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CULTURAL TRENDS STUDY: INDIA'S SAI BABA MOVEMENT (U)

KEY JUDGMENTS


(U) A worldwide mass religious movement is growing around the Indian holy man and alleged miracle worker, Sathya Sai Baba, whose devotees regard him as a full incarnation of God.

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(U) Sai Baba's well-organized and financed movement probably will continue to grow, and may even become another worldwide religion.

(U) The Sai Baba movement could help provide stability to a troubled country, and his influence may also counterbalance the appeal of Hindu chauvinists and ethnic separatists.



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CULTURAL TRENDS AND MASS MOVEMENTS

(U) Cultural trends and mass movements reflect changes in outmoded cultural norms. Cultural trends may be imported from foreign countries, as with the westernization of traditional societies, or they may be an indigenous creations, such as rising Islamic fundamentalism. They are normally not directed, and spread by diffusion. However, cultural trends may also become mass movements. These are usually the creation of a charismatic figure or an organized group, and are consciously directed against some aspect of the culture as manifested in the political, economic, or social status quo. The Iranian revolution led by Ayatollah Khomeini is an example of a cultural trend transformed into a mass movement. Emerging cultural trends are important indicators of impending changes in a society that may manifest as mass movements with political and military implications for a nation's stability.

SETTING THE SCENE

(U) The culture of India is highly diverse, as befits a nation with 14 major languages and at least 200 dialects, 6 religions with innumerable sects, and a conglomeration of ethnic groups. However,

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the indigenous Hindu religion, with about 80% of the population, dominates India. Hinduism is more of a culture than a singular religion since Hinduism is itself splintered into numerous sects devoted to different Gods, Avatars, and saints, or espousing one of the six Hindu philosophical systems which are further divided by differing interpretations. The national and regional caste system also divides Hindus into factions.

(U) An ongoing cultural trend since exposure to British rule has been the abandonment by many educated Indians of the Hindu religion and its traditional culture in favor of western materialistic values. As with many traditional cultures, the advent of modern communications has increased exposure to European and American culture, which has accelerated the trend. Many educated Hindus also emigrate to the west, and their acculturation while abroad is reflected upon returning to India.

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(U) However, Hinduism is very diverse. Uneducated Hindus, which includes much of India's population, practice simple supplication and worship of personal and household Gods, of which there are thousands. But aside from this popular version of Hinduism, the religion has a sophisticated philosophical and ethical system, called Vedanta, based on the Upanishads section of the four Vedas. The ancient Vedas form the foundation of Sanathana Dharma (Eternal Righteousness), as the Indians call Hinduism, and are elaborated on by numerous sastras (scriptures) and puranas (stories). India has produced great rishis (sages) and yogis (enlightened persons) who espouse Vedanta, such as Ramakrishna Paramahansa, Meher Baba, Ramana Maharshi, Aurobindo Ghosh, Anandamayi Ma, Amritanandamayi Ma, Paramahansa Yogananda, and many others. Each of these gurus (teachers) has a worldwide following in addition to India. However, their appeal has been generally limited to those on a personal spiritual quest, and while widely respected in India, they have not sought to generate organized mass movements.

(U) India also has innumerable sadhus (holy men) and sannyasins (renunciates) who lead ostensibly ascetic lives, either out of genuine religious ardor, or because begging with religious dignity is a traditional way of making a living. The BJP puts such persons

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on display at rallies, presumably to advertise the BJP's Hindu credentials. With very few exceptions, these religious persons don't attempt to attract a wide following.

THE SATHYA SAI BABA PHENOMENON

(U) According to the Bhagavad Gita, sometimes called the fifth Veda, and Hinduism's best known scripture, God incarnates periodically as a human being to save the world and restore righteousness when evil is rampant. This incarnation of God, called an Avatar, may display some or all of the powers ascribed to the divine, depending on the reason for the incarnation. Hindus generally regard Jesus and the Buddha, for example, as partial Avatars whose mission was to found a religion. Most Hindus consider Rama and Krishna as the most recent of nine fully divine incarnations, known as Poorna Avatars. Now, however, many Hindus believe that another Poorna Avatar has incarnated. He is Sathya Sai Baba, born in 1926 at Puttaparti, a small village in what is now Andhra Pradesh state, southern India. Devotees consider Sai Baba to be the tenth incarnation of Vishnu, the aspect of God that Hindus believe preserves the universe. As with the Christian return of Christ, the Jewish Messiah, the Buddhist Maitreya, and the Muslim Mahdi, this tenth "Kalki Avatar" has been awaited to mark the end of the age, and to create a new world of peace and justice.

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(U) As the self-professed Kalki Avatar, Sathya Sai Baba has generated a mass movement, and a multi-layered organization, to accomplish what he says is his mission. Since he claims that India has abandoned its cultural heritage, his first goal is to evoke an Indian spiritual renaissance by restoring the traditional vedic culture of India. He also claims that he will eventually rule over the earth in a golden age. In fact, he says he is the Biblical second coming. While such claims may be incredible, most of his devotees believe him.

(U) Sai Baba's large following and claim to be a Poorna Avatar is primarily based on his alleged capability to perform miracles. Hindus believe that spiritually advanced people, including partial Avatars, are capable of creating miracles, but only a full Avatar has omniscience. It is Sai Baba's alleged display of omniscience that has convinced many devout Hindus that he is a Poorna Avatar.

(U) According to numerous anecdotal accounts, Sai Baba has the capability to appear anywhere instantaneously, change his shape and appearance at will, be in more than one location simultaneously, and to transfigure himself into a glowing ball of light. He is reputed to tell people details of past events in their lives, including what they were thinking at the time. He is said to read minds and answer devotee's questions before they have the chance to

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voice them, and he supposedly appears in people's dreams even before they have ever heard of him. He is supposed to be able to materialize objects such as icons and jewelry, hot food, and live animals out of thin air by a wave of his hand, and to teleport objects instantaneously from anywhere. Devotees tell of him changing the weather at will, multiplying food to feed large crowds, healing terminally ill people, and raising the dead, including one decomposed body. He reportedly can speak any language, and some devotees say that when Sai Baba discourses in his native Telegu, the words meant for the devotee will be heard in the devotee's own language. Sai Baba's miracles are said to occur anywhere, not just in his presence. Vibhuti (holy ash) and amritha (a nectar-like substance) are reported to exude from many of his photos around the world.

(U) Such claims have not been scientifically verified in a laboratory, although a team of western parapsychologists observed some of these events in a field study. While the scientific paradigm may reject the possibility of such capabilities, traditional Hindus accept them as entirely plausible. However, the Indian propensity for expounding the miracles of a yogi probably has raised Sai Baba's alleged feats to the status of folklore, so it is difficult to determine the degree of exaggeration in such claims. But whether Sai Baba can perform miracles or not, his followers believe he does, which gives him enormous authority as an

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accepted Avatar. It probably also generates many followers who are only seeking miraculous favors.

(U) Despite reports of his alleged miracles, Sai Baba is a controversial figure. His detractors, especially those westernized Indians who discount the supernatural, claim that his miracles are fraudulent and that his ability to predict the future, for example, is frequently inaccurate. India has a small industry of fake holy men who perform magic tricks for a living. However, as they become prominent, they are usually exposed by critics. Sai Baba's supporters point out that he has been performing miracles 30 or 40 times each day for over 50 years in front of millions of people, and that despite considerable efforts by his critics to discredit him, he has never been proven to be a fraud. According to other Hindu critics who otherwise accept the reality of miracles, spiritually advanced siddha yogis (miracle workers) don't normally display their powers, so Sai Baba is sometimes accused of being a practitioner of tantric black magic. Some critics also accuse him of being a homosexual pedophile.

SAI BABA'S APPEAL

(U) While Sathya Sai Baba's controversial status limits his credibility with some segments of Indian society, his doctrine does have potential widespread appeal in a society riven by communal

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violence. While his ethical teachings are essentially the same as those found in the Christian Bible, his overall doctrine is Advaita (non-dualistic) Vedanta. A tenet of Vedanta posits that all things are God, and that all people, through spiritual progress over many reincarnations, will eventually realize their own divinity. For that reason, Sai Baba's devotees are told to love all people as facets of God, regardless of religion or caste. Another tenet stresses that all religions are equally valid so long as they do not disparage other faiths. In fact, Sai Baba, as a Poorna Avatar, says he represents all names and forms of God, and prefers people to live up to the ideals of their own faith rather than switch to the Sai Baba form. Despite that admonition, Sai Baba's devotees include members from all religions. Since Sai Baba's message supports the concept of a harmonious, multi-religious and multi-ethnic India, it has the potential to counterbalance the appeal of Hindu chauvinists and ethnic separatists.

(U) Another aspect to Sai Baba's appeal to Indians in a land of widespread poverty is his relatively austere lifestyle and constant service to his devotees. He is reported to have almost no personal possessions, nor does he ask for money, disdaining what he calls "beggar yogis" who make a business of their services. Room and board at Sai Baba's ashram (hermitage) is virtually free to visitors, so even the most impoverished Indian can stay.

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THE SAI BABA MOVEMENT

(U) Sathya Sai Baba has developed a genuine mass religious movement based on devotion to himself and his teachings. The Sai Baba organization claims to have 50 million devotees worldwide, although most are in India. The actual number of devotees is unknown, but press reports indicate that between 600,000 and one million people came to Prasanti Nilayam, Sai Baba's main ashram at Puttaparti (140945N/0774715E), for his 1990 birthday. There are normally several thousand visitors to his ashram every day, including hundreds of foreigners, so the number of devotees is probably quite large.

(U) The Sai Baba movement is organized into a World Council, with national organizations having Presidents and other office holders. However, it is run from private homes where devotees meet, called centers. Aside from devotional activities, members are enjoined to perform service to the needy. Consequently, under an umbrella organization called Seva Dal, about 6,000 indigent villages throughout India have been adopted by Sai Baba centers whose members care for the villager's needs. The Sai Baba organization is also building schools and clinics throughout India, and in November 1991, a 100 million dollar advanced research hospital was inaugurated at Prasanti Nilayam. There is also a university system with several campuses offering degrees up to the doctorate level.

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The university accepts only India's moral and intellectual elite, since Sai Baba expects the graduates of his university to assume positions of leadership in every facet of Indian society. All services and institutions are free.

(U) Another aspect of Sai Baba's effort to transform Indian society is the Education in Human Values (EHV) program. Intended to imbue good morals in children, the program has been adopted by many educational systems in India. Teachers from all over India come to Sai Baba's Bombay ashram for training in the EHV program. Further, Indian Prime Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao, indicated in 1991 that India's new educational policy would be based on a synthesis of spiritual and scientific values modeled on the Sai Baba educational system.

SAI BABA'S INFLUENCE

(U) Sathya Sai Baba is influential with many Indian leaders. In the case of politicians, it isn't clear whether such influence is based on spiritual devotion, or whether the politicians perceive Sai Baba's devotees as a large vote bank. Nevertheless, Indian Prime Minister Rao may be a devotee. He attended Sai Baba's November 1991 combination birthday celebration, inauguration of the new hospital, and educational convocation. In an address at the Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning, Rao said, "I believe that

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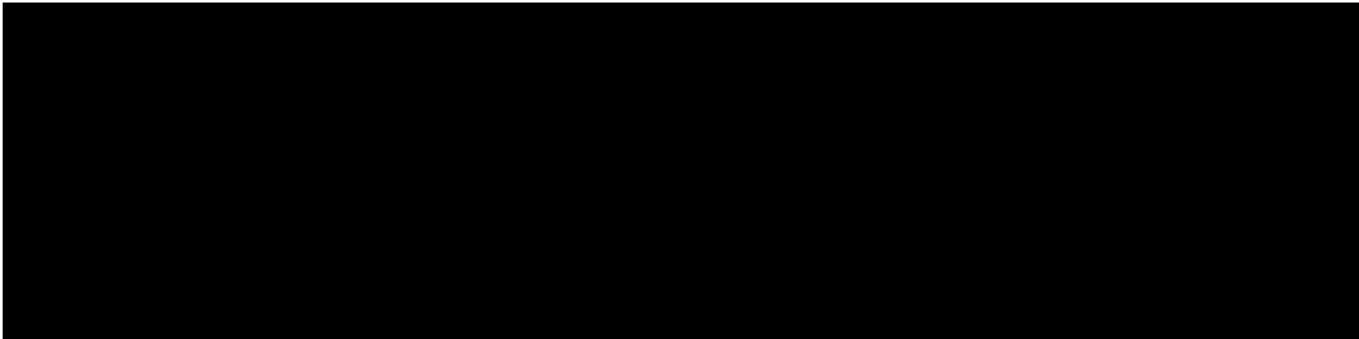
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Bhagavan (God-man) decided to shower his blessings on me personally. So I am here, and the convocation is but a pretext. I am deeply grateful to him for having remembered me and for having chosen me for his benediction today, at a time when I fervently believe that I am in need of it and the country is in need of it." The elderly Rao may merely have been ingratiating himself with the crowd, but his interpreting the invitation as a personal blessing suggests a devotional relationship.

(U) Sai Baba's known devotees have included vice-presidents of India, state governors, supreme court and lower court justices, a Chief Air Marshall, army generals, heads of various ministries, prominent scientists, industrialists, academicians, former Indian royalty, and various Hindu religious figures. Sai Baba virtually never mentions political matters in his discourses, and publicly disdains politics, so it is unlikely that any of these devotees ever acted on explicit orders from Sai Baba. But they are likely to have acted according to Sai Baba's ethical principles, since devotees believe that Sai Baba is always watching them.

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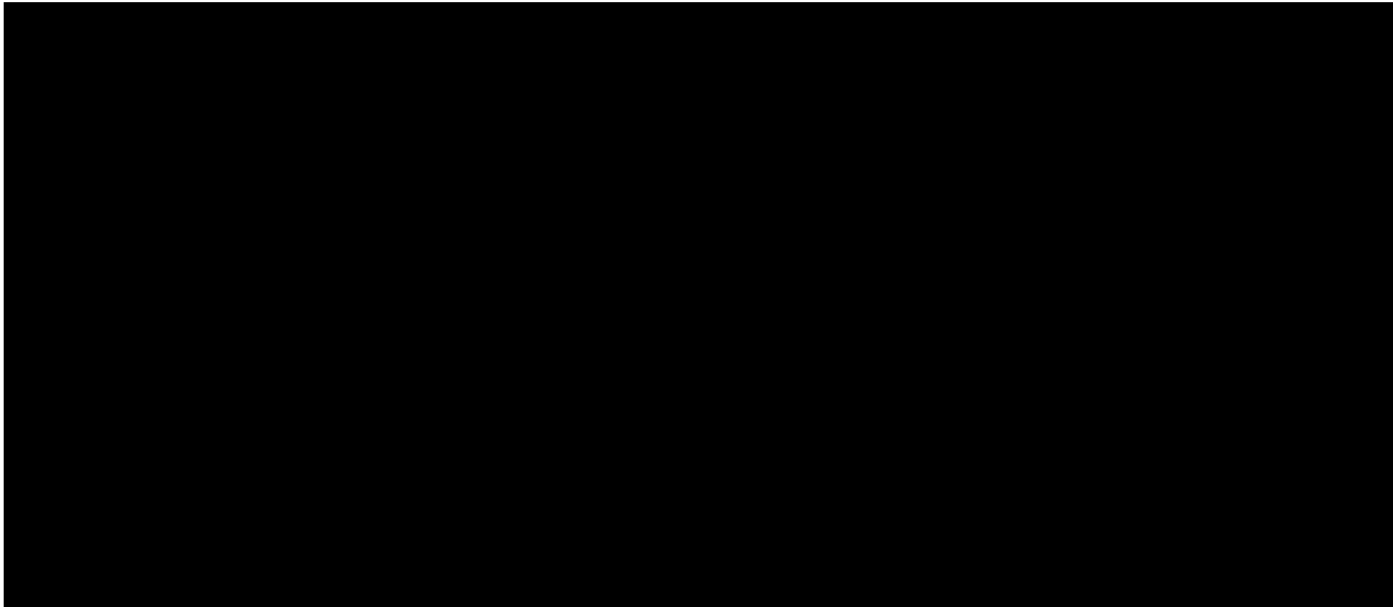
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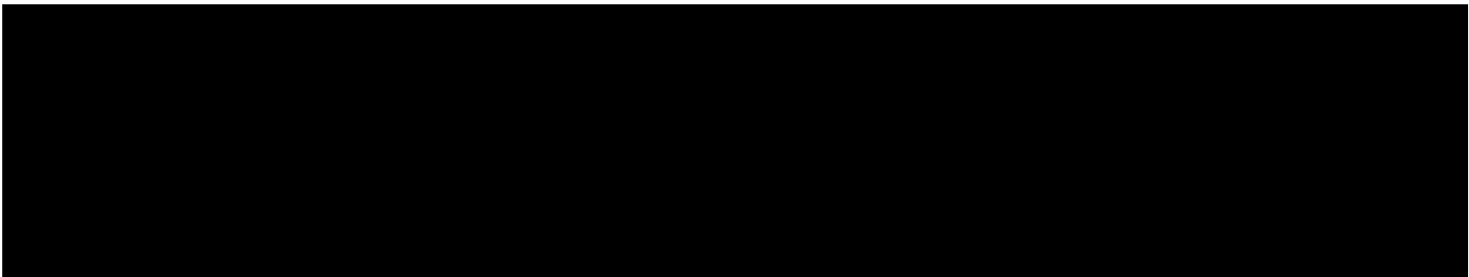
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(U) Former Panamanian Defense Forces Chief, Col Roberto Diaz-Herrera turned against Gen Manuel Noriega in 1987 after becoming a Sai Baba devotee. The colonel claims that, to prove his divinity, an emissary from Sai Baba disclosed in advance that a light plane from West Germany would soon violate Soviet air space (referring to the May 1987 incident involving the West German, Mathias Rust, landing on Red Square), and that Col Diaz should tell this to Soviet President Gorbachev. Diaz did not say whether he notified Gorbachev, and in any case, he made the claim after the incident occurred.

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OUTLOOK

(U) The Sai Baba movement is likely to eventually become another worldwide religion. Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, Sikhism, and Jainism, were all founded by a charismatic holy man, usually to reform an established religion. As its charismatic focus and living source, the immediate viability of this emerging religion depends on Sai Baba's health, which is apparently good, and his continuing credibility with devotees. In the longer run, his influence should be carried on by his devotees who will, in this information age, have a well-documented legacy of his teachings. (Sai Baba claims that he will leave his body at 95 years of age in the year 2020, only to be reborn one year later as Prema Sai Baba. As part of a triple incarnation, he says he was also the Indian saint, Shirdi Sai Baba, who, before he died in 1918, said he would be reborn in eight years.)

(U) The ability of the movement to continue its rapid expansion is apparently not constrained by finances, since the ability to finance a major hospital and airport simultaneously is an

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impressive display of wealth. The source of the money is not clear. Wealthy devotees are allowed, but not encouraged, to donate money to the Sathya Sai Trust, administered by the Bank of India, which funds Sai Baba's projects.

(U) The expanding provision of free education, free medical care, and volunteer service by Sai Baba devotees will continue to promote a favorable perception among Indians towards the Sai Baba movement, despite the controversy over his miracles and claim to be an Avatar. As the movement continues to grow, it will become increasingly influential with Indian politicians. So even if Sai Baba is not involved in politics, his followers are likely to support politicians who advocate policies promoting social harmony and an emphasis on alleviating social ills. Moreover, devotees will also increasingly come from the ranks of India's influential citizens.

(U) In the longer term, if the Sai Baba educational system produces large numbers of leaders who have progressed from the elementary schools through the university system and into Indian government and business, there may be a cadre of Sai Baba devotees in more key positions. They will then be in a position to influence policies in many aspects of society.

(U) On the other hand, the social ills of India are monumental,

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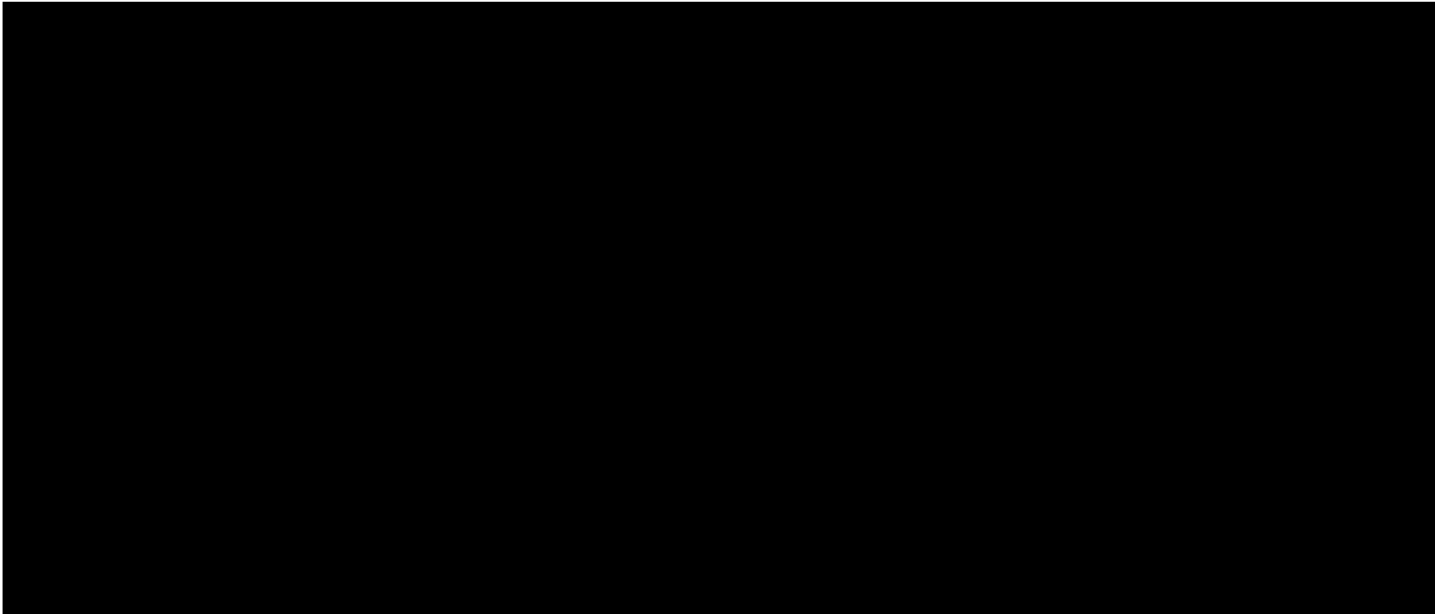
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and will require enormous efforts to solve. Whether the movement will attract a sufficiently large critical mass of people to overcome the ingrained prejudices of different ethnic and religious groups is uncertain. Hindus typically disparage any guru or sect other than their own, and the leaders of other non-Hindu religions usually denounce Sai Baba. Some Christian fundamentalists, for example, claim that Sai Baba's ability to perform miracles is evidence that he is the Antichrist, and the idea of an Avatar is anathema to Muslim fundamentalists. There is always the possibility, too, that the movement will collapse if Sai Baba is convincingly demonstrated to be a fraud.

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