

The Start of Websites for Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba

After discussing the start of a website for the International Sai Organization with Michael Goldstein and others, in an interview in June 1995, David Gries presented a proposal for it to Swami. Swami said, "Do it, do it."

After reporting this to Dr. Goldstein, the website was designed and implemented. It was hosted where it still is hosted today, 23 November 2010, Swami's 85th Birthday, on the servers of the company Sai Systems in Shelton, Connecticut, USA, owned by longtime devotee Ramesh Wadhvani, at this address:

www.sathyasai.org

The proposal presented to Swami appears in this document, beginning on the next page.

That first website was quite small. We have placed it on www.sathyasai.org at this address:

www.sathyasai.org/history/index.htm

There is a website called the WayBack Machine that makes snapshots of the web. At this address, you can see all the snapshots made of www.sathyasai.org over the years, as well as snapshots of almost all websites.

http://web.archive.org/web/*/http://www.sathyasai.org

Proposal for a
World Wide Web Site
to serve
Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba

The project SAIRAM (Sai Systems Automated Image and Retrieval System And Management) to gather and archive material concerning Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba has already been approved by Bhagavan, and preliminary work for it is underway. We propose to extend the project by establishing a World Wide Web site on the computer network Internet. This will make archived information about Bhagavan available in a matter of seconds to people who have access to the World Wide Web —both Sai devotees and those who are interested in learning about Bhagavan’s teachings. We can foresee making available the following.

1. Information about Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba: introductions to Bhagavan and His teachings, to the Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Medicine, to the Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning, to Bal Vikas, and to Education in Human Values.
2. Writings of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba (e.g. the *Vaahinis*).
3. Discourses of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba (e.g. the volumes of *Sathya Sai Speaks*).
4. A bibliography of books, magazines, newsletters, and videos about Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba.
5. Catalogs of books available from the Sri Sathya Sai Books and Publications Trust and the Sathya Sai Bookstore in Tustin, California, USA.
6. Information about Prasanthi Nilayam and Brindavan, including pictures of these ashrams and travel information.
7. Information about the Sathya Sai Baba Organizations in the world.
8. Pictures of Swami, audio (mantras and bhajans sung by Bhagavan).
9. In the future, any other appropriate information that meets with His approval.

In the following pages, we describe the proposal. Should it be Bhagavan's Will that the archive project be thus extended, we ask for His Divine guidance in redesigning the proposal and then implementing it.

1 Introduction: The World Wide Web

We can convey the idea of the World Wide Web as follows. Suppose Mary (say) wants to make information on some topic generally available. Mary gives her address to some people and tells them that anyone can write to that address and ask for the information. When someone writes to Mary at that address, she copies the information and sends it immediately to the person.

The World Wide Web works this way, except that the communication is by computer, telephone lines, and satellites, using a world-wide system called the Internet, and the information is transmitted almost instantaneously¹. The address of someone who has information to give out is called a URL (Universal Resource Locator). Right now, someone in Bangalore with a suitable computing resources could ask for information that is at some URL in a computer in New York, and the information would appear on his computer screen in Bangalore in a matter of seconds. This information might contain embedded URLs of other pertinent information, and the person in Bangalore could look instantaneously at the information at those URLs, too.

The World Wide Web is used by hundreds of thousands of people in this fashion, and its use grows every day. Further, sound and pictures as well as text can be retrieved.

The World Wide Web is being used by researchers and scholars to disseminate scholarly information. But it is being used by commercial enterprises as well. For example, in the United States, Federal Express has a URL, and a person who has sent a package by Federal Express can actually check to see where the package is. AT&T has a URL for 800-telephone numbers, and anyone who has the URL can look up 800 numbers. The White House in Washington, D.C., has a URL, and people can listen to messages from the President and Vice President, send a message to them, and take a visual tour of the White House.

The World Wide Web is simply a means of providing almost instant access to information, including text, pictures, and audio. It is shrinking the world and bringing people closer together.

¹The time it takes to receive information depends on the amount of information to be sent and the kind of computer connections one has. If the person is on a computer that is directly connected to the Internet, then it might take 2–10 seconds to receive a page of text. If the page has pictures on it, it might take 5–20 seconds. However, if the computer connection is made through a modem using a telephone, it could take a lot longer.

2 Purpose and Scope of this Proposal

We propose to construct a World Wide Web site for providing access to archived information concerning Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba. This would make it easier for Sai devotees to find various kinds information about Bhagavan and his teachings from the archive. It would also make it easier for people who hear about Bhagavan for the first time to learn more about Bhagavan.

This is not a proposal for publicizing Bhagavan. Indeed, the World Wide Web is passive, in the sense that people will get information only when they *seek* it. The person who wants information has to act in order to receive it. This proposal only makes it easier for people who want information to receive it.

3 Storing text on a computer

In section 4, we give a list of Sai material that could be made available on the World Wide Web site. But first, we explain how textual information can be stored, so that the reader can get a better idea for what we propose and the effort needed to implement it. Text, say one of Bhagavan’s discourses, could be stored in three forms:

1. **Bitmap image.** To make a bitmap image of a written discourse, each page is “scanned” into the computer and stored as a large array of 0’s and 1’s (bits), which indicate which parts of the page are white and black. This kind of representation takes a lot of space, but it is the easiest to produce. It also gives an exact presentation of a page —if there is a picture on a page, the reader will see the picture.

The bitmap image cannot be easily searched in any way. It is only for reading.

2. **Plain text.** The pages of the book are stored as the sequence of characters that make up the page. This form of a discourse can be obtained by someone typing it into the computer or by having a software program process a bitmap image and recognize the characters. This “optical character recognition” (OCR) program may make mistakes, so someone must read the final text carefully to correct mistakes. Any pictures or diagrams will not be included, since they cannot be represented as text.

With this form of text, it is fairly easy to have software programs that search the text for something —for example, the word *Prema*. In fact, in the current archive project, methods for structuring and searching the texts are being developed. However, people can easily copy the information, store it, change it, and then send it to someone else.

3. **HTML document.** HTML is a “language” for describing how a document is structured —where sections and paragraphs begin and end, which words are to be printed in conventional letters and which in italics, and so forth. Using html, one can “markup” one of Bhagavan’s discourses to provide links to other discourses and writings. For example, suppose Bhagavan mentions Krishna in a discourse. In html, one can fix it so that the word Krishna is underlined, and if the person reading the discourse on his computer screen “clicks” their mouse on this word, immediately a short description of Krishna appears on the screen. (Behind the scenes, clicking on Krishna causes a request to be sent to the URL for this document; this new document is then sent to the reader and displayed on his computer screen.)

Writing an html document for a discourse can take a lot of work. The plain text version of the discourse has to be processed to insert commands wherever something special is to be done. To put all of Swami’s discourses into html in a systematic fashion would take the work of several scholars, and we don’t recommend doing this for a long time. However, html would be good for basic information about Bhagavan, where one would want to be able to move quickly between different documents covering Bhagavan’s life, tours of Prasanthi Nilayam and Brindavan, travel to India, the Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning, and so forth.

4 Information on the World Wide Web Site for Bhagavan

We propose to generate and store on the World Wide Web site the following information.

1. Information about Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba, including the following (other approved items could be added). This information would be maintained as html documents, so that cross links can easily be provided, making it easy for a reader to move from part to part.
 - Introduction to Bhagavan and His works.
 - Prasanthi Nilayam and Brindavan, including pictures of the ashrams.
 - Information on travel to and within India.
 - Sai Organizations throughout the world.
 - Short history of Bhagavan’s Avatarhood.
 - Introduction to the Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Medicine.
 - Introduction to the Sri Sathya Sai Institute of Higher Learning.
 - Current information of importance (e.g. dates of festivals and events).

2. Writings of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba (e.g. the *Vaahinis*). These would be stored first as bitmap images. However, they already exist in electronic, plain-text form. If the electronic forms were given to us, in a relatively short time all this material could be available on the World Wide Web as plain text.
3. Discourses of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba (e.g. the volumes of *Sathya Sai Speaks*). These would be stored first as bitmap images. However, they already exist in text form. If the electronic forms were given to us, in a relatively short time all this material could be available on the World Wide Web as plain text.
4. Current issues of *Sanathana Sarathi*. In bitmap or plain text form.
5. A bibliography of books, magazines, newsletters, and videos about Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba. These could be done in plain text or html. The advantage of html is that cross links can be easily given.
6. Catalogs of books available from the Sri Sathya Sai Books and Publications Trust and the Sathya Sai Bookstore in Tustin, California, USA. These could be done in plain text or html. The advantage of html is that cross links can be easily given.
7. Pictures of Swami, audio (discourses by Bhagavan, mantras and bhajans sung by Bhagavan).
8. In the future, any other appropriate and approved information.

5 Implementation of a World Wide Web site

We look for guidance from Bhagavan for locating the World Wide Web site. It would make sense to have it in Puttaparthi, but until there are adequate computers and communication lines, some place like the company Sai Systems International in the U.S. could be suitable.

The estimated costs for obtaining a suitable hardware/software system and communication lines are outlined below. For this purpose, we give two possible approaches.

Approach I: PC-Clone system:

1. Pentium system with 32MB/10GB mirrored storage and DAT backup and good high-speed modem	\$18,000
2. UNIX License	\$1,000

Approach II: Internet-ready Sun Server System:

1. Sunsystem 8MB/1GB Communications-ready system	\$8,000
2. Upgrade to 10GB mirrored, and more memory (estimate)	\$15,000
2. DAT Backup	\$1,500

Other Costs:

1. Annual Internet and phone costs	\$6,000
2. Unix System Administrator costs	unknown

It will take time to obtain the hardware and software and set up an Internet node. Therefore, we propose a parallel effort to develop prototypes for various parts of the archive using computer resources available to a few Sai devotees. The URLs (computer addresses) of these prototypes would be for experimental and developmental purposes only and would not be made publicly known. Only after approval (see the next section) and installation at an approved site will information become publicly available.

The prototypes would be developed using computer resources at the universities where the devotees work or study. Such university and departmental computing systems are used for a number of different purposes, and investigations into different uses of the World Wide Web go on all the time. The development of a few prototype URLs in this manner would not be a problem.

6 Accountability

The information on a World Wide Web Site for Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba would be accessible world wide, by anyone who has access to a World-Wide-Web server. Therefore, it is important that the information be truthful, well written, and well presented.

We propose that the World Sai Organization set up a small committee to oversee the work. This committee would

- Approve material to be placed on the World Wide Web.
- Seek written permission to use material that is copyrighted.

It makes sense for most of the committee members to have access to the World Wide Web and to email —ideally, the committee should read the material the way anyone else would read it, on a computer using the World Wide Web. Also, this committee should act in a timely manner, so that information can be made available without too much delay.

It might be useful for someone from the Sri Sathya Sai Publications and Trust to be on the committee, and also someone from the Sai Book Center in Tustin, California, since both the Trust and the Tustin bookstore hold copyrights, have electronic documents, and are heavily involved in the dissemination of Sai material.

The writings and discourses of Bhagavan Sri Sathya Sai Baba are copyrighted by the Sri Sathya Sai Books and Publications Trust, and their written permission would be necessary before these writings could be put on the World Wide Web. A notice of the copyright would appear at the beginning of each work. It would help if the Sri Sathya Sai Books and Publications Trust would provide written permission for this archival project to obtain the electronic versions of these works from whoever has them. Once these electronic versions were obtained and the permanent World Wide Web Site were set up, these electronic version could be made publicly accessible on the net in a matter of weeks.

7 Schedule

Here is a tentative list of milestones.

- 1 March 1995: Development of prototypes begins.
- March 1995: A committee is established for overseeing the development and approving information to be placed on the World Wide Web, so that interaction between the committee and the developers can start.
- July–August 1995: the hardware/software system for a World Wide Web site is in place and approved information is being moved to it.
- November 1995: With Swami’s Grace, a substantial amount of information is available on the World Wide Web site and is being accessed by devotees.