



**Tulasi Srinivas.** *Winged Faith: Rethinking Globalization and Religious Pluralism through the Sathya Sai Movement.* New York: Columbia University Press, 2010. 448 pp. \$89.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-231-14932-7; \$29.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-231-14933-4.

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## When the Guru Does Not Travel, or How Does Globalizing Religion Actually Work?

The fascination in the “West” for gurus from the “East,” or India, is a long-standing one, colored on each side by essentialized assumptions and ontological anxieties, not to mention different ideas of the material and immaterial. The actual interactions between the gurus and their publics, and the discourses generated by these encounters, are valuable sources of data for problematizing ideas of religion, Hinduism, sacred spaces and practices, the devotional body, and the movement of ideas between the West and India. With the wider availability of transborder travel and communications, and multiple channels of information circulation, gurus from India can sustain transnational communities whether or not they actually travel anywhere themselves. In *Winged Faith: Rethinking Globalization and Religious Pluralism through the Sathya Sai Movement*, anthropologist Tulasi Srinivas explores the various sites and material expressions of the Sathya Sai movement (SSm) and its extensive network of devotees.[1] Srinivas’s overall aim is to consider the ways in which a transnational religious community can provoke a rethinking of what it takes to thrive in a plural and global world. Writing as a non-devotee and non-apologist, Srinivas argues that “religion can ... provide the basis for a new civil dialogue on identity in the global era” by supporting an “engaged cosmopolitanism” (pp. 4, 6). *Winged Faith* is an attempt to demonstrate that the SSm supports the transformations of individuals into those who have a tolerance for uncertainty, non-transparency, and paradox, all qualities that may mediate the challenges of living in world of cultural globalization. Srinivas draws from her extensive ethnographic observations and the actual thoughts shared by her interlocutors. The overall result is a sensitive consideration of SSm followers’ motivations and

a challenging set of interlocking analyses pointing to the necessity of including religion’s role in the experiencing of globalization.

How does the Sathya Sai movement actually become globalized? Who and what is travelling where; and, what happens to ideas, practices, and peoples as they are transported from one epistemic context to another? In *Winged Faith*, Srinivas takes these questions and asks further, “Does our contemporary understanding of pluralism rest on an illusion of civility located in indifference to the other” (p. 327)? These questions, motivated by Srinivas’s resistance to the “domestication of otherness,” rest at the center of *Winged Faith* (p. 6). In answering them, Srinivas not only avoids reducing Sathya Sai (SS) teachings and the SSm to “Hinduism” or new-age religion, and instead finds them to be a fertile source for theorizing about the mechanics of global processes. *Winged Faith* looks intently at SS devotees and practices and examines how these are traveling into and out of different national spaces, informed by their own histories and yet guided by SS devotional and ontological ideals. Srinivas’s significant contribution to the literature on globalization is her delineation, grounded in ethnography, of how ideas, objects, and ontologies arising in one place actually become “disembedded,” “codified and universalized,” “latched and matched,” and finally “contextualized and reembedded” into other cultural locations (pp. 331-342). Terming this multi-step process “cultural translation,” Srinivas sees the ability of the SSm to offer a range of experiences that can be culturally translated within wide latitudes of interpretation to be the basis for the movement’s transnational appeal and success. Ironically, while the leader of the SSm, Sathya Sai Baba, does not travel, his teachings and

ideas are leaving India and becoming re-embedded into altogether other contexts. Notably too, this is a pattern of global flows that counters the more common impression that cultural globalization begins in the West before moving elsewhere.

It is the juggling of ethnography with theory that makes *Winged Faith* a rich and challenging text. Based on eight years of fieldwork conducted over numerous sites, *Winged Faith* is two ambitious projects packed into one bracing study: (1) an effort to schematize, analytically and ethnographically, the processes by which the Sathya Sai movement has become globalized; and (2) a participant-observation study of a transnational community from the personal perspectives of some of its current and even former devotees. Srinivas acknowledges and makes judicious use of published scholarly and other materials on the SSm, especially in the *Presence of Sai Baba: Body, City, and Memory in a Global Religious Movement*, by Smriti Srinivas (2008) and the works of Alexandra Kent. Smriti Srinivas's (no relation) text is perhaps the most comprehensive historical account of the SSm. In contrast, Srinivas (of this review), while offering a necessary chapter on Sathya Sai Baba (SSB), directs her attention to the members of the SSm as she traces their engagement, including their struggles, with the different dimensions of being a SSB devotee. Srinivas looks closely at: devotees' interaction with the built environment of SSB's ashram in Puttaparthi, Andhra Pradesh; their efforts to cultivate bodily and affective responses to SSB; their interpretations of men murdered in the guru's personal living area; and their appreciation of SSB's gifts, namely his materializations of objects. Srinivas analyzes the interface of devotional context with devotees' thoughts and experiences and posits that the SSm supports an "economy of faith" (p. 96) in which each devotee is a "moral stakeholder" (pp. 190-200) and yet where devotees have agency to choose their interpretation of their experiences. The result, argues Srinivas, is a religious movement that creates meanings "rooted in the plural, the ambiguous, the plastic, and the layers" (p. 6). These are the qualities of "engaged cosmopolitanism," a way of being in the world that Srinivas suggests provides SS followers with a "grammar of diversity," that is, the ability to live with ease and skill in a multicultural societies (p. 329).

Srinivas convincingly shows that followers from 137 countries who come to SSB's ashram in Puttaparthi see themselves as traveling to *deus loci* (title of chapter 2). Here they experience, sensorially and

affectively, what Srinivas describes as the "mediating model" of Puttaparthi (p. 153). The act of travel to this distant place promotes a rethinking of identity and of an intense desire to find the "real self" (p. 106). Devotees hope to meet SSB for he, unlike many leaders of transnational movements arising in India, does not travel much beyond his ashram. Thus, for SS followers, Puttaparthi is the ultimate home or the home away from the devotee's exilic (actual) home; it is the place where devotees travel, expecting to be morally and bodily transformed. By the time they reach the first outer gate of Puttaparthi, they are faced with the portal that divides everywhere else from the moral universe within, one that is interpreted as offering inclusiveness, non-judgement, and open affection. Puttaparthi can thus be seen as the spatialized expression for how the SSm fosters interpretive freedom, qualities that Srinivas frames as "strategic ambiguity" (p. 271). Puttaparthi, in other words, is a model of and for moral architecture that followers experience, interpret, and then translate to other areas of their lives. In this ashram, people of many backgrounds and often no language in common suspend, according to Srinivas, issues of "the local and the global," and endorse instead "the possibility of pluralism of perspectives combined with empathy" (p. 154).

Among the strongest material in *Winged Faith*, where the ethnographic materials and theoretical interventions come together and offer an altogether unexpected analysis, is chapter 5, "Secrecy, Ambiguity, Truth, and Power." Srinivas introduces in some detail the "scandal" of four men's deaths in SSB's private ashram quarters. She outlines what is known about the 1993 "June incident" and then allows her interlocutors to speak for themselves. What emerges is a striking dissonance of interpretation between devotees and former devotees and amongst members of either group. Srinivas herself experiences what she terms "discursive strategies of silence" when she raises certain topics. The silence about the scandal or other off-limit topics results in an "ambiguity [that] enables the creation of a matrix of possible meanings that lends itself to fluidity of interpretation" (p. 265). What makes this seemingly passive silence theoretically productive is that devotees do not see secrecy, or the hiddenness of knowledge, to be troubling or wrong. Rather, devotees feel that the right knowledge will, in time, be revealed and therefore insistence on transparency is not relevant. As for the allegations of pedophilia against SSB or the defense of his al-

leged indigenous “sexual healing” practices, Srinivas argues that these differing “truths” point to the existence of cultural “untranslatables.” These points of untranslatability confirm “a moment where cultural translation is put to the test and the reach of the global network of the Sai organization is tested” (p. 269). Some practices and ideas, it appears, do not travel well, do not dis-embed or re-embed easily and are therefore potential fissures in a plural society.

In the SSm, secrecy becomes a currency in the economy of faith. Secrecy rewards those with greater discretion by allowing for their rise in the SS organization. Devotees, though sometimes grumbling about the cloaking of information, nevertheless share that eventually there will be disclosure and unveiling, but at the “proper” moment (p. 276). Srinivas concludes that the “deeper function behind the Sai devotees’ silence is to unseat the assumed, modern, Western link between apparent transparency and truth, as leading to trust and an evaluation of integrity” (p. 278). This is a bold and provocative assessment, one that compels rethinking of the relationship between truth, religion, and control or, for that matter, relationships that generally rely on a connection between truth and transparency. Also, in light of Srinivas’s overall aim to consider how the SSm encourages an engaged cosmopolitanism, it has to be asked if a high ratio of “untranslatables” to a cultural context jeopardizes the possibility of comfortable pluralism. If so, irrespective of how secrecy is epistemically supported, cultivating a resistance to domesticating some citizens of the world may be unfeasible.

Throughout *Winged Faith*, as Srinivas moves between ethnographic description and theoretical framing, her efforts to translate the specificity of her observations toward a broader argument are not always smooth. This may be due to Srinivas’s admirable incorporation of many texts and ideas of scholarly works; on the other hand, her on-target chapter epigraphs reveal the breath of reading. Then there are the undeniable copyediting bumbles throughout the book. At best, these problems are mostly negligible (whole sentences may appear twice in two pages, numbers referencing the same matter appear in different quantities, semicolons arise in unwanted places); at worst, editing lapses result in Srinivas’s

deft phrases appearing as if they were previously explained. Important concepts such as “cultural translation” and “intercultural congress” appear numerous times in the introduction and elsewhere but are not explicated until the last chapter, titled “In Lieu of a Conclusion.”[2] For readers wishing to grasp the significance of cultural translation, reading the first and last chapters of *Winged Faith* in sequence is advised.

Finally, much like the portals and objects that guide and persuade Sathya Sai followers to transform their selves into more developed moral beings, *Winged Faith* is itself a portal leading to further research possibilities. Srinivas alludes to these when she notes that in studying how cultural globalization works, she recognizes the necessity of refining a globalization thesis for the study of religious movements. She writes, “But it is clear to me, even in attempting this exercise, that it requires us to question received understandings of religion in the postmodern world and problematize their subjectivities” (p. 21). For Srinivas, the SSm by its capacity to support its followers’ multiple interpretations makes possible an engaged cosmopolitanism or an “alternate understanding of plurality” (p. 6). The next step may be to consider the influence of the discourse on religion on the devotees’ expectations of SSm as well as the SSm’s public representation of itself. These questions are not the main focus of *Winged Faith*. Nevertheless, Srinivas’s data and theoretical framings bear fascinating fruits for those seeking to push further the entanglements of devotion, bodily modes of interpretation, and the challenges of “latching” and “matching” a moral body to an ethical way of life in the name of religion.

#### Notes

[1]. In full disclosure, I read the manuscript of *Winged Faith* prior to its publication but I did not have any role in peer review matters, either then or at present, relating to its author. At the time of my reading, I was involved in reviewing another author’s work connected to Sathya Sai Baba. This latter material is mentioned in this review.

[2]. For example, the number of years that Srinivas gave to fieldwork is mentioned several times: it is nine years once (p. 4) and eight years more than once (pp. 48, 325).

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