest, they lived by selling

<sup>68</sup> Analogously, in Sathya Sāi Bābā’s ashram the day begins at dawn with the chanting of a Śrī Sathya Sāi *suprabhātam*; see B. Steel, *The Sathya Sai Baba Compendium: A Guide to the First Seventy Years* (York Beach, ME: Weiser, 1997), 197–99.

<sup>69</sup> He is known as Mailār in Karnataka and Khaṇḍobā (alias Mallāri/Malhāri/Mairāi) in Maharashtra. Worshipped as a royal god or a bandit-king, Mallanṇa is the fulfiller of earthbound wishes such as good harvest, fertility and marriage. If displeased, however, he may exhibit a furious temper, just like Rudra-Śiva. His image is typically made of clay taken from termite mounds; see G.-D. Sontheimer, “Rudra and Khaṇḍobā: Continuity in Folk Religion,” in *Religion and Society in Maharashtra*, ed. M. Israel and N. K. Wagle (Toronto: University of Toronto Centre for South Asian Studies, 1987), 1–31, and also *Some Incidents in the History of the God Khaṇḍobā*, in Gaborieau and Thorner, *Asie du Sud: Traditions et changements*, 111–17.

<sup>70</sup> See Ramesan, *Temples and Legends of Andhra Pradesh*, 13–14.

<sup>71</sup> At Śrīśailam, the original image of Mallikārjuna resembles a termite mound; see Feldhaus, *Water and Womanhood*, 97.

<sup>72</sup> See Sontheimer, *Between Ghost and God*, 321–22.

firewood. They then prayed to Śiva that he might forgive their sins and rescue them from their condition. Pleased with their repentance, the god manifested himself to them as a *jaṅgama*, a Liṅgāyat renouncer, and promised that an illustrious son would soon be born to the couple. Mallanṇa was miraculously begotten as the seventh and youngest son of Ādireḍḍi and Nilamma, and thanks to him his family regained prosperity as well as the kingdom. In time, however, Mallanṇa's brothers or, rather, his six sisters-in-law, turned against him, and when the property was divided he received uncultivable forest land as his share. This notwithstanding, Mallanṇa cleared the forest by cutting trees and digging up termite mounds. While digging one of these mounds, he found a golden nose ring, which is symbolic of sheep, the Gollas' treasure.<sup>73</sup> Then Śiva's consort, Pārvaṭī, satisfied with Mallanṇa's devotion, asked him to tend the sheep for seven years and to perpetually kindle the fire near the termite hill. Obedient, Mallanṇa made a fire in a bowl-shaped brazier and milked the sheep daily, boiling the milk in the brazier and worshipping the termite mound by pouring milk into it.

If Mallanṇa may be identified with the snake living in the mound, the cow may be interpreted as Mallanṇa's lover, perhaps Gaṅgā/Gaṅgamma, who is the Gollas' chief goddess.<sup>74</sup> After all, one of Gaṅgā's names is Kāmadhenu,<sup>75</sup> and the flow of her milk may well be equated with the flow of the riverine goddess.<sup>76</sup> Moreover, the cowherd who hit Mallanṇa with a stone need not be understood as a mere human agent but might be identified with Kṛṣṇa Gopāla himself. The story can be read as the confrontation between two antagonistic male gods over the possession of their beloved lover/bride: the regional, folk deity Mallanṇa is wounded/killed, that is, sacrificed, by the transregional Epic/Purāṇic Kṛṣṇa Gopāla, who impersonates Golla identity at its highest and purest level.

Even more to the point, the cowherd of our tale might be identified with Kāṭamarāju, the hero of the Kāṭamarāju Kathā.<sup>77</sup> He is an *avatāra* of Kṛṣṇa

<sup>73</sup> Once upon a time, Pārvaṭī was presented a sheep by Śiva, which multiplied to the amount of ten million, and she kept her nose ring as a lock on the sheep.

<sup>74</sup> It is worthwhile noticing that in Tirupati she is worshipped as Veṅkaṭeśvara's sister. On her cult, see D. Handelman, "The Guises of the Goddess and the Transformation of the Male: Gangamma's Visit to Tirupati, and the Continuum of Gender," in *Syllables of Sky: Studies in South Indian Civilization; in Honour of Velcheru Narayana Rao*, ed. D. D. Shulman (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), 283–337.

<sup>75</sup> In the Gaṅgāsahasranāmastotra, the hymn of Gaṅgā's thousand names, Kāmadhenu figures as her one hundred seventy-second name.

<sup>76</sup> See Gaṅgāmāhātmya 4.30. On the identification of rivers and cows, dating back to the Ṛg-veda, see Feldhaus, *Water and Womanhood*, 46–47.

<sup>77</sup> On Kāṭamarāju and the Kāṭamarāju Kathā, see Narayana Rao, *Tricking the Goddess*, in Hiltebeitel, *Criminal Gods*, 105–21. See also Elmore, *Dravidian Gods*, 107–12.

who also incorporates *śaiva* traits. Indeed, he represents a bundle of opposites, mirroring the Gollas' ambiguous caste identity. If the cowherd is Kāṭamarāju, then it is only natural to interpret the cow—his favorite *go*—as Gaṅgā/Gaṅgamma, to whom he is married.<sup>78</sup>

As Kṛṣṇa, Kāṭamarāju is the ultimate trickster; as Śiva, he is the ultimate destroyer. In his function as both a cowherd and a heroic warrior, Kāṭamarāju is a protective guardian offering shelter to his cows and to whoever seeks refuge in him. When he witnesses his favorite cow, that is, Gaṅgā, offering her bountiful udder to the snake (alias Mallaṅṅa), he is overcome with jealousy and, in revenge, hurls the sacrificial stone against his rival. That Kāṭamarāju and Mallaṅṅa/Śiva contend over the possession of Gaṅgā appears most fitting, given that in Purāṇic mythology Gaṅgā sexually arouses both Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa (causing the jealousy of Rādhā, his favorite lover and consort) and Śiva (causing the jealousy of his wife Pārvatī).<sup>79</sup>

#### C. SITUATING THE TALE WITHIN THE BROADER CONTEXT OF HINDU MYTHOLOGY

In a wider perspective, one might identify the snake as either a plain manifestation of Śiva or as a demon, whereas the cow is necessarily a form of the goddess in both her maternal and seductive aspects. As is portrayed in similar myths, the encounter between the snake and the cow betrays a relationship between two lovers, with sacrificial overtones: the udder of the cow is the counterpart of the phallus, that is, of the snake/lingam.<sup>80</sup>

The jealous cowherd, agent of the sacrifice, might again be identified with Kṛṣṇa, who in Gollapalle lived as a *gopa* among *gopas*. He cannot tolerate the stealthy relationship between Śiva/the Nāga demon and his beloved cow/lover/wife. Enraged, he hurls a stone against his rival and this stone is the instrument of Kṛṣṇa's sacrificial violence.

Kṛṣṇa's enmity toward the snake finds its model in the Purāṇic accounts of the former's victorious fight over the Nāga demon-king Kāliya. The story goes that the five-headed Kāliya lived in the Yamunā River near Vṛndāvana

<sup>78</sup> Their relationship, however, has incestuous overtones since Kāṭamarāju and Gaṅgā are understood to be brother and sister; see Bhāgavatapurāṇa 10.3.47–49.

<sup>79</sup> As is well-known, Gaṅgā is said to have been spilled out from Viṣṇu's foot and to have fallen on top of Śiva's head, where she mischievously meanders through his locks of hair; see W. Doniger O'Flaherty, *Śiva, the Erotic Ascetic* (London: Oxford University Press, 1981), 229–33; Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses*, 187–96; D. L. Eck, "Gaṅgā: The Goddess in Hindu Sacred Geography," in *The Divine Consort: Rādhā and the Goddesses of India*, ed. J. Stratton Hawley and D. M. Wulff (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1984), 166–83. See also K. Alley, "Gaṅgā," in Jacobsen, *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, 1:571–77.

<sup>80</sup> See Shulman, *The Serpent and the Sacrifice*, 108–9.

and had poisoned its waters, endangering the lives of cows and cowherds. The child Kṛṣṇa, however, discovered his secret pool and succeeded in overcoming him by performing a frenzied dance on top of his middle head.<sup>81</sup>

Here as well as in the prior Golla identification of the cowherd with Kṛṣṇa/Kāṭamarāju, the stone that hit the snake bears the power (*śakti*) of both Kṛṣṇa and the wounded deity. The blood with which it is smeared is the tangible remainder of the performed sacrifice. The stone signifies the sacrificial fight/encounter between Śiva/the Nāga demon and Kṛṣṇa, the locus in which the two male deities antagonistically meet and coalesce. It thus incorporates Kṛṣṇa's presence as well as Śiva/the Nāga's presence. The latter is the sacrificial victim and his blood is the precious remnant that foreshadows a new beginning. As D. D. Shulman observed, "The remnant belongs by right to the god who performs the violent act of sacrifice, for the remainder is dangerous and impure, like leavings generally in Hinduism; but the residue might also be seen as the quintessence of the sacrifice for it holds the germ of the new life which the sacrifice seeks to provide."<sup>82</sup>

The snake, thought to survive to his own death, stands as the sacrificial symbol par excellence. He is at the same time the victim of the sacrifice and the *ucchiṣṭa*, the irreducible, powerful residue that is the token of life's renewal.<sup>83</sup>

In both my reconstructions, the idea is that the basic mythic event here displayed is that the serpent god or demon, caught in the act of uniting with the cow goddess, is sacrificed, that is, wounded/slain by the divine owner/husband (*pati*) of the cow who acts as sacrificer. Śiva/the Nāga demon, lost in his passion for Kāmadhenu/Devī, does not even realize that he is being seen by his rival. When an enraged Kṛṣṇa Gopāla attacks Śiva/the Nāga demon by hurling a stone at him, the latter is especially vulnerable, being taken by surprise by the sudden onslaught. Although Śiva/the Nāga demon is easily defeated/killed and the divine cowherd can regain his cow goddess, the sacrificial victim's vengeance is to hurl a terrible curse on Kṛṣṇa Gopāla and the community of cowherds that he represents. Śiva/the Nāga demon exhibits his destructive character, and this is precisely the necessary counterviolence that, by causing pain to the sacrificer, allows the latter to at least partially free himself from the karmic burden of his evil act.

<sup>81</sup> The story is narrated in both the Viṣṇupurāṇa (5.7.1–83) and the Bhāgavatapurāṇa (10.13); see C. Dimmitt and J. A. B. van Buitenen, eds., *Classical Hindu Mythology: A Reader in the Sanskrit Purāṇas* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1978), 114–16.

<sup>82</sup> Shulman, *The Serpent and the Sacrifice*, 115.

<sup>83</sup> See J. Gonda, "Atharvaveda 11, 7," in *Mélanges d'indianisme à la mémoire de Louis Renou* (Paris: de Boccard, 1968), 301–36; C. Malamoud, "Observations sur la notion de 'reste' dans le brahmanisme," *Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde Süd- und Ostasiens* 16 (1972): 5–26.

IV. RATNĀKARAM KONDAMA RĀJU, GODDESS SATHYABHĀMĀ,  
AND VEŅKĀVADHŪTA'S PROPHECY

I now turn to an evaluation of significant developments that took place in Puttaparthi around the latter part of the nineteenth century and that can be read as new, decisive chapters in the unfolding of the village narrative. Besides the Venugopālasvāmin temple, there exist in Puttaparthi two other temples: a Hanuman temple,<sup>84</sup> located at the entrance of the hamlet, and, not far from it, a Sathyabhāmā temple, which is rarely found in rural Andhra Pradesh. This latter one was built by Sathya Sāi Bābā's grandfather, Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju (1840–1952), and it incorporated the Sathyamma shrine to the point that the *grāmadevatā* and goddess Sathyabhāmā came to be coidentified. As we shall see, linked to this temple is the startling prophecy that an ascetic known as Veṅkāvadhūta supposedly told Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju: in the near future, Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa himself would manifest in his midst in order to rescue Mother Earth.

According to Hindu mythology, Sathyabhāmā (more correctly, Satyabhāmā, literally “having true luster”) was the daughter of Śatrajit and the third of Kṛṣṇa's eight wives, renowned for her capricious will. Kṛṣṇa is said to have been especially fond of her. Among the legends that concern Kṛṣṇa and Sathyabhāmā, there is a famous one in which Kṛṣṇa, in order to please Sathyabhāmā, did not hesitate to steal from Indra's paradise the fabulous Pārijāta tree, originally produced by the Devas (gods) and Asuras (antigods) through their churning of the ocean of milk. Kṛṣṇa's theft led to a great fight with Indra, the king of the gods, in which the latter was ultimately defeated. The tree was taken to Dvārakā, Kṛṣṇa's capital, and planted there; at Kṛṣṇa's death, however, it returned to Indra's heaven.<sup>85</sup> In Andhra Pradesh, Sathyabhāmā is commonly revered as a manifestation of Bhūdevī or Mother Earth.<sup>86</sup>

Ratnākaram<sup>87</sup> Kondama Rāju, who lived to be a centenarian, was a peasant with a strong religious leaning. A sincere *vaiṣṇava*, he belonged to the Bhatrāju

<sup>84</sup> According to legend, this temple was consecrated centuries ago by an unknown seer.

<sup>85</sup> On the Pārijāta legend, see Harivaṃśa 2.64–76, and Viṣṇupurāṇa 5.30–31. A popular poem found in Telugu literature is Pārijātapaharanamu, written by Timmana under the patronage of the Vijayanagar king Krishnadevaraya (r. 1509–29). On Satyabhāmā in Epic and Purāṇic lore, see V. Mani, *Purāṇic Encyclopaedia: A Comprehensive Dictionary with Special Reference to the Epic and Purāṇic Literature* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1975), 704–5.

<sup>86</sup> In the fifteenth-century Telugu poem Mahābhāgavatamu, composed by Bammera Potana, Sathyabhāmā (alias Bhūdevī) is presented as actively helping Kṛṣṇa in his fight against the demon Narakāsura, until Kṛṣṇa eventually decapitates him; see D. Soneji, *Performing Satyābhāma: Text, Context, Memory and Mimesis in Telugu-Speaking South India* (PhD diss., McGill University, 2004), 44–47. On Bhūdevī, see A. Venkatesan, “Bhūdevī,” in Jacobsen, *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, 1:491–98.

<sup>87</sup> This family name is quite common and means “sea,” “ocean,” and, literally, “jewel-mine.”

caste of bards and genealogists, which is recognized as a Kṣatriya subcaste. In Andhra Pradesh, the Bhatrājus are generally employed as teachers or speaking minstrels, popularizing sacred literature through songs and poetry.<sup>88</sup> Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju had musical and dramatic talent and knew by heart many Epic and Purāṇic myths culled from Sanskrit and Telugu sources. In village plays, he sang songs from the Rāmāyaṇa and brilliantly interpreted the role of Rāma's brother Lakṣmaṇa.<sup>89</sup> Local people were fond of him as he was wise and good-hearted, also acting as an arbitrator in Puttaparthi.

The story goes that one night the pious man had a dream in which Sathyabhāmā asked him to provide shelter for her. She stood outside in the rain during a terrible storm while waiting for her beloved Kṛṣṇa, whom she had sent to gather the flowers of the Pārijāta tree from Indra's heaven. As soon as Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju woke up, he thought it clear that in order to offer shelter to the goddess he was to erect a temple for her.<sup>90</sup> Therefore, sometime in the late nineteenth century, the Sathyabhāmā temple was rapidly built and, as mentioned, it came to incorporate the Sathyamma shrine, being homologized to the village deity.<sup>91</sup> The coidentification of the two goddesses was certainly favored by the similarity in their names—Sathyabhāmā being also known as Sathyā<sup>92</sup>—and by the fact that both Sathyamma and Sathyabhāmā are understood to be manifestations of Bhūdevī.

The family deity (*kuladevatā*) of Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju was one Veṅkāvadhūta, a saintly figure to whom the former was wholeheartedly devoted.<sup>93</sup> Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju and his wife Lakshamma (1852–1931) named their two sons Veṅka after him—Pedda Veṅkama Rāju (1885–1963) and Chinna Veṅkama Rāju (1898–1978). Both of them inherited from their father his literary and dramatic abilities, coupled with his piety.

<sup>88</sup> See Rao, *Sathya Sai Baba: God as Man*, 4; Padmanaban, *Love Is My Form*, 11, 24 n. 6. The Bhatrājus are supposed to be the offspring of a Kṣatriya female and a Vaiśya male. They are mostly Viṣṇu worshippers, and are the only non-Brahmin caste that performs the duties of a religious teacher. They are described as touring around villages making extempore verses in praise of householders, being rewarded by gifts of old clothes, grain, and money. It is also stated that some Bhatrājus "have *shotriems* and *ināms*," where *shotriem* is land given as a gift for proficiency in the Vedas or learning, and *inām* is land given free of rent; see Thurston and Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes of Southern India*, 1:223–30. See also Nanjundayya and Ananthakrishna Iyer, *Mysore Tribes and Castes*, 2:259–76.

<sup>89</sup> See Kasturi, *Sathyam-Sivam-Sundaram*, 4.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid. N. Kasturi (1897–1987), main biographer of Sathya Sāi Bābā, interviewed Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju in the late 1940s.

<sup>91</sup> See Kasturi, *Sathyam-Sivam-Sundaram*, 3–4; Padmanaban, *Love Is My Form*, 11–12. The Sathyamma/Sathyabhāmā temple was renovated in the mid-twentieth century.

<sup>92</sup> Monier-Williams, *Sanskrit-English Dictionary*, 1135 c. 3 (Satyā = Sathyabhāmā).

<sup>93</sup> For a description of this holy man, see N. Kasturi, *Easwaramma: The Chosen Mother* (Prasanthi Nilayam: Sri Sathya Sai Books and Publications, 1984), 12–13. Veṅkāvadhūta would have narrated to Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju the legendary origin of the stone that was worshipped in the Veṅugopālasvāmin temple; *ibid.*, 18.

Apparently, this Veṅkāvadhūta was well-known in the area, being revered as a divine embodiment in hundreds of villages even beyond the Anantapur District. His name implies that he was an ascetic of a radical kind who had relinquished all ties, that is, an *avadhūta*, possibly consecrated to god Veṅkaṭeśvara. This holy man is believed to have hailed from Maharashtra, to have lived a long, itinerant life, and to have finally settled at Hussainpur in the then Kingdom of Mysore in today's Karnataka, Pavagada Taluk, close to the border of Andhra Pradesh, where he ended his days. His tomb in Hussainpur is located in the so-called Veṅkāvadhūta Temple.<sup>94</sup>

Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju is reported to have had a memorable encounter with his beloved Veṅkāvadhūta one afternoon in Puttaparthi, underneath a Banyan tree.<sup>95</sup> After he had devoutly offered him some food, Veṅkāvadhūta, much to his amazement, solemnly announced that Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa would soon manifest himself in the village in order to rescue Bhūmi Devī, the Earth Goddess, who was in deep distress.<sup>96</sup>

In both Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju's dream and Veṅkāvadhūta's prophecy, Bhūmi Devī's alias Sathyamma/Sathyabhāmā's anguish and loneliness mirrors the sad condition of Puttaparthi. In other words, the goddess, who *is* the village, is incapable of effectively restoring the *kṣetra*'s pristine prosperity by herself. Evidently, the worship of the stone identified as Veṅugopālasvāmin and even the sending away of all cowherds from Puttaparthi—as she had intimated through her medium—were not sufficient measures. The idea is that only the cherished return of the goddess' lord (*pati*), that is, of Kṛṣṇa—who is none other than Viṣṇu Nārāyaṇa—will once and for all eradicate the Nāga's curse. As long as the god is absent and does not come back to his spouse/village, filling the place with his blissful presence, there will be no happiness for Puttaparthi.

#### V. SATHYA SĀTĪ BĀBĀ COMES IN

What follows is the impressive story of the one who appropriated the founding narrative of the village by presenting himself as the savior of Puttaparthi, and who succeeded in transforming this hamlet into the internationally re-

<sup>94</sup> On Veṅkāvadhūta's tomb and the saint's powerful presence, see Padmanaban, *Love Is My Form*, 25 n. 11.

<sup>95</sup> In 1998, S. Padmanaban was told by one Rama Rao, priest of the Veṅkāvadhūta temple in Hussainpur, that Veṅkāvadhūta had gone into *jīvasamādhi*, i.e., had willingly "left the body," about 300 years ago. In such case, Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju could have never met Veṅkāvadhūta (*ibid.*, 12, 25 n. 11). On the other hand, A. V. Narasimha Murthy, former head of the Department of Ancient History and Archaeology of the University of Mysore, who visited the site in 2010, reports that Veṅkāvadhūta died in Hussainpur "more than a century ago," around 1900. If this is true, Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju—who was born in 1840—could have met Veṅkāvadhūta sometime in the second half of the nineteenth century; see <http://www.ourkarnataka.com/Articles/starofmysore/venka009.htm>.

<sup>96</sup> See Padmanaban, *Love Is My Form*, 12, 25 n. 9.



nowned center of his cult. As per local tradition, Ratnākaram Sathyanārāyaṇa Rāju alias Sathya Sāi Bābā (Telugu: Satya Sāyibābā) was born in the village on November 23, 1926.<sup>97</sup> He was to become one of the most popular Indian gurus: his portraits, in which he is seen smiling under a round mass of hair and clad in an ochre robe, are familiar both in public spaces as well as in private homes. In India and throughout the world his devotees count in the millions, predominantly from the urban upper-middle classes. His teaching, steeped in *bhakti*, was Vedāntic through and through and—as is typical of neo-Hinduism—placed special emphasis on ethics (through his education in human values program) and social service (through the creation of schools, hospitals, and a variety of charitable works such as furnishing drinking water supplies to downtrodden villages).<sup>98</sup> But Sathya Sāi Bābā's towering fame is due first and foremost to his alleged miraculous and healing powers, which are inextricably interwoven to his life and message.<sup>99</sup>

He was the fourth of the five sons<sup>100</sup> of Pedda Veṅkama Rāju and Meesaraganda Easwaramma (1890–1972), who were cross-cousins (the related parents of each cousin being brother and sister).<sup>101</sup> The reports of Ratnākaram

<sup>97</sup> Nonetheless, there are discrepancies on Sathya Sāi Bābā's date and place of birth. In school records his birth date is recorded as October 4, 1929 (*ibid.*, 68). Moreover, his mother's family maintains that he was not born in Puttaparthi but in nearby Karnatanagapalli, the village where Easwaramma's mother resided at the time; *ibid.*, 13, 21. For information on the International Sathya Sai Baba Organization, see <http://www.sathyasai.org/>. For a critically annotated bibliography on Sathya Sāi Bābā, see Brian Steel's website: <http://www.bdsteel.tripod.com/More/sbresearchbib1.htm>. For a synthetic portrayal, see T. Srinivas, "Sathya Sai Baba," in Jacobsen, *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, 5:625–33.

<sup>98</sup> On neo-Hinduism, see W. Halbfass, ed., *Philology and Confrontation: Paul Hacker on Traditional and Modern Vedānta* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1995), 227–350. On Sathya Sāi Bābā's service (*sevā*) to society, see B. Aitken, *Sri Sathya Sai Baba: A Life* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2004), 191–206.

<sup>99</sup> See the collection of articles in S. P. Ruhela and D. Robinson, eds., *Sai Baba and His Message: A Challenge to Behavioural Sciences* (1976; Delhi: Vikas, 1982).

<sup>100</sup> The eldest son of the couple, Seshama Rāju (1911–1985), was to become a Telugu scholar and teacher and lived a retired life in Puttaparthi until his death. The second and third children born were girls, Veṅkamma (1918–1993) and Parvathamma (1920–1996), who also lived in the village all their lives. The youngest son, Jānakīrām Rāju (1931–2005), was educated up to high school and has been for decades an influential member of the Sri Sathya Sai Central Trust (which was created as a public charitable trust in 1972, with Sathya Sāi Bābā as chairman). On Sathya Sāi Bābā's brothers and sisters, see Padmanaban, *Love Is My Form*, 88. Apparently, Easwaramma suffered four miscarriages before having Sathyanārāyaṇa. She prayed to the village gods, fasted, and performed the auspicious *satyanārāyaṇapūjā*, the worship of Satyanārāyaṇa, i.e., Viṣṇu: she finally gave birth to a child and he was named Sathyanārāyaṇa as a thanksgiving to Viṣṇu for answering her prayers (*ibid.*, 17). For the Ratnākaram family tree, see 22–23.

<sup>101</sup> In South Indian villages, cross-cousin marriage was and still is a common pattern. The effect of such marriages is to bind people in relatively small, tight-knit kin groups. The younger sister of Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju, Veṅkaṭa Subbamma, married one Meesaraganda Subba Rāju of Koli-migunda, a village in Kurnool District. They had six children: three sons and three daughters. Their eldest daughter was Easwaramma. When she was fourteen, Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju arranged the marriage between her and Pedda Veṅkama Rāju, his firstborn son.

Sathyanārāyaṇa Rāju's conception, birth, and early life all emphasize his supernatural character. For example, we are told that as the newborn baby lay in a bed of piled clothes, the parents noticed that it was being raised and lowered by something underneath; when they investigated, they discovered a cobra beneath the clothes.<sup>102</sup> Such story is clearly aimed at equating Sathyanārāyaṇa with Viṣṇu, and the cobra with Śeṣa/Ananta.

Ratnākaram Kondama Rāju seems to have been the first to realize the nephew's divine nature.<sup>103</sup> Young Sathyanārāyaṇa would frequently fall into ecstatic trances and was especially fond of singing devotional hymns (*bhajan*) and enacting epic and mythological plays.<sup>104</sup> He would identify himself with Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa, Śiva, and practically all deities of the Hindu pantheon. His biographies are replete with *mirabilia*, first and foremost a bewildering variety of materializations (ashes, i.e., *vibhūti*, food, fruits, candies, rings, pictures, idols, etc.).<sup>105</sup> The hagiographic sources emphasize his acts of healing every kind of disease and illness, as well as his ability of granting visions.

In the early 1970s, Shaṅkaranārāyaṇa Rāju, first cousin of Sathya Sāi Bābā and Telugu professor at Bangalore University,<sup>106</sup> offered this intriguing testimony to P. Pratap Kumar, a student of his at the time: "It is said that Sathyanārāyaṇa's transformation to having 'god-man' status began when an old, wandering mendicant arrived in the village and stayed at the local travelers' resting place. During his stay, the mendicant became ill, and the young boy . . . took care of him; after three days, the mendicant died. Soon afterward, the boy began to exhibit the signs of being extraordinary. Local people believe that the old mendicant's mental powers might have been transferred to him."<sup>107</sup> Whatever the case may be, it was either on May 23, 1940, or—more probably—on October 21, 1943,<sup>108</sup> that Sathyanārāyaṇa solemnly declared that he was "Sāi Bābā": "I am Sai Baba . . . I belong to Apasthamba

<sup>102</sup> See Padmanaban, *Love Is My Form*, 21.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 72–73, 141. Among the plays written by Sathya Sāi Bābā there was even a Pārijātopaharaṇa (Offering of the Pārijāta [tree]), in which he played the part of Sathyabhāmā and G. S. Anjaneyulu's son played the part of Kṛṣṇa (*ibid.*, 135–37).

<sup>105</sup> One of the earliest documented materializations is a photograph of Shirdi Sāi Bābā with Kṛṣṇa, Rāma, Śiva, and Hanuman in the background (*ibid.*, 136). For a review of his alleged miracles, see Steel, *Sathya Sai Baba Compendium*, 129–71.

<sup>106</sup> P. Pratap Kumar recently observed: "[Shaṅkaranārāyaṇa Rāju] was a remarkable man with a remarkable memory. He never carried a book to the classroom but could recite the entire *Mahābhārata*, *Rāmāyaṇa*, and a whole range of Telugu poetic texts, including *Śṛṅgāraṇaiśada*, without the aid of a text. I mention this little detail to indicate the intense religious background from which the Sathya Sāi Bābā himself came"; see [http://www.enlightened-spirituality.org/Sathya\\_Sai\\_Baba\\_my\\_concerns.html](http://www.enlightened-spirituality.org/Sathya_Sai_Baba_my_concerns.html)

<sup>107</sup> P. Pratap Kumar, "Andhra Pradesh," in Jacobsen, *Brill's Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, 1:196–97.

<sup>108</sup> Padmanaban, *Love Is My Form*, 146–49, 160 n. 64.

Suthra;<sup>109</sup> I am of the Bharadvāja Gothra;<sup>110</sup> . . . I have come because Venka Avadhootha and other saints prayed for my coming. I shall bless you and remove all that troubles you. Worship me on every Guru Var (Thursday, the day of the Guru). Keep your mind and homes pure.”<sup>111</sup> Soon afterward, with the words “I am no longer your Sathya, I am Sāi Bābā,” he announced the beginning of his mission. Sitting on a rock in the garden of one of his first devotees, the excise inspector G. S. Anjaneyulu, he sang a *bhajan* that was to become a favorite among his *bhaktas*: “mānasa bhajare guru-caraṇam / dustara-bhava-sāgara-taraṇam,” which means, “Worship in thy mind the guru’s feet, they are the bridge for crossing the troublesome ocean of worldly existence.”<sup>112</sup> These events took place in Uravakonda, about eighty miles from Puttaparthi, where Sathyanārāyaṇa had temporarily transferred himself in order to join the district board high school. In Uravakonda, he lived at the home of his elder brother Seshama Rāju. It should be noted that, a few months before his declaration, young Sathya had been bitten by a scorpion in Uravakonda, after which he appeared changed or possessed.<sup>113</sup>

Few in Puttaparthi and the surrounding villages had ever before heard the name Sāi Bābā. Yet there are testimonies that the holy man Sāi Bābā of Shirdi (d. October 15, 1918) was known and worshipped by local people, even in Sathyanārāyaṇa’s family. It is reported that Sathyanārāyaṇa’s second cousins, Veṅkaṭarāma Rāju and Veṅkaṭasubba Rāju, were *bhaktas* of Sāi Bābā long before Sathyanārāyaṇa made his announcement.<sup>114</sup> Even G. S. Anjaneyulu was a devotee of Sāi Bābā, and he soon came to recognize Sathyanārāyaṇa as none other than the saint of Shirdi.<sup>115</sup>

Sāi Bābā had been an unconventional fakir, part and parcel of the Deccani Sufi tradition, who lived the greater part of his life up to his death in a dilapidated mosque of the village of Shirdi in the Ahmednagar District of Maharashtra. In the last decades of his life and even more so after his death, he became famous as a wondrous miracle worker.<sup>116</sup> Starting from the 1920s,

<sup>109</sup> The interpretive writings of sage Āpastamba on the Vedas, that is, his school of Vedic exegesis.

<sup>110</sup> Sage Bharadvāja’s spiritual lineage.

<sup>111</sup> Padmanaban, *Love Is My Form*, 114.

<sup>112</sup> See Kasturi, *Sathyam-Sivam-Sundaram*, 54–56. On the ideology and function of the guru institute, see A. Rigopoulos, *Guru: Il fondamento della civiltà dell’India; con la prima traduzione italiana del “Canto sul Maestro”* (Rome: Carocci, 2009).

<sup>113</sup> On Sathya Sāi Bābā’s stay in Uravakonda, the scorpion’s bite, and subsequent attempted cures, see Padmanaban, *Love Is My Form*, 85–113.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 126, 134–35, 156–57.

<sup>116</sup> Nowadays, Shirdi Sāi Bābā is no doubt the most popular saint of India. His temples and shrines are found all over the country as well as abroad. For an introduction to his figure, see A. Rigopoulos, “Shirdi Sai Baba,” in Jacobsen, *Brill’s Encyclopedia of Hinduism*, 5:641–50.

his cult crossed the borders of Maharashtra, reaching Andhra Pradesh and other southern states. In the 1940s, in Penukonda, there lived one Kesavaiya, a subregistrar who was a staunch devotee of the saint of Shirdi. He happened to be one of the first to test Sathyanārāyaṇa's claim.<sup>117</sup> In time, by furnishing various proofs of his identity through his omniscience (*antarajñāna*) and powers, Sathyanārāyaṇa succeeded in establishing himself as Sāī Bābā among the growing community of devotees.<sup>118</sup>

Interestingly, various followers of Shirdi Sāī Bābā believe that Veṅkā-vadhūta was none other than Sāī Bābā's mysterious guru, whom he used to call Veṅkusha and in the company of whom he apparently spent twelve years in the village of Selu/Sailu in Maharashtra.<sup>119</sup> If this were the case, a definite link would be established between Sāī Bābā of Shirdi and Sathya Sāī Bābā of Puttaparthi, the guru of the former being the family deity of the latter.

If in the early days Sathya Sāī Bābā frequently toured the South in order to propagate his renown,<sup>120</sup> later extending his travels to the whole of India, he nonetheless remained based in Puttaparthi all his life.<sup>121</sup> Sources report that in the late 1940s and early 1950s he used to take devotees to the Chitravathi River almost daily.<sup>122</sup> Sitting on its bed he would offer spiritual instruction, sing devotional songs, and materialize from the sands or out of thin air all sorts of items (lingams, beads, photos, lockets, talismans, etc.).<sup>123</sup> Thanks to the sponsorship of wealthy *bhaktas* such as the pious Subbamma and Kama-lamma, wives of the Brahmin Lakshminārāyaṇa Rao, the village Karnam, his cult was launched with the building of the Śrī Sāī Bābā Bhajan Temple (*mandir*), which was inaugurated on December 14, 1945. This *mandir* was further expanded in 1946–47.<sup>124</sup> A few years later, on November 23, 1950, on the

<sup>117</sup> See Padmanaban, *Love Is My Form*, 114–15. In 1945, there were still objections and doubts about Sathyanārāyaṇa: for several months he had to move out of Puttaparthi and live in caves in the nearby hills; *ibid.*, 237, 241.

<sup>118</sup> On Sathya Sāī Bābā's purported link and identity with Shirdi Sāī Bābā, see Kasturi, *Sathyam-Sivam-Sundaram*, 177–218; H. Murphet, *Sai Baba: Man of Miracles* (York Beach, ME: Weiser, 1971), 58–67, 149–60; Padmanaban, *Love Is My Form*, 455–91.

<sup>119</sup> See A. V. Narasimha Murthy, "Sri Venka Avadhoota" (June 17, 2010), <http://www.ourkar.nataka.com/Articles/starofmysore/venka009.htm>. See also M. Warren, *Unravelling the Enigma: Shirdi Sai Baba in the Light of Sufism* (New Delhi: Sterling, 1999), 41, 370–72.

<sup>120</sup> Beginning in 1946, Sathya Sāī Bābā was a frequent visitor to Tirupati.

<sup>121</sup> Sathya Sāī Bābā had promised his mother that he would never abandon his native place; Kasturi, *Easwaramma*, 63–64. He often remarked that his roots were in Puttaparthi and that he would never transplant himself somewhere else; see Kasturi, *Sathyam-Sivam-Sundaram*, 9–10; Kasturi, *Easwaramma*, 14. He traveled outside India only once, flying to Nairobi, Kenya, and Kampala, Uganda, in July 1968.

<sup>122</sup> Even the royal families of Mysore and Chincholi and the raja of Veṅkatagiri used to visit Puttaparthi; see Padmanaban, *Love Is My Form*, 413–53, 495–529.

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*, 234, 478.

<sup>124</sup> On the eastern side of the *mandir* there was a termite mound and two granite slabs representing the Nāga. These stones were later removed (*ibid.*, 353). The devotee Śaradā Devī alias Pedda

occasion of his twenty-fifth birthday, a much bigger and sumptuous *mandir* was inaugurated on the outskirts of Puttaparthi, that is, the Prasanthi Nilayam or “Abode of highest peace.” It was to become the headquarters of his hermitage (or ashram).<sup>125</sup> On August 4, 1966, the Prasanthi Nilayam ashram was separated from Puttaparthi to form Prasanthi Nilayam Township. Sathya Sāi Bābā’s first public discourse was held in Karur, near Bellary, in 1947;<sup>126</sup> his public speeches, however, were formally inaugurated only six years later, in 1953.<sup>127</sup>

To local people, Sathya Sāi Bābā explained his advent as the decisive occurrence that vanquished the Nāga’s curse, assuring a future of prosperity to all. From the early years, he presented himself as the ultimate redeemer, capable of transforming the village and its surroundings into a sacred land.<sup>128</sup> Significantly, among the 1008 Sanskrit names that extol his divinity we find the following: (517) Salutations to Śrī Sāi, who released Puttaparthi from the curse (*om śrī sāi puṭṭaparthi-śāpa-vimocakāya namaḥ*) and (518) Salutations to Śrī Sāi, the giver of the reward of prosperity at Puttaparthi (*om śrī sāi puṭṭaparthi-phala-puṣṭi-prasādāya namaḥ*).<sup>129</sup> A precious testimony has been preserved of Sathya Sāi Bābā’s own telling of the founding myth of the village. It might be dated around 1951, and is worth quoting in full:

“What should I tell you today?” He asked us. We all looked expectantly, and He told us, “Do you know how this village got the name of ‘Puttaparthi’? Its original name was ‘Gollapalli.’ Many decades ago, lots of cowherds lived here. They eked out a living, tending their cows. One particular cow, that was quite strong and sturdy, never would yield even a drop of milk. The cowherd would feel vexed not knowing the rea-

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Bottu (1888–1986) recalls that in the old *mandir* there was an anthill in which lived a cobra. The snake used to come out of the mound and encircle Sathya Sāi Bābā’s silver sandals (*pādukā*); see Pedda Bottu, *Autobiography* (Prasanthi Nilayam, 2003), chap. 36.

<sup>125</sup> On the building of the old *mandir* and of Prasanthi Nilayam, see Padmanaban, *Love Is My Form*, 234–65, 464–67, 530–55. If Sathya Sāi Bābā was born in 1926, then according to Western standards he would have been twenty-four in 1950, not twenty-five. As per Hindu tradition, however, the nine months of gestation are counted as the first year in a person’s life.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid.*, 339–409.

<sup>127</sup> Volume 1 of *Sathya Sai Speaks*, the series devoted to his discourses, comprises thirty-two speeches that Sathya Sāi Bābā delivered between 1953 and 1960. The first eleven volumes of the series, up to 1972, were edited and translated into English by N. Kasturi.

<sup>128</sup> Sathya Sāi Bābā used to say that Puttaparthi would become another Tirupati, another Mathurā; see N. Kasturi, *Garland of 108 Precious Gems: Ashtothara Sathanama Rathnamala* (Bangalore: Sri Sathya Sai Education and Publication Foundation, 1979), 25, and *Easwaramma*, 90.

<sup>129</sup> A. P. Narasappa, R. Narasappa, and R. Seethalakshmi, trans., *Sahasradalakamala (1008 Names of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba)*, with English translation (Talkad: T. A. Appaji Gowda, 1985), 48. In the collection of Sathya Sāi Bābā’s 108 names, his special link with the village is highlighted in the seventeenth and eighteenth names: *om śrī sāi partī-grāmodbhavāya namaḥ* (Prostrations to Lord Sāi who has taken birth in the village of Partī), and *om śrī sāi partī-kṣetranivāsīna namaḥ* (Prostrations to Lord Sāi whose abode is the sacred land of Partī); Kasturi, *Garland of 108 Precious Gems*, 24–25.

son for it. To make sure that the calf was not drinking up all the milk, he tied it far away from the cow. But it was to no avail. One night, he slept in the cowshed. Seeing the cow going out of the shed in the early morning hours, he followed her. She went and stopped near a snake pit. A snake came out and, holding the cow's udder in its mouth, began drinking milk. The cowherd was stunned and, angry with the snake, flung a big stone at it. Its head was severed from its body and, foaming at the mouth, it fell down dying. Hissing, it cursed him with the words, "May your cowherd clan be destroyed," and died. From that day, the cowherd clan perished gradually, and the tribals began to flourish. Snake pits also proliferated everywhere from that moment onward. The name "Gollapalli" was replaced by the name "Puttapalli." It was also referred to by some as "Valmikapuram." In course of time, the tribals also perished, and Brahmin families began to flourish. But because they neglected to worship the deities properly, their clan also perished, and then the Kshatriya clan, the Ratnakaram family in particular, took root here. "Puttapalli" slowly became "Puttaparthi." Adjacent to the old Mandir was Venugopala Swami temple. Even to this day, there is no idol or statue for a deity there. The stone flung at the serpent was installed here in place of a deity. People offer daily worship to that stone. If one applies sandalwood paste to that stone, one can clearly see the outline of little Krishna trampling on the hood of Kalinga,<sup>130</sup> the Snake King." In those days, we would visit that temple along with Swami. We would play hide and seek with Him, and hide there.<sup>131</sup>

What is most revealing in Sathya Sāi Bābā's retelling<sup>132</sup> of the story is that the constituency of the village goes through different phases: following the snake's curse, the Gollas are succeeded by tribals, by Brahmins, and finally by Kṣatriyas, that is, by his own Ratnākaram family. Clearly, his appropriation of the tale has to do with local caste politics, since it serves the function of highlighting the superior status of his own Kṣatriya clan over all other castes.

The village's first phase, characterized by the predominance of tribals, is the direct effect of the Nāga's curse and determines the expansion of the wilderness (*vana*) that devours the domesticated space of the *kṣetra*, turning it into an arid land. Subsequently, possibly thanks to the redeeming power of worshipping the stone that hit the Nāga, the tribals are said to fade away and to be substituted by Brahmins. The *kṣetra* is thus reconstituted and yet Putta-

<sup>130</sup> Another name of Kāliya.

<sup>131</sup> Vijayakumari, *Anyathā Saranam Nasthi; Other than You Refuge There Is None*, trans. Smt. T. Padma, Ekkrattuthangal (Chennai: Sai Shri Ram, 1999), 174–75. Vijayakumari, daughter of V. Radhakrishna Setty of Kuppam, visited Puttaparthi for the first time in 1946; see Padmanaban, *Love Is My Form*, 230–31, 318, 341, 429.

<sup>132</sup> Over the years, Sathya Sāi Bābā has occasionally recalled the village's myth. In his birthday discourse of November 23, 2003, he said that the anthill was located near the Venugopālasvāmin temple. He also stated that it were the cowherds collectively that planned to kill the snake and hit it with a boulder; as a consequence of the snake's curse, the cowherds left the place and built their homes near Gokula, i.e., the site near Vṛndāvana frequented by Kṛṣṇa in his youth. The mention of Gokula reveals the cowherds' true identity: they are Kṛṣṇa and his *gopas/gopīs*, understood as an inseparable whole.

parthi does not regain its pristine welfare. The reason for this is that the priestly community—whose primary duty is to honor the gods—guiltily neglects the proper worship of the snake stone and of the other village deities. This lack of devotion is singled out as the cause of the Brahmins' decline and of the villagers' inability to free themselves from the snake's malediction. Finally, the third phase sees the coming to prominence of the Kṣatriya caste and of the Ratnākaram family. Its pious character, filled with *bhakti*, makes it stand out as the purest and highest community, above and beyond the Brahmins. The assumption is that it is precisely in reward of its superior piety that Sathya Sāi Bābā took birth in its fold.

The holy man of Puttaparthi further disclosed that the stone that is worshipped as Venugopālasvāmin bears the outline of the child (*bāla*) Kṛṣṇa trampling over the snake Kalinga/Kāliya. Even the 1961 *Census of India* reports his revelation, yet postulating an iconographic variant: "Strangely enough that stone has acquired a special feature now. Sri Satya Sai Baba, the noted saint of this village . . . directed some people to wash the stone and smear sandal paste on the dented side. When this was done, they could discern the clear outline of a sculptured picture of Sri Gopalasvami with the world-captivating flute at his lips, leaning on a cow."<sup>133</sup>

All in all, what we witness here is Sathya Sāi Bābā's imposition of a Sanskritizing, Purāṇic overlay on the story in an effort to ennoble it and to identify himself with Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa. Indeed, if the snake is none other than the Nāga demon-king Kāliya, the cowherd who killed him is none other than Kṛṣṇa. Such solemn disclosure is intended to function as one more proof that Sathya Sāi Bābā is he who has once and for all annihilated the terrible curse: the cowherd Kṛṣṇa who had been exiled (together with his community) has finally come back as Sathya Sāi Bābā (together with his *bhaktas*), fulfilling Venkāvadhūta's prophecy. Bhūdevī's distress and Sathyabhāmā's desperation—as per Kondaḍa Rāju's dream—are understood to come to an end only with Sathya Sāi Bābā's advent. The circle has been completed: the snake's curse that determined the exile of Kṛṣṇa Gopāla and the Gollas—followed by the arrival of impure tribals and, later, of pure Brahmins, both destined to perish—has been at last countered with the coming to prominence of the Kṣatriya Ratnākaram family, in whose milieu Sathya Sāi Bābā alias Kṛṣṇa Gopāla was to be born (i.e., to return). Indeed, Kṛṣṇa was a *kṣatriya*, a princely warrior, not a Brahmin. The idea is that the village regained its splendor when Sathya Sāi Bābā was born.<sup>134</sup>

<sup>133</sup> *Census of India, 1961*, vol. 2, pt. VII-B (10), 128. Padmanaban states that "the stone-turned-deity continues to be worshipped with the gory mark still visible on the reverse of the side that bears Lord Krishna's countenance"; *Love Is My Form*, 11.

<sup>134</sup> See Sathya Sāi Bābā's speech "Redeem Your Life by Namasmāna," in *Sanathana Sarathi* 45, no. 5 (2002): 145–46.

The guru's retelling of the story was part and parcel of a plan to establish himself as the embodiment of the Absolute. Thus, although in his early years he emphasized his identification with Kṛṣṇa—the paradigm of the juvenile god—he also identified himself with Śiva and even with the goddess (he enjoyed playing the role of Sathyabhāmā as well as of Śiva's wife Pārvatī).<sup>135</sup> He has constantly aimed at presenting himself as the divine incarnation of this wicked Kali age, the supreme “descent” (*avatāra*) encompassing all names and forms, and, as Agehananda Bharati rightly noted, “his espousal of a Muslim (= Shirdi Sai Baba) as his metempsychotic forbear has had no positive or dysfunctional effect whatsoever upon his status with high caste Hindus, or with anyone else.”<sup>136</sup> To be sure, Shirdi Sai Baba mirrors the archetype of the holy man, venerated by Hindus and Muslims alike.

Following the plural ways in which the myth of Puttaparthi can be interpreted, Sathya Sāi Bābā has identified himself even with the Nāga, allegedly granting vision of himself as a cobra, or “Nāga Sāi,” as early as 1946.<sup>137</sup> His identification with the snake aimed at highlighting the fullness (*pūrṇatva*) of his divinity. Thus he was Viṣṇu-Kṛṣṇa, but he was also the Nāga, and of course Śiva-Śakti, recapitulating in himself all the gods as well as their female counterpart. When on July 6, 1963, day of the Gurupūrṇimā festival, he announced his future incarnation as Prema Sāi<sup>138</sup>—to be born in the Mandya District of Karnataka—he linked the Sāi Bābā avatāric lineage to a boon Śiva and Śakti would have granted to the seer (*rṣi*) Bharadvāja due to the latter's piousness in the preparation of a sacrifice taught to him by Indra.<sup>139</sup> His *śaiva* characterization was further underlined through the building in 1979 of a Śiva temple at the site where he was supposedly born.<sup>140</sup>

In short, Sathya Sāi Bābā claimed to embody all deities in his postsectarian persona. To Hindus, he described himself as a *pūrṇāvatāra*, and to the ever-growing international audience of his devotees he aimed at representing himself as the quintessential Godhead, beyond the boundaries of institutionalized

<sup>135</sup> See Padmanaban, *Love Is My Form*, 135–37, 379, 523.

<sup>136</sup> A. Bharati, *Hindu Views and Ways and the Hindu-Muslim Interface: An Anthropological Assessment* (Santa Barbara, CA: Ross-Erikson, 1982), 87–88.

<sup>137</sup> See Vijayakumari, *Anyathā Saranam Nasti*, 56–57; Padmanaban, *Love Is My Form*, 168, 237, 277, 307, 327, 375, 564; Kasturi, *Sathyam-Sivam-Sundaram*, 84–85.

<sup>138</sup> For references on Prema Sāi Bābā, see Steel, *Sathya Sai Baba Compendium*, 204–5.

<sup>139</sup> For an analysis of this claim and of the Bharadvāja myth, see D. A. Swallow, “Ashes and Powers: Myth, Rite and Miracle in an Indian God-Man's Cult,” *Modern Asian Studies* 16, no. 1 (1982): 136–45. On Sathya Sāi Bābā as being both Śiva and Śakti, see L. A. Babb, “Sathya Sai Baba's Saintly Play,” in *Saints and Virtues*, ed. J. Stratton Hawley (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987), 168–86. By the same author, see also *Redemptive Encounters: Three Modern Styles in the Hindu Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986), 159–201.

<sup>140</sup> He emphatically asserted his Śiva-hood through the daily production of *vibhūti* and through the emission of Śiva lingams from his mouth during Mahāśivarātri festivals; see Steel, *Sathya Sai Baba Compendium*, 113–19.



religions. His organization is rooted in a universalistic or, better, inclusivistic ideology—characteristic of neo-Vedāntic movements—which makes of Sathya Sāi Bābā the representative of a distinctively modern Hinduism.<sup>141</sup> In his *sarvadharmā* emblem he incorporated all world religions, acknowledging them as different paths leading toward the same ultimate goal, though of course reserving for Hinduism, the “mother” of all religions, the highest place in the hierarchy of faiths.<sup>142</sup>

Over the years, this charismatic guru has had to face various accusations.<sup>143</sup> Starting from the mid 1970s, he was charged with sleight of hand and, especially from the 1990s, he has been accused of sexual abuses as well as of financial mishandlings. The most tragic episode that haunted Prasanthi Nilayam took place on June 6, 1993, when four persons were shot dead by the police after they had stabbed four devotees in Sathya Sāi Bābā’s living quarters, killing two. The motives behind this bloodshed were never satisfactorily cleared.

Despite all this, Sathya Sāi Bābā succeeded in expanding his worldwide fame and fabulously rich “kingdom.” Indeed, he has become a national glory, the trademark of India’s spirituality, and among his advocates are many top politicians. In December 2001, the then Prime Minister A. B. Vajpayee and other political authorities expressed through a public letter their anguish for the “wild, reckless and concocted allegations made by certain vested interests and people against Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba.”<sup>144</sup> They argued that responsible media should ascertain the truth before printing calumnies, “especially when the person is revered globally as an embodiment of love and selfless service to humanity.”<sup>145</sup> Despite controversies over his persona—which are still rampant—Sathya Sāi Bābā has always been supported by subsequent prime ministers and Indian elites.

With the globalization of his fame and mission, the formerly unknown and mud-hut village of Puttaparthi has become an ideal polis of sorts. Poignantly, S. Srinivas has referred to Puttaparthi as an example of architecture as rhetoric, meaning that the place’s huge buildings represent values that are impor-

<sup>141</sup> On the notion of inclusivism, see W. Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 1988), 403–18.

<sup>142</sup> On Sathya Sāi Bābā’s universalist movement, see T. Srinivas, *Winged Faith: Rethinking Globalization and Religious Pluralism through the Sathya Sai Movement* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

<sup>143</sup> The first significant attack was by his ex-devotee Tal Brooke, who, in 1979, published a book titled *Sai Baba, Lord of the Air* (Delhi: Vikas). A collection of data against Sathya Sāi Bābā, titled *The Findings*, was made public in 2000 by former devotees David and Faye Bailey; see <http://www.exbaba.com/findings.html>. Against the guru of Puttaparthi, see also K. Shepherd, *Investigating the Sai Baba Movement: A Clarification of Misrepresented Saints and Opportunism* (Dorset: Citizen Initiative, 2005), 269–301.

<sup>144</sup> Quoted in [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sathya\\_Sai\\_Baba](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sathya_Sai_Baba).

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*

tant in the Sathya Sāi Bābā movement.<sup>146</sup> Thus Puttaparthi has been transformed into a town with fine roads and edifices, an auditorium, schools, a university, a planetarium, the museum of religions, the huge Vidyāgiri Stadium, the famed super specialty hospital (inaugurated in 1991 in the presence of Prime Minister Narasimha Rao) and even a Sri Sathya Sai Airport.

In the end, Puttaparthi villagers claimed that Sathya Sāi Bābā's fatal illness was the consequence of the idol of Sathyamma being replaced with a new one in November 2010.<sup>147</sup> It was his nephew R. J. Ratnākar Rāju (b. 1972)—son of Sathya Sāi Bābā's younger brother Jānakīrām Rāju—who ordered the carving of a new goddess idol, as the old image was in a mutilated condition. This replacement of the ancient idol with a new, more stylish and refined one exemplifies a typical modernization of a traditional site. The remodeling and cleansing of Puttaparthi's sacred areas, carried out by the International Sathya Sai Baba Organization, satisfies the spiritual expectations of Western devotees as well as the sensibility of those Westernized Hindus for whom the worship of rudimentary stones and idols is often a matter of embarrassment.

But the substitution of Sathyamma's icon (*mūrti*) was perceived as a sacrilegious act by local people, a profanation that had angered the goddess and entailed punishment. An accident in which R. J. Ratnākar Rāju was injured and, more importantly, the continued deterioration of Sathya Sāi Bābā's health were interpreted as ominous signs.

In order to appease Sathyamma, at the beginning of April 2011 the villagers decided to retrieve the old idol—which had been sunk in Bukkapatnam's tank—bring it back to Puttaparthi in a solemn procession, and reinstall it in its place beside the new one. But unfortunately all this did not improve the guru's condition. Sathya Sāi Bābā died at Puttaparthi's super specialty hospital of a cardiorespiratory failure on April 24, 2011. He was eighty-four years old (not ninety-six, the age at which he had said he would die).<sup>148</sup>

The government of Andhra Pradesh declared April 25, 26, and 27 as days of mourning. The burial ceremony was officiated on April 28 and was attended by an estimated 500,000 people, among whom were Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, Congress President Sonia Gandhi, and a host of Andhra Pradesh and South Indian ministers and authorities. Among the religious leaders who of-

<sup>146</sup> S. Srinivas, *In the Presence of Sai Baba: Body, City, and Memory in a Global Religious Movement* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 208–15. By the same author, see “The Advent of the Avatar: The Urban Following of Sathya Sai Baba and its Construction of Tradition,” in *Charisma and Canon: Essays on the Religious History of the Indian Subcontinent*, ed. V. Dalmia, A. Malinar, and M. Christof (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 293–309.

<sup>147</sup> See “Replacing of Idol behind Saibaba's Illness?,” *The Hindu*, April 6, 2011, <http://www.thehindu.com/todays-paper/tp-national/tp-andhrapradesh/article1603705.ece>.

<sup>148</sup> See J. S. Hislop, *Conversations with Sathya Sai Baba* (San Diego: Birth Day, 1978), 82. Soon after his death, the leaders of the Sathya Sai Organization tried to solve the discrepancy, arguing that the saint of Puttaparthi would have meant traditional lunar years, not calendar years.

ferred their condolences was the Dalai Lama. Sathya Sāi Bābā's tomb (*mahāsamādhi*), a rectangular marble-clad edifice, was located in Sai Kulwanth Hall, exactly where he used to give his *darśana* and deliver his discourses.

The ashram's future is in the hands of the Sri Sathya Sai Central Trust, one of the most prominent members of which is R. J. Ratnākar Rāju. Now that Sathya Sāi Bābā has "left the body," the fear of the local people is that Puttaparthi may rapidly decline. To be sure, as per his prophecy that he will be reborn as Prema Sāi Bābā, devotees will focus more and more on the search for the third Sāi Bābā, diverting their attention from Prasanthi Nilayam. The hope of the villagers—many of whom got rich thanks to the *avatāra*'s presence in their midst—is that Puttaparthi will become a prominent pilgrimage center, as was the case with the village of Shirdi after the death of the first Sāi Bābā in 1918.

Sathya Sāi Bābā's early appropriation of the village's myth was a notable factor in the affirmation and expansion of his charisma, inseparably linking his fortunes to the village's destiny. Indeed, although the guru's cult has become an international, translocal phenomenon, his birthplace has always remained its headquarters. If in the years to come Puttaparthi will establish itself as an "awake/powerful" (*jāgrta*) pilgrimage site, attracting crowds to Sathya Sāi Bābā's *mahāsamādhi*, it will be fair to say that the Nāga's curse has come to a definite end.

In conclusion, the multiple interpretations of the village's founding myth, culminating in Sathya Sāi Bābā's retelling, exemplify its openness to a plurality of solutions and recastings over time. It is precisely such flexibility that constitutes its strength. Still more understandings of this story—and of termite mound myths in general—might be put forward by applying different identities to the actors involved. In each case, the establishment of the narrative's characters and the details of its unfolding reflect the social needs and interests of the particular communities by whom and for whom the story is told.

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