

Austin, Texas, Public Meeting 23 April 2005

The Sathya Sai Organization- Region X conducted a public meeting in Austin, Texas on 23rd April, 2005 from 2:00 to 4:00 p.m. The purpose of this meeting was to introduce and explain the message and teachings of Bhagawan Sri Sathya Sai Baba, one of India's most venerated spiritual teachers, to the general public in the region.

The meeting was attended by about 375 people; approximately one third were not members of the Sai Organization.

An atmosphere of peace and calm pervaded the Frank Erwin Center on the University of Texas campus, where the event was held. Smiling volunteers clad in crisp, professional attire manned the well-designed reception area, where books, CDs, and DVDs about Sathya Sai Baba were on display. Questions were answered in soft, confident tones filled with love and devotion. The hall echoed the same theme of understated elegance, with posters depicting Sai Baba's choicest aphorisms such as "Help Ever, Hurt Never" and "Love All, Serve All." A portrait of Sathya Sai Baba and the symbol of the Sai Organization, the Sarva Dharma or symbol of all religions, also greeted the attendees. As the devotees and guests filed into the auditorium, an atmosphere of hushed anticipation filled the hall, supplanting the earlier muted greetings of "Sairam," which is how followers of Sai Baba address one another.

Shyam Kanagala, the Regional Young Adult Advisor, who emceed the function, greeted the guests and introduced the speakers. He remarked that, though mankind has made great strides in science and technology, we continue to live in fear and anxiety because we have not understood the true nature of our inner selves. He described Sai Baba as the "embodiment of all that humankind aspires to but can only dream of."

The first speaker, Dr. David Gries, Associate Dean for Undergraduate Programs and Professor of Computer Science at Cornell University, spoke with candor and sincerity about his experiences ! with Sathya Sai Baba. His honesty was as disarming as it was charming: in narrating his initial reactions, Gries wryly mentioned how he "did not want to be associated with an Indian teacher and (he) was ashamed almost." Gries, who is Webmaster for the International Sai Organization, proffered a wonderful PowerPoint presentation as accompaniment to his lecture. He highlighted three aspects of Baba's work— free medical care, free education, and numerous water projects— as examples of Sai Baba's munificence. Gries won over the audience with his dry humor and endearing manner, as he delineated Baba's teachings of universal love, His espousal of all religions, and His emphasis on selfless service to the poor and indigent. True to his affection for binaries, he presented an equation for pain and pleasure, describing pleasure as the interval between two pains. Dr. Gries also reiterated the significant observation that the Sai Organization does not solicit funds or recruit people; rather, it aims to serve "as a beacon of light in a dark world."

The second speaker, Jonathan Roof, who holds a Bachelor's Degree in Religion and has served the Sai Organization in various capacities, opened his speech with the interesting declaration that Sai Baba, despite being a highly revered teacher with followers all over the world is still a "well-kept secret" in the annals of spirituality on account of His complete eschewal of evangelization and fundraising. In a speech was marked by staunch conviction, clarity, and eloquence, Roof opined that Baba's mission is to aid man in answering the quintessential question, "Why am I here?" He stressed the Unitarian yet diverse nature of the Organization, which embodies simplicity and spirituality, and is driven by sincerity, devotion, and selfless service. Roof made an impassioned plea for the recognition! of the divine unity of humankind, the sharing of Baba's universal vision of love and service, and the understanding of the divine identity within ourselves.

Both speakers, though possessed of diverse styles of speaking, demonstrated a common purpose and

conveyed converging messages, seeking to explicate the purpose and nature of Baba's mission and the accomplishments of His Organization. As Dr. Gries succinctly remarked, man, in order to realize his inner divinity, must have his "head in the forest, hands in society," in other words, man needs to perform unselfish service while filling his mind with thoughts of the divine. The speeches were followed by a video presentation titled "His Work", which depicted vignettes of various landmark social service projects undertaken by Sai Baba in the rural heartlands of India. The video brimmed with kaleidoscopic images of sari-clad villagers and bright-eyed children thronging the Super-Specialty hospitals for free medical care, grateful villagers filling their water pots to the brim at the numerous reservoirs spawned by Baba's Drinking Water Project (which is the single largest social benefit project in the world by a non-profit organization), and rows of students clad in pristine white filing through the corridors of His institutions of higher education. Images of Bhagawan Baba himself, gentle, caring, and loving, pervaded the video, imbuing viewers with a sense of wonderment and awe at the simplicity and accessibility of such a towering spiritual figure.

As we watched Baba gliding among throngs of devotees and students in the video, his palm raised in benediction and eyes overflowing with compassion, the thought that this world teacher is the motivation behind several significant social developments, the realization that this unassuming figure is the a teacher with world-wide following moved many of the viewers profoundly. As we left the meeting, we were filled with admiration and humility; we were also overcome by a deep sense of gratitude to Baba for permitting us to be a part, albeit microscopic, of His grand mission. A number of devotees and guests expressed the experience of a state of joy and deep peace. The crowd dispersed as efficiently as it had gathered, enveloped by an aura of harmony and bliss.