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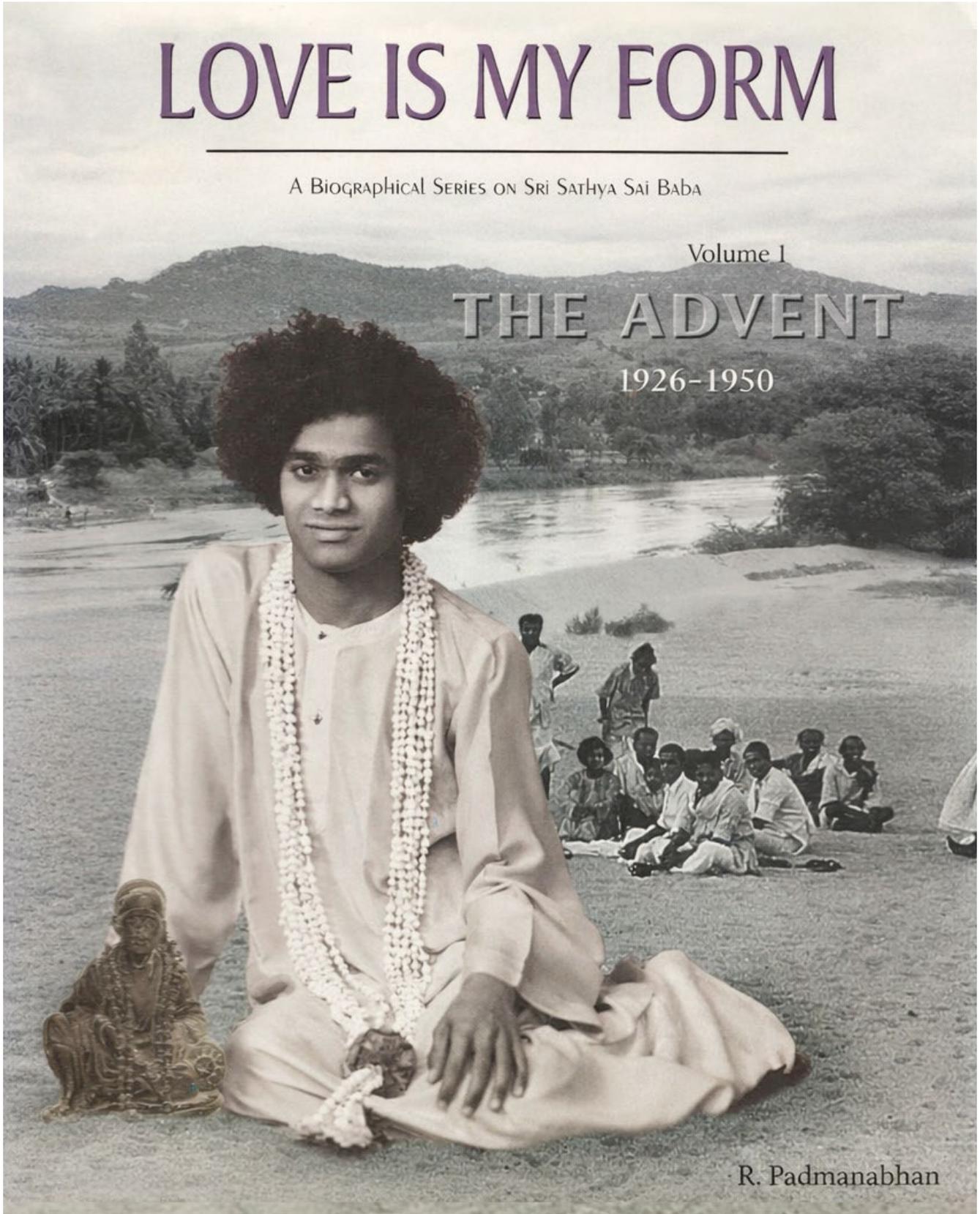
LOVE IS MY FORM

A BIOGRAPHICAL SERIES ON SRI SATHYA SAI BABA

Volume I

THE ADVENT

1926-1950



R. Padmanabhan

FOREWORD

Karnam Kamalamma



Karnam Kamalamma, who had the good fortune to see Baba, to love Him and admire Him – ever since He was five years old – was Baba’s host for some time, until the Puttaparthi Mandir was constructed. This foreword was spoken in Telugu.

Padmanaban requested of me a foreword to this book, even though I do not understand what is written in it - because I never went to school. I am more than eighty years old, now! What can I do?

Yet, the photos in this book speaks to me and take me back to the good old days.

When I saw Swami for the first time, I was about twelve years old and had just then been married - as the second wife to the Karman (the village chieftain) of Puttaparthi. I did not know that the little boy in shorts and half-sleeved shirt was to be revealed as Swami, an Avatar!

Tears run down my eyes when I think of it the Swami of those days. After returning from Uravakonda He came to our house and said to me, *"Kamalamma! You think I am a human being? No! I am God, Kamalamma: I am Easwara - Himself! You will see My glory in the coming years. Believe Me!"*

Several incidents appear fresh before my mind's eye: After the bath ' He stands as a very young boy, with a towel around His waist. He keeps a Shirdi Baba photo and breaks open the coconuts we carried there for the worship [offering]. Then He says,

I am not a ghost. I am Shirdi Baba. I want to join this boy. I trouble this body in numerous ways, to settle down.

After that, He materialises flowers and fruits, takes *arati* and goes to sleep. We wake Him up and offer a dhoti and a shirt for Him to wear and invite Him for dinner. We serve Him dinner in a silver plate ... others, on a leaf. He mixes all the items and eats up everything. No leftovers! Afterwards, He settles down in our house.

People would visit Him from early morning to midnight, in those days, and He would go on granting them interviews. He would hear their woes, materialise *vibhuti*, cure diseases, solve their problems or console them. I once asked Him *"Why do you grant interviews to so many people?"* He said: *"If I do not do it, not*

even a crow will come to Me, now. But a day will come when you will see people arriving by the thousands. Then, you will see Me in all My glory." How all that has come true!

Devotees would come and many would stay for months - and some, even for years! Every day, ten-bullock carts would come, filled with men and women. Subbamma (Karnam's first wife) and I would cook for all of them, until we were tired and fell asleep. Often, Swami wakes us up late in the night and say, "*Kamamma, many are waiting! Call them! I will grant them interview and send them away! Otherwise, tomorrow you will have to cook for them again!*" Nobody left without an interview. Also, nobody left without food.

We used to sit with Swami for lunch and dinner. He would mix up all the dishes - curries, rice, etc. and make them into large morsels! Each of us would get one. There was never a shortages! Everybody was well fed.

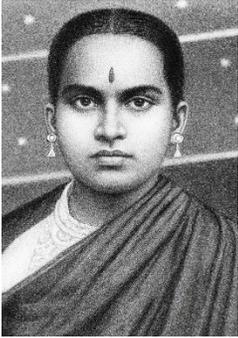
And, His *leelas*! How wonderful they were! He would take Subbamma and myself to the *Kalpa Virksha* (the wish-fulfilling tree) and as us to hold it's leaves. Each day the tree would give different fruits according to our request. One day Navaneetham Naidu's daughter wanted to eat dosa.

Immediately, Swami materialised a stock of hot and crisp dosas. Sometimes, He would ask us to bring some small vessel. He would give it a pat and it would be filled with *Amrith* (divine nectar)!

Yet, Swami was so simple, sweet and child-like. In no time at all, He would make garlands out of jasmine flowers brought from our garden. Sometimes He would make a bed out of them and sleep on it. He would also play many games with us. He always won! At other times, He would pull my hair and tease me! There was an old servant, Bhimappa by name, who would bring drinking water from the Chitravathi River. Bhimappa sang well and even cracked jokes. He loved chilies and took at least ten with his meals! Swami would often ask him to sing songs for a reward of chilies.

But Swami was Swami-a hard taskmaster who never lost an opportunity to teach, even in the midst of hilarity. One day, I was serving Him lunch. He was very playful and asked for another helping of curry. Absentmindedly and erroneously, I served Him, using my left hand. How He hit my left hand! It stills pains, just to think of it! Once, He told Subbamma and me, "Both of you will not have children. But I will be there as your child. You will have no rebirth."

Now, in spite of so many people coming to Him every day, He still remembers me and inquires after my welfare now and then, and sends a sari for me, during every festival time.



Swami once told me, "You, Subbarnma and I should have a photo taken." But nobody had a camera, then. Somehow, it did not materialise, even later. Who knows the mind of Swami, the Sathchakmvarthi - the real Emperor of all the worlds?

Whatever He has done for Puttaparthi and whatever He has been doing in the hearts of millions of people, out of His immense *prema*, is proof enough of His Divinity. It has been my good fortune to witness all this.

Take my advice: Love Him for all that He is; have faith, and He will save you. Let this book become the medium for you to get immersed in *Sai Tattva*-the Principle of Sai.

INTRODUCTION TO THE VOLUME THE ADVENT (1926-1950)

- Dr. R. S. Padmanabhan

Dr. R. S. Padmanabhan first met Sathya Sai Baba when he was 21 and Baba was 18 years old. An eminent dentist, he is an office-bearer in the Sri Sathya Sai Seva Organisation and assists Baba in carrying devotees' letters during darshan at Brindavan, Bangalore.



It gives me great joy to write a few reflections upon the release of this biographical series on the great World Teacher, Sri Sathya Sai Baba, by my good friend, R. Padmanaban. This volume does not rewrite Baba's early biography. Certainly, it adds many wonderfully credible primary accounts. These include the testimonies of old classmates-some of them living in areas unvisited by vehicles-who, as I am informed, recalled the boy Sathyanarayana with tears streaming down from their eyes. The marvelous, unique photographs (most never before seen, except by a fortunate few) visually support the passionate accounts of the legendary Professor N. Kasturi in *Sathyam Sivam Sundaram*. The photographs and text relating to the first few years of Baba's life, which He Himself has said were those of *leela* (Divine play), involved extensive travel to the homes of many devotees in far dung parts of

South India. An enormous effort has been made to record as many as possible of these *leelas* of the early life of Bhagawan Baba.

Obtaining photographs of Baba from the early days beset the researcher with difficulties galore. People of the era lacked proper photographic equipment. Most of the photos taken were by amateurs with box cameras. As there was no indoor lighting then, photographs were taken outdoors. In addition, the extreme climatic conditions of South India damaged those photographic negatives that managed to survive. Moreover, Baba was somewhat camera-shy. Those devotees, who were thus privileged to possess those rare impressions that had been taken, led quiet lives, and tracing these people back for generations, from the known leads was a labyrinthine task. Enhancing the damaged photographs digitally was another labour of love.

The first volume is called *The Advent* and covers the period from His birth in 1926 until 1950, His ashram, Prasanthi Nilayam, was inaugurated. It celebrates the advent of a great soul; it celebrates the advent of a new way of celebrating love and its expression in life; it celebrates the advent of a purposeful mission on the face of the planet-Baba's ashram, Prasanthi Nilayam. *The Advent* traces the early years of Sai Baba-when He did not proclaim any gospel of love for the masses but provided an opportunity for people to relate to His loving 'play' or 'divine sport'. Baba's life itself, formed His message-living and spreading love, profusely blessing the lives of others – with love.

The Advent is special in many ways. It provides an impressive line-up of eyewitnesses. Not only does that provide the advantage of using primary sources; it also brings before the mind's eye the actual happenings as they were - for some of us, triggering off a sentiment we were once so familiar with, in those good old days. The story speaks for itself, without a narrator's commentary intruding. This makes the text more reliable and authentic. We are immediately confronted with a series of things that actually happened - facts carefully sifted from the web of legends and myths that have already started to form around them. Further, the attempt to 'bend' time, as it were, in the narrative, removes the coldness of the distant past from the events and yet makes us wonder at their strange mystery.

The photographs in this book transport us with a sense of immediacy to those times. We see Baba growing up in front of our eyes, in these photographs. Of course, it is more the growth of His glory. We see pictures of the names that we

read about in the text, and they, too, come alive. Together, they create a 'felt experience,' and, deep within us, we know that all this is real.

The book also brings to light the unique relationship that Baba had with the devotees of those early days. He lived with them; He sang with them; He played with them. They have lived long enough to see His vision come true. They have lived to see Him celebrate life, as an expression of love. They have lived to see the Divine Self expressed through the Human. Even today, these devotees remember their experiences as though they took place only yesterday.

I am tempted to share with you my good fortune of belonging to this select group of 'old' devotees. I say it not with pomposity, but with the joy of speaking His glory, and with gratitude for the difference He has made in my life. In 1944, my uncle, Seshagiri Rao, my cousin Sundaramma, and my other relation, Savithramma, were drawn to Baba's mission of spiritual, educational and service activities. Subsequently, as dedicated devotees, they spent their lives with Baba. In those days, Baba used to come frequently to Bangalore and regarded it as His second home.

I had just completed my dental education and started practising dentistry, in the early part of 1944. On Sundaramma's appeal, I visited Baba's Bhajan session on a Sunday morning, in the first week of December, at the residence of a devotee in Chamrajpet. Although I had gone there rather reluctantly, I was, to my surprise, called for an 'interview'.

To this day, I feel a thrill when I recall that interview. Inside the room, I experienced the Divine Presence of Baba. He spoke softly and lovingly to me, told me all about my life and my future, assuring me that He would always be with me and guide me. He produced *Vibhuti*, gave it to me and smeared some of it on my forehead. I was wonder-struck and could not utter a word. I just surrendered my ego and doubts and took *padanamaskar*. He then told me that I would be married in February of 1945. That was a shock and not very pleasant news for me, as I had just started my practice and had yet to settle on my own. I was only 21 years old. I pleaded that it would not be possible for me to agree to marriage, as I was not well set in my practice. He simply said it would happen, whether I liked it or not, and that he would take care of everything-which He did and is doing, even to this day. Kamala, who was to become my wife, also had an interview in December of 1944 and was told that she would soon be married to a dentist-in spite of her protest to the contrary, as she was only 15 years old at the time. We were married on 15 February 1945 and have been in His care, ever since.

Baba has taken such good care of my family and me, over the past five decades, that it would fill volumes to relate all of our experiences. I cannot find words to express my gratitude to Baba for all that He has done for our family. My wife and I have been supremely privileged to serve Him all these years. Nothing has given us greater joy.

But, to those whom time denied the darshan of the beautiful Avatar in His younger days, what could be holier and lovelier than to imprint the pictorial and biographical treasures, that this pioneer endeavor offers, in one's heart? In addition, of course, let the inner joy blossom into good thoughts and the practice of Baba's teachings. That, indeed, will please Baba. That will make your life His message. May this worshipful work serve as a beacon to light the pathway to a divine feast, for those many souls who hunger and thirst for spiritual joy.

THE FIRST TWENTY-FIVE YEARS of the life of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba had its peaks and its troughs. Filled with a sense of wonder and unmistakable glory, the life of the young Sathya Sai Baba was supremely divine, yet undeniably human. Through it all, there was an undercurrent of an extraordinary mission-something that found recognised expression in the ensuing years.

The journey from boyhood as Sathyam to young adult as Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba had been both inspiring and profound. As a little boy, he had pranced about the backstreets of Puttaparthi and had been the hero to his peers. His acts of compassion, his precocious nature and his high-minded religious attitude had set him apart from the rest-yet made him acceptable. At school, he had been a student of normal intelligence, but his intense psychic abilities had landed him into trouble, on more than one occasion. He was the butt of his classmates' jokes. He had not been outgoing like most of his friends, but rather withdrawn. His preoccupation with worship, rituals and music sometimes had made others feel that he was often too genteel and not one of them. But the young boy also had the uncanny knack of picking up a good following. This became more evident when he was found to have been a poet par excellence; his compositions and dramatic performances winning kudos, even from the elders.

The formation of the 'Pandari Bhajans' group was the first genuine expression of his ability to appeal to the religious sentiments of the masses at large, winning not only their love, but also their admiration. The winds of change had begun to blow.

Village Andhra was once again being swayed by the lilting music of devotional singing. The 'Bhakti' Movement was in for another renaissance.

Unfortunately, a humble origin exacted a heavy toll from him through suffering at the hands of misguided elders. A family and a village steeped in tradition and superstition could not initially accept that Sathya was an extraordinary boy. He was a challenge to their wits, a test to their patience, a foil to their foibles and sometimes a source of untold misery. Neither had they ever experienced any child like Sathya before, nor was there anything in recorded history or memory that could be taken as a parallel. One cannot help but sympathise with Pedda Venkama Raju and Easwamma for what they had to put up with. Yet, one cannot help but recognise what Sathya was up against as well. The bastion of a somnambulist society needed a hard beating to be felled.

Contrary to popular belief Sathya did not have to wait for the scorpion incident to let the divinity in him surface. Quite early, from the Bukkapatnam years themselves, the latent divinity was already yearning for self-expression. Great creative surges overtook him. He had no formal musical training, yet those round (elders and peers) recognised that he was a gifted and technically superior singer. He never studied dance and yet his performances even equaled the great professionals of the day. His poetry scalded the egos of the guilty and helped sell pharmaceutical products. Some elders even saw his poetry as that of a rebel-in-the-making.

And he was a rebel. He refused to conform to a loveless society, for he could only conform to the source of all love, God Himself. To do this, He had to be a God himself.

Sai Baba of Shirdi was revered in the Marathi and Telugu speaking lands. Many, who had been to Him before He left His body, had returned with the good news of His message of Shraddha (firm faith) and *saburi* (patient piety). He was worshipped in small pockets of the erstwhile Madras province. When the young Sathyanarayana Raju initiated the worship of Sai Baba of Shirdi at Uravakonda, he helped the people strengthen their spiritual bond with the Shirdi Master. He helped them re-establish their sagging spiritual ties with their own selves and thereby prepared them for spiritual life. Raju's own loveable nature greatly helped in this regard. The high receptivity of these people made them view his trances and out-of-body visitations as quite normal. His materialisations, though regarded as out-of-the-ordinary at an early stage, were routinely taken for granted by his childhood peers.

The momentous events that took place on the day of his Annunciation, in October, produced mixed feelings in people. That day the loveable Sathya was lost to the world and the adorable Sathya Sai Baba was found. For Sathya, it was his final assault on familial attachment. For others, it was an upgrading of attachment to devotion. In retrospect, both seemed ultimately inevitable.

The *Pravesha* (Immaculate Conception) and not *Prasava* (ordinary conception), that Easwamma had talked about, had taken place again. He was a new person altogether, as though there had been a new 'entry,' hence, a new 'being'. He was the embodiment of a free spirit, carefree and yet caring, non-attached and yet loving. From that rebirth, until 1950, was perhaps the most enchanting phase in the life of Sri Sathya Sai Baba. He was an enigma to reckon with, being many things rolled into one—a prankish teenager, a fledgling guru, a reluctant messiah, an enchanter, a wonder-healer, a darling and hallowed presence and a definitive teacher. His Form was that of Love.

The saga of Sai Baba's courtship with the world at large defies narration. Such parallels can only be found in religious mythology. Cobblers to kings craved His company. Wives left behind their husbands to relish His darshan. Husbands abandoned their responsibilities to be in His presence. For children He was an enchanting role model; for elders He was the most-loved relation in the family. Doors of houses always remained open for Him. Villages, towns and cities were mesmerised by His visits, and princely states felt honoured by his presence.

On his return from Uravakonda, Baba was a powerhouse of energy. Special efforts had to be made to restrain Him. One day, Easwamma's brother, Chandramouli, tried to restrain Him by catching hold of his hand. Baba tried to make Him let go. In the process, the sleeve of Baba's shirt was torn. He wept and asked His uncle to procure for Him a new shirt. The next evening, a mobile fair visited the village. Chandramouli asked Baba to pick up a piece of cloth for His new shirt. Instinctively, Baba picked up an ochre-coloured cloth and asked for a long shirt to be made. Ochre is the colour associated with renunciates. Baba, who had apparently renounced the world, wept over a torn shirtsleeve and then chose the garb of a renunciate!

For a few years, Baba would sleep for hours on end. He would cover His entire body with a bed sheet and sleep for days, going without food. Subbamma would ask, "Sathyam, what has happened to you? Why don't you come and eat?" He

would immediately push the bed sheets aside and ask her to smell His palms. The palms would smell of very tasty food!

Not interested in feeding Himself, He often 'willed' to feed multitudes, and the serving vessels apparently never became empty. He would suddenly arrive at some devotee's house with a number of other devotees. The host or hostess would panic, but Baba's love would save him or her from dishonour. The guests would always return home, well fed with His miraculous food.

He was very frugal about His own food. He would accept anything, if it was given to Him with love and devotion. Shanta Krishnamurthy would remember a time when earlier she had bought some masala dosas from a nearby restaurant, and she had to serve Him those, as there was nothing else at home. P. V Krishnamurthy's account of how Baba would come from behind and stretch out His little hand in front of Krishnamurthy's mother when she was serving morsels to her children, has been recounted earlier. When devotees brought food for Baba later, in the Puttaparthi Mandir, He would merely taste it and request that it be distributed as prasadam.

However, there were those occasions when He even accepted poisonous food which was served to Him by people who wished Him dead. Baba Himself narrates an occasion when a Brahmin lady from Puttaparthi invited Him over and fed Him with poisonous vadas. Baba ate all of them, with relish, just to teach the lady a lesson. He forbade the others to do the same, however. His body turned blue because of the poison, and He vomited out everything and saved His body from danger. On another occasion, He even warned His teachers V C. Kondappa and B. Subbannachar about an intended attempt to poison Him with similar vadas. His forewarning turned out to be true!

Baba's day in the Mandir was spent mostly in the company of devotees. He would sing with them, talk with them, take part in making garlands, even climb ladders to tie festoons and play with them. His life was inseparable from theirs. There was even an interesting tradition in which devotees would put across their pleas to Baba, through the singing of devotional songs. Baba would immediately reply to their prayers using the same medium during the *bhajan* session. He would receive devotees at the entrance of the old Mandir and see them off each time they left to return home. He would call people in for an 'interview,' anytime they wanted one. He would help devotees carry their bags across the Chitravathi and also carry across young children, like Padma and Kusuma. He was so fond of devotees that He

would almost dance in glee whenever a group of ten to twenty devotees arrived. There were also times when He would turn His face away, while bidding them good-bye as they left, to shed tears in secret. In the early days of limited resources, He would keep one set of His clothes under the mattress to be 'ironed'. When an important dignitary like a doctor or a lawyer arrived, He would wear those pressed clothes.

He also wrote a letter to Thirumal Rao, explaining His travails in great detail-all about an occasion when He continued to help a few devotees.

This brings us to a very important aspect of His personality-the wonderful relationship He had with His devotees, especially those who wanted Him to become their ultimate 'refuge'. He always helped them with their chores: cooking, fetching water and looking after their children. After a bhajan session, He would often escort them back to their own villages. He would carry a hurricane lamp, to light the way and a stick, to ward off the many snakes that infested Puttaparthi in those days. He would see them off safely back to their villages, before returning to retire to the Mandir.

In the Puttaparthi Mandir, there was Konamma, who had lost her husband very early in their marriage. Distressed, she had decided to end her life. She had walked into a dark forest at night, found a poisonous snake and managed to get bitten by it. Yet someone woke her up in the morning. Baba had saved her life and had given her refuge. She remained to take care of Baba's food, until her death.

Sometimes Baba used to tell Bhujamma (Sundaramma): 'You take care of my food, and I will take care of your children.' And He did so. There was another aged lady, Bayamma by name, who used to take care of Baba's food and the food of the devotees in 1945-46. Baba would run up to her, sit on her lap and caress her wrinkled cheeks. She would be reading the Bhagaivada Gita and Baba would take away her spectacles. She could see nothing much without them and would plead with Baba who would then return the glasses. He would ask her, "Why do you read the Gita?" She would reply that she wanted to become liberated. Baba would stand with his face very close to her face and say, "I am that Krishna [that sang the Gita]. When I am here right before you, why should you read the Gita?" Bayamma could only offer silent prayers of gratitude for her singular great fortune.

Even the great lady Sakamma was not spared from Baba's jokes. One day she entreated Baba to rest in the afternoon. He seemingly agreed to her entreaties. When she retired, Baba placed two pillows and covered them with a blanket to

make them look like a sleeping person and left to play with the children of the Kup-pam family.

Sometimes they would swim, climb trees or just play in the sand on the banks of the Chitravathi River. He played *thayam/pagadai* (board games) with them and always won. He made shadow images of various birds and animals and humoured the young children. Afterwards, when He returned, He would rub His eyes and yawn, saying that He had a good sleep. Sakamma once more was caught in His web of illusion.

He was never tired of saving devotees. When Karnam Kamamma was proceeding to Anantapur to fight a court case related to her property, her enemies followed her in another bus. They wanted to produce false witness and stall her from getting any benefit. A snake appeared on the road just in front of their bus and began dancing there. When the driver stopped, the snake entered the bus. Kamamma's enemies were detained for more than a hour, until the snake left. By the time they resumed their journey, the court had already pronounced its judgement in favour of Kamamma. On her return to Puttaparthi, Baba told her of the snake episode and revealed that He had appeared there in the form of a snake to save her.

In the Puttaparthi Mandir, while sleeping in the open quadrangle among the devotees, He would suddenly get up and say that He had gone and saved a devotee in distress. This was a frequent affair. Navaneetham Naidu's sister, Jeevamma had once invited Baba to visit their house. Baba agreed, but did not turn up on the appointed day. Meanwhile, a calf came and ate all the food kept in the house meant for Baba to bless as prasadam. The lady beat the calf and sent it away. The next day, Jeevamma invited Baba to come and have prasadam. Baba lifted His robe and showed the marks of a beating on His back. 'This is enough, I don't want any more,' He said. This was just another reminder of the Shirdi Avatar under similar circumstances.

When Subba Rao of Bukkapatnam wanted to perform the annual memorial rites for his deceased father, no Brahmin accepted the invitation to visit their house, as the family followed Baba, who was not a Brahmin by caste. Baba then asked Subba Rao if he would like to see his forefathers-father, grandfather and great-grandfather. He assured him that the family ancestors would themselves come as Brahmins and accept his memorial services. At midday three tall Brahmins appeared from nowhere and said they had come from Guntur. They had the same name as that of the family ancestors. They helped perform the ritual correctly, partook of

the offerings and left. In this way, Baba helped the Subba Rao family to uphold its family name.

There were numerous other ways through which He revealed His Divine nature- and all of them for the singular purpose of building faith and love. Once He asked Saradha Bhai, Dr. Satish Bhonsle's mother, "Do you want to see the Ganga?" He then rubbed His big toe on the ground and up sprang a spring. During the Second World War, film rolls were in short supply in India. Baba materialised film rolls for M. L. Leela, whenever she visited Puttaparthi. Once, when Krishnamurthy was about twelve years old, Baba visited the Kolar Gold Fields, where He was being driven in a jhatka (horse-drawn carriage). On the way, He did not sit quietly. He threw handfuls of sweets, flowers and coins, making the children in the streets run all around, picking them up. The police thought that He was a black magician or an exorcist and feared that He would create trouble. They stopped the carriage in an effort to arrest Him. They even put handcuffs on His wrists, but the handcuffs broke. Then, feeling that He was Divine, they let Him go!

In other moments of intense spiritual elevation He revealed that He was the Sai Baba of Shirdi come again. Such moments were quick and casual and only the sensitive caught the purport of His actions. He once tied a piece of cloth around His head, like Shirdi Sai Baba and asked how He looked. He observed, "At Shirdi, I used to smoke (the hukkah); here, I eat betel nut." He told the Subba Rao family of Bukkapatnam, "I visited your families in the Shirdi Avatar. I'll be visible to them in the Prema Sai Avatar, too." When V C. Kondappa's book was released, Baba asked M. L. Leela to read relevant sections aloud. When the section on the life of Shirdi Sai was being read, Baba's form changed to that of the Sai Baba of Shirdi. From the crowd, Leela's father, Lokanatha Mudaliar cried, "Hey Sail Hey Sail" and ran to embrace Him. It took some effort to separate the two.

His trans-corporeal journeys were sources of great concern for the devotees. When He was in the middle of a conversation, He would suddenly go into a trance. There was no fixed time or situation for this. If any devotee suffered from a severe ailment, pain, anxiety, incurable disease or any handicap for that matter, He would just leave His body and go to that place where there was suffering. His body would become stiff; He would become unconscious and He would often pull on His hair and stretch it into His mouth. The abject sufferings His physique went through was taken on by Him in order to help His devotees through their misery. And He accepted their suffering gladly.

All His efforts were directed at connecting people's lives through His love. This connectivity touched the inner space of their being, thus awakening their consciousness to a higher level of attunement with their own innate divinity. His love was the binding force between God and man, between the creating force of the Creator and the created wonder of Creation. This binding force helped the devotees to recognise the oneness of all life, the oneness of His purpose, the oneness of His being and the oneness of all avatars. This oneness transcends the 'form' of existence to the formlessness of 'being'. It transcends all limits in a manner such that His form and the boundlessness of Love become one. In this love, He heals the mind, body and soul of those whom He has touched with His Divine Love.

In a strange way Baba could be very stern in His love too. He would create confusion and quarrels amongst His devotees so that they would relate to Him exclusively. He would also ignore some of them at times so that their true love for Him would increase. Many of His early devotees would apparently fall out of His favour a charade He would enact to allow them to grow on their own. Some of them would be fortunate to grow as fruit-bearing trees in the oneness of creation while others would be consumed by their own confused disbelief.

But the curious and humane in Him were never lost. As recounted earlier, in His curiosity to witness the behaviour of urban people, He cleverly disguised Himself in the shirt and trousers of Bhaskar of Bangalore and walked about Commercial Street. In the early days, Bhaskar, while talking to Baba in Telugu, would often mix in a few English words, just to tease the young Baba, and Baba would playfully hit Bhaskar on the back of his head. As Baba grew from an adolescent to a young man, on a few occasions Bhaskar shaved Baba's face. He even assisted in giving Him the ritualistic oil bath. At Puttaparthi, when Baba was once exhausted, Bhaskar carried Him on his shoulders from the Kalpa Vriksha hill to the plains and thence across the Chitravathi.

Baba was very camera shy. He would look down when asked to pose for a photograph. Many a time the photographer had to request that He look into the camera. When people tried to take His photo without His permission, they would often have very strange experiences. Either they would not find the film roll loaded in the camera-that is to say, the film would be missing-or they would end up getting blank negatives and nothing else. Sometimes the film rolls would come into His Hands, straight away. Dr. N. Jayalakshmi would say later, "We have seen this happen even to expert photographers-if they had not obtained Baba's approval

beforehand-when they just would not have any success in their attempts to photograph Him."

Who would believe that this young Baba was one who never lifted His face to talk to womenfolk? Even so, He spoke to them with warmth and love. He was accessible to anyone and people could ask Him questions, when He willed it so. He talked less to strangers, but when He began a conversation, it was as if He had known the person for a very long time. Introductions had become superfluous. He would accept garlands from both men and women-all were allowed to put garlands around His neck. But when He heard some people commenting on the desirability of Baba allowing women to garland Him, He immediately stopped the practice and bade the women to give Him garlands in His hands, instead.

Yet it was He who encouraged young men and women to get married. As a youngster in His twenties, He became like an 'elder' relative, inspecting and approving matrimonial alliances, supervising family weddings and blessing couples with prosperity and progeny. He seemed curious to know the marriage customs of different cultures and traditions. In 1944 He wrote to Narasimha Rao Naidu, who was much older than He, that He had selected a girl for him in Machilipatnam.

As the years went by, the playfulness decreased and a more purposeful reformer emerged. Yet He remained all Love. His message to the vast gatherings of people on festival days only spoke of this great 'life of love' that He Himself reflected through His activities. Whenever He had any project in mind, He never lost sight of His purpose and always went all out to achieve it. Perhaps the greatest of such projects was the establishment of Prasanthi Nilayam, which was indeed a rare achievement in those days. Single-handedly He arranged everything-something quite remarkable in the normal circumstances of a young man in rural India at that time. He had a mansion constructed for devotees, made by the best craftsmen of the day. He had an attractive guest list, one that puts to shame some of the best event-managers of today. He achieved His purpose on the inauguration day, by filling the hearts of all those who loved Him with immense joy and devotion.

Many of His devotees expressed the fear that He would become distant once Prasanthi Nilayam was established. Yadalam Venkataramanappa is reported to have said: "Now You have a temple like a cinema hall. Soon You will have all sorts of rules and regulations. It will be difficult to meet You. There will have to be prior appointment or information of arrival sent in notes."

But that was not to be. His heart always melted for the love of His devotees. He rarely made a distinction between those who were rich and those who were poor. Narayanaswamy of Bangalore visited Puttaparthi in December of 1950 with his family. When he approached the Puttaparthi Mandir, he was asked to stop there and to go no further, as there was no place available in Prasanthi Nilayam. Narayanaswamy was not happy to do that, so he proceeded to the new Mandir. When he reached Prasanthi Nilayam, he was told the same thing. However, Baba stepped out onto the balcony and told Seshagiri Rao to permit them to stay in the portico. There were about ten people present. Devotees were talking about *paadapuja*. Narayanaswamy did not know anything about it; but gathering some information, he went to Bukkapatnam and bought some fruits, turmeric powder and camphor packed in an old newspaper. When he returned from Bukkapatnam, he saw a rich family, well dressed, carrying special plates of fruits and other items for *paadapuja*. Soon Baba came out and asked the rich family to leave all the fruits in the Bhajan Hall and to give Narayanaswamy a special plate to do *paadapuja*. Narayanaswamy did not know how to do *paadapuja*. Baba told him to place the plate on the ground, which he did. Baba then put His feet on the plate and asked Narayanaswamy's family to wash and wipe them. With love, He taught them how to love and worship Him through the ritual of *paadapuja*.

Baba was to tell some devotees then, "I have no connection with anyone at *Prapancha* (worldly) level; My connection with you is only *Adhyatmic* (spiritual), which is permanent. You people have enjoyed me. You have had the sweet sugarcane juice. The residue is not sweet. You need not come to Me. Enjoy Me from your homes."

The devotees of Sri Sathya Sai Baba, in those wondrous first twenty-five years, have been granted tremendous grace. Their external relationship with Baba has been always unique. Their own inner experiences have firmly established their faith in Him. They have always regarded Him as their loving God. Now they live in the memories of those days, as if it all happened only yesterday. He has affected their lives in such a manner that even today they still live in love, taking the 'everyday grind' in their stride. They can never forget the beauty and the love that they experienced and continue to experience Baba. He is always fresh and new, whatever His physical age. Such experiences are available to one and all, especially to those who yearn to know God, for God is Love, and Love is His Form!

Beginnings



The first quarter of the twentieth century marked a crucial phase in human history. The trauma of the First World War had cast a spell of disillusionment in the West, where the brutal exploitation of human and material resources clouded mankind's vision and reason. Survival issues sorely tested familial ties, and evidence of love was difficult to find. Man was desolate, stripped of faith in himself and in his God. It was the most significant of times.

The East had fared a little better-especially India. Its glorious heritage of spiritual awareness still glimmered through the ritual-laden social fabric, but the vitality of life was gone. Yet, human destiny was scribbling out its unique history in a remote valley of the Deccan peninsula-a part of the world associated with many stories and legends. It was here, that a new awakening was about to take place. It was here that humanity would be afforded a new beginning ...

The wheel of Time rumbled slowly through the bullock cart tracks of Rayalaseema in the erstwhile Madras Presidency. Prosperity was the middle name

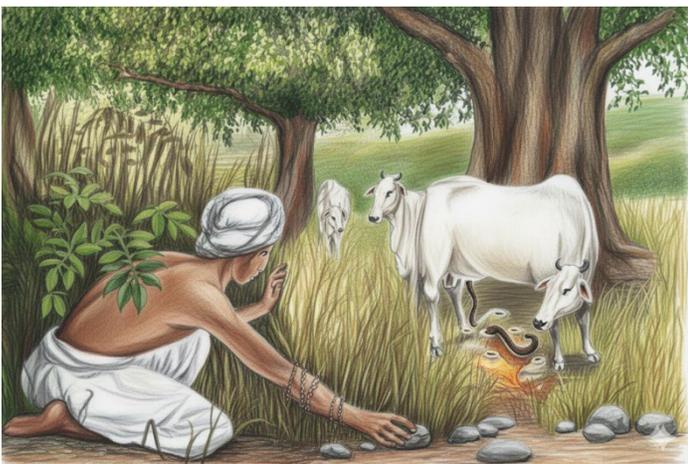


of the proud *gollas* (cowherds) of the village named *Gollapalli* - which meant the village of cowherds-situated on the banks of the river Chitravathi. The *gollas* flourished on the rich produce of their milch cows.

Tradition holds that one evening trouble started when a cow returned from the pastures with empty udders. The owner of the cow was out-

raged. The next morning he secretly followed his cow, determined to discover the culprit who had robbed him of his precious milk. The cow, unmindful of her prying master's presence, wended her way through the green pastures skirted by gentle undulating hillocks, eventually reaching the outskirts of the village. She stood next to an anthill and waited-while the cowherd, hidden in the bushes, watched intently. He saw the strangest sight: a cobra emerged from the anthill, placed himself beneath the cow, reached up to the cow's udder and began to drink her milk. The cow, undisturbed, contentedly suckled the serpent, while the cowherd turned indignant. He picked up a stone and with all his might hurled it at the serpent. Mortally wounded, the cobra writhed in pain and let out a curse upon all the *gollas* of Gollapalli: henceforth, anthills and the snakes that inhabit them, would torment the village.

The snake died, but the villagers soon felt the effects of the terrible curse. Ant-



hills popped up like mushrooms after rain. The land gradually lost its lush vegetation and became red and rocky. Without pastures, the cattle population decreased alarmingly, and the cowherds diminished. Invaded by ants, the village soon became known as Puttavardhini, the village where anthills thrive. Still, the effects of the curse were far from over.

Puttavardhini continued to deteriorate, the very ants started dying and the ground became even rockier. In due course, the name of the village changed again from Puttavardhini to Puttaparthi, the village of anthills.



Following custom, the village elders unanimously counselled that the sin of murdering an innocent cobra must be atoned for. They decided to worship the stone supposed to be instrumental in the serpent's death and wash its gory stain with tears of sincere repentance.

Nothing less would exonerate them and bring happiness back to their hearts and prosperity to their homes.

Accordingly, the fateful stone, with a blood-red streak on one side-perhaps symbolic of the fact that the blood of the serpent was still on the villager's hands - was installed as the chief deity in a temple, which came to be known as Venugopalaswamy Temple. Curiously enough, many years later, on the other side of the stone an image of Lord Krishna mysteriously manifested. 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.

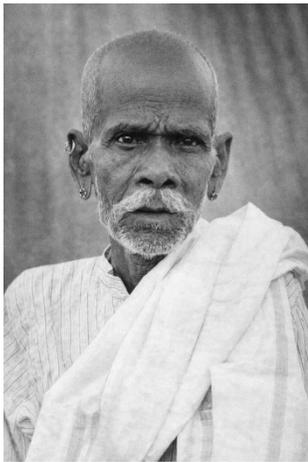


The peasants of Puttaparthi were a God-fearing lot and devoutly worshipped their village deity, Sathyamma. A small shrine, crude in construction, was dedicated to her. Although the deity's name was Sathyamma, the villagers had been calling her 'Sathyabhama,' after one of the consorts of Krishna. Sometime afterwards, the village oracle-also called Sathyamma after the village deity-revealed that if the cowherds were sent out of Puttaparthi, the anthills (and consequently the snake mounds) would disappear. The Karnam (headman) ordered a crier to proclaim that all the cowherds must leave the village and go to a piece of land more than one hundred

acres in area located on the outskirts of Puttaparthi. Subsequently, following the oracle's prediction, the snake mounds began to diminish.

Did the goddess Sathyabhama have plans of her own? That remained to be seen.

In Puttaparthi there lived a devout, abstemious peasant, named Kondama Raju of the Ratnakaram Raju family. The Raju family had long since abandoned its militant Kshatriya role and taken up interpreting and popularising sacred literature. Hence, they had the caste name Bhat Raju.



Kondama Raju had great musical and dramatic talent. He sang songs from the Ramayana and played the role of Lakshmana in the village plays about Rama. Kondama Raju was greatly revered by the villagers and often provided succor to the distressed among them. He was also very intelligent and acted as one of the three arbitrators in the village, helping to solve local problems-like those related to land registration.

One night the goddess Sathyabhama appeared in Kondama Raju's dream. She looked desolate and unsheltered, standing in a terrible rainstorm, waiting for Her Lord (Krishna), whom She had sent to gather flowers. When the storm struck, Kondama Raju was passing by, and Sathyabhama asked him for shelter. The moment he woke up, Kondama Raju knew the significance of the dream and decided to have a temple erected, dedicated to Sathyabhama. He succeeded in his resolve, and Sathyabhama became the village deity.

Since the days of the renowned Sage Venkavadhuta, saintly ancestor and family deity, this family was well known for its piety. Kondama Raju, imbued with the family spirit, was inclined to simple living and high thinking. He was always in communion with Venkavadhuta. He is reported to have offered him food and directly listened to him. Oral tradition holds that the divine would incarnate, as Mother Earth was in deep distress.

Kondama Raju used to talk about the Avadhuta thus: No face could ever be gloomy in his presence, for he was always jovial. No door was ever closed as he passed by; everyone invited him in. People everywhere claimed him as Kinsman, though he himself refused to accept such a relationship or such ties with anyone. He was hungry when another was hungry in his presence. He wore clothes only when they were wound around him and they remained on

him only until they fell off. He carried his body about as if it [were] ... gossamer. The rains washed it; the sun dried it; sleep visited it as it sat or stood and left it when it found itself unwelcome. His voice never grated, and his eyes shone bright. When he laid his hand on the head of some one, that touch was a prelude to Paradise. He was a breeze, a cloud, a bird on flight from earth to heaven. No one knew where he came from or where indeed he went. He was here, there, anywhere, everywhere for more years than any knew or could guess.

The physical body of the Avadhuta '...lies buried in the tomb at Hussainpura in the Pavagada Taluk of the state of Karnataka, a few miles away from the Andhra Pradesh border.'

Kondama Raju's pious wife, Lakshamma, bore him two sons: Pedda Venkama (Venkappa) Raju and Chinna Venkama (Venkappa) Raju - each, most likely, named after the great Venkavadhuta. Both of them inherited their father's musical, literary and dramatic capabilities, coupled with his piety and simplicity.

The two brothers, along with their nephews, the two sons of Kondama Raju's brother, lived adjacent to each other and two houses away from the Karnam house. Each of them had a small house with one or two rooms.



Pedda Venkama Raju's house was a simple one with stone walls. It had two rooms. One was used to store food grains while the other was used as the living room. Across a small passageway was the kitchen. A few wooden poles laid horizontally with a slight slope for regulating the flow of rainwater formed the roof. A few more poles supported it. A bamboo mat spread over the wooden frame and nailed to the walls, substituted for tiles. A plaster of lime and a bleaching agent, *chavudu*, was used as waterproofing material on the roof.

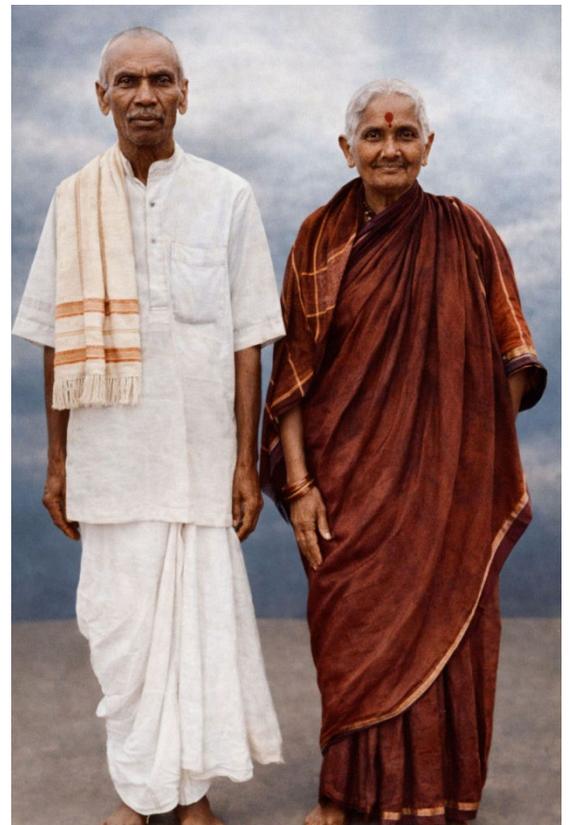
Kondama Raju's younger sister Venkata Subbamma married Mee-saraganda Subba Raju of Kolimigundla, a village in the Koilkuntla Taluk of Kurnool

district, Andhra Pradesh, then ruled by the Nizam of Hyderabad. They had six children - three sons and three daughters. Their eldest daughter was Easwamma.



Family photo 1923, Pedda Narasa Raju, Venkamma, Kondama Raju, Lakshamma, Narasamma and Parvathamma

Named after the family deity, Easwara (another name for Lord Shiva), Easwamma was born soon after her father Subba Raju, a great devotee of Lord Shiva, constructed a Shiva Temple in his village. Kondama Raju agreed to accept Easwamma, as the bride of his first-born-Pedda Venkama Raju. She was only about fourteen years old, when she entered the Raju household. Easwamma won the affection of her in-laws by serving them with devotion, modesty and enthusiastic performance of the family rituals. She would visit the Easwara Temple on Mondays, the Sathyabhama Temple on Tuesdays and Fridays and the Venugopalaswamy and Anjaneya (Hanuman) Temples on Saturdays.





Sathyabhama Temple Once a small shrine, crude in construction and dedicated to 'Sathyamma,' it now stands renovated by Kondama Raju into a proper temple for Sathyabhama



Venugopalaswamy Temple The very stone instrumental in killing the serpent was installed as the deity in a temple, later named as the Venugopalaswamy Temple

Since highway robbers infested the Parlepalli forest close to Kolimigundla, Easwaramma's parents and siblings lived in perpetual danger. Soon after her marriage, Easwaramma's father passed away. Kondama Raju, Easwaramma's uncle (and also father-in-law), persuaded his now-widowed sister, Venkata Subbamma, to move to Karnatanagapalli, a village just across the river Chitravathi from Puttaparthi.



Ratnakaram Chinna Venkama Raju was proficient in astrology and could produce herbal medicines and talismans, in accordance with traditional methods. As a dramatist, he organised a dramatic troupe 'Venugopala Naryamanda.' Karnam Gopal Rao, the son of the village headman would remember that every Friday, Chinna Venkama Raju would give copper

plates energized with 'Om Namasivaya' as talismans, to those who came for cure of diseases or to release evil spirits that possessed their bodies. Through his marriage to Venkatalakshamma, Chinna Venkama Raju was bountifully blessed. From this marriage, he had six children. After his



first wife died, he and his second wife, the generous and pious Venkata Subbamma, were blessed with eight children.

Pedda Venkama Raju was a quiet, God-fearing man. Brought up in a strong religious tradition, he was strict, but understanding, pious and simple. Though ordinary in appearance, he exuded geniality and generosity. In music and drama, he was remarkable. After Pedda Venkama Raju and Easwamma were blessed with a son and two daughters-Seshama Raju, Venkamma and Parvathamma, Easwamma suffered four miscarriages. The family attributed these to evil planetary influences and consequently performed the Graha Santhi ritual (designed to pacify the planets). Easwamma, longing for another son, prayed to the village Gods, conducting the propitious Sathyanarayana worship and keeping to a number of vows requiring vigil and fasting. It was about time for Venkavadhuta's prophecies to be fulfilled.

Not long afterwards, Easwamma's mother-in-law, Lakshamma, had a dream that she could only decipher to mean auspicious for Easwamma - perhaps the gift of an extraordinary son. The blessing, she realised, was likely to come through supernatural means, and so she warned Easwamma not to be frightened, if something unusual happened to her. And the unusual did happen.

Many years later Easwamma was to recollect that one morning when she had gone to the village well to draw water. As she prepared to draw up her water-filled pot, she became aware of a strange blue glow. She was confused, yet unafraid. Even as she stood transfixed, the warm glow of light transformed itself into a luminous blue ball and softly glided deep into her being. Filled with light and rapture, she fell unconscious near the well. Surely, this was no common event.

Easwamma told no one what had happened, except her mother-in-law, who asked her to keep it a secret, lest people should spread stories.



Easwammamma's house at Karnatanagapalli, now a bhajan hall



Years later, Vengamma (1910-), Easwamma's youngest sister, would remember a similar, though different, account of this mystical experience: Pedda Venkama Raju owned a few cows. One day, Easwamma went to collect some grass for the cows, from the fields across the Chitravathi River. It was hot and she was very thirsty. She collected the grass, made it into a bundle and was returning across the Chitravathi riverbed. She put the bundle aside and sat down to rest on the riverbank. She dug a hole in the sand to get some water. Some dirty water surfaced, which she threw away. She then scooped up some clear water with both hands and was

about to drink when she saw a luminescence merge into the surface of the water and finally become a part of it. She did not know what to do, and was very thirsty. Thinking of God and keeping faith in Him, she drank the water. The luminescence was so powerful that, in spite of the glare of the hot sun, she could still see it. She returned home and reported the incident to her mother-in-law.

Shortly thereafter Easwamma found herself 'expecting' again.

When the time of her delivery approached, several wondrous inexplicable events began to occur in the family of Pedda Venkama Raju. The house contained several musical instruments for Pedda Venkama Raju's dramatic rehearsals. In the middle of the night the tambura (a string instrument) would start twanging on its own-as if being played by an invisible but dexterous hand-and the Maddala (drum) would beat rhythmically, as if keeping time with the tambura. It was also said that Kondama Raju heard the child talking when it was in the womb of Easwamma.

All these mysterious occurrences were to presage some extraordinary event. The wise men of the village discussed the nature of these phenomena unable to determine their portent, which only added more to their enigma. Pedda Venkama Raju sought out a venerable *sastri* (scholar) in Bukkapatnam (a nearby village), in whose wisdom he had faith. The *sastri* stated that these occurrences were auspicious omens: they signified the presence of Shakti, a beneficent power that would confer harmony and joy on the family.

The twenty-third day of November, in 1926, was still Karthika Somavara (a Monday of the Holy Month of Karthika), in the year called Akshaya - the 'Never-declining, the Ever-full,' an occasion devoted to the worship of Lord Shiva. That day was made even more auspicious by the coincidence of the ascendant star of Ardra

(Orion constellation) with the month and the day. Not to miss the benefit of Shiva worship on such a rare heavenly confluence, the villagers began chanting the names of the Almighty Lord from very early morning.

Easwamma, too, was performing the final part of her Sathyanarayana worship, although her labour pains had begun. Nothing would distract the devout lady from her religious vows. When the pains grew insistent, Lakshmamma, who had gone to the priest's house at four in the morning, to carry out her religious duties, was informed that her daughter-in-law would give birth any moment. The messengers urged her to hurry home; but, determined in her piety, she refused to be hurried. She sent word that she would come only after the rituals were completed and would bring offerings sanctified by the ceremony, for her daughter-in-law. Such was the pious old lady's faith in God: she was certain that Easwamma would give birth only after she arrived. Lakshmamma finished the ritual and went home, bringing her daughter-in-law flowers and consecrated water. Only then did Easwamma give birth to a beautiful baby boy, filling the entire family with delight.

Easwamma spent her confinement in her mother's house at Karnatanagapalli village. Her mother's family maintains that Sathya was born there. Since the two families had always been very close and resided in adjacent villages, it is quite possible that they might have mistaken one for the other. Moreover, the flooding of the Chitravathi made movement from one bank to the other a frequent affair. The third day after the child was born, the family feared that the Chitravathi River would flood, and Easwamma moved to Puttaparthi with the child.



The baby was named Sathyanarayana, since Lakshmamma and Easwamma were certain that the angelic child was the gift of Lord Sathyanarayana Himself, who had been pleased with their devotion and austerity.

Following the birth, miraculous events kept the Raju family enthralled. Once, as the newborn baby lay on a bed of piled clothes, they noticed that it was being raised and lowered by something underneath. Stunned, they watched anxiously. When at last they investigated, a cobra was found beneath the clothes, though it seemed to harbor no ill intent towards the new-born infant. At another time the non-vegetarian meal

prepared for the relatives and friends in the Raju household, miraculously turned into vegetarian food.

Venkamma, the eldest daughter of Easwamma, would tell her captive audience, years later, that she observed Sathya disappear, in a haze of light, from his mother's lap and then reappear.

Many villagers reported that before the child was born, a beautiful girl dressed in silk, decked with gold ornaments, was observed walking from the Sathyabhama Temple into the house of Pedda Venkama Raju. Hence, they believed the infant was Sathyabhama Herself.

Born in the wee hours of the day, the baby was charming beyond description: with a little mole on the left cheek, a fold of flesh on the brow and a cherubic smile, which lit up his softly radiant face. Dr. N. Jayalakshmi, a long-time devotee of later years would recall:

I took with me a picture of Krishna, drawn by a famous artist, depicting him squatting beside a pot of butter and eating the contents. It was a big picture I had taken down from a calendar on the wall of my room. Easwamma looked on it and said, "Yes! His face shone like this, like the Moon. He had the same black curly hair. His muscles were strong and well formed. His brows were different from Krishna 's. They met in the Centre." Pointing to the jewels that Krishna wore, she heaved a sigh, "But we were poor. We could not afford to give him the jewels this child wears."





Sathya Sai (on the car's step) with His two older sisters - Venkamma (...–1993), Paravathamma (...–1996), older brother – Seshama Raju (1911-1985), and younger brother – Janakiram (1931-2003)

Planetary Position at the Time of Birth of Sathyanarayana Raju

Place of Birth: Puttaparthi

Date of Birth: 23.11.1926

Time of Birth: 5h 6m 0s a.m. IST

Tithi (Lunar Phase): Krishnapaksha Chaturthi (Fourth day after full moon)

Star: Ardra (Orion)

Longitude: 77d 47m East

Latitude: 14d 10m North

Sidereal Time: 8h 51m 54s

Chitra Paksha Ayanamsa: 22h 50m 9s

Ketu and *Radu* (the two shadow planets) and *Kuja* (Mars) are in their own astrological house. *Ketu* in *Dhanush* (Sagittarius zodiac), *Rahu* is in *Mithuna* (Gemini zodiac) – the span of life of the subject cannot be predicted.

The owner of *Thula Lagna* (the house of the Libra zodiac, at the moment of birth) is the *Sukra* planet (Venus). The subject will hold control over a lot of precious gems which he will not use for himself.

Lagna adhipathi (the ascending planet of the moment of birth) is also *Sukre*. The subject is entitled to enjoy worldly comforts throughout this life – the first twenty years being material and the rest other-worldly.

Four planets in the second house from the Lagna are well positioned. So, the subject will enjoy unlimited wealth and worldwide fame.

Guru is in the fourth house: the subject will spend all the wealth in charity, in service to the poor, feeding the poor, free education. These will give the subject immense joy.

Brihaspathi (Jupiter), in the fourth house, will give him a royal life. The subject will get Siddhi (spiritual power) from God.

