

# Book Review: The Hagiographer and the Avatar

Robin Rinehart

2023

*The Hagiographer and the Avatar: The Life and Works of Narayan Kasturi*, by Antonio Rigopoulos. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2021. xxv + 499 pp., £75 (hb), £25 (pb). ISBN 9781438482293 (hb), 9781438482286 (pb).

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**Keywords:** hagiography; Narayan Kasturi; Sathya Sai Baba.

Narayan Kasturi (1897–1987), a humourist, novelist, college lecturer and follower of the Ramakrishna Mission in his younger years, went on to become one of Sathya Sai Baba’s closest devotees and author of the four-volume English-language hagiography *Sathyam Sivam Sundaram* and many other works. In his role as Sai Baba’s ‘right-hand man’, Kasturi transcribed Sathya Sai Baba’s lectures, and often gave lectures on Sai Baba’s teachings to Western followers. Drawing upon both fieldwork and Kasturi’s writings, Rigopoulos seeks to explore Kasturi’s central role in the development of the Sai Baba community. He cites the roles of the hagiographer within a charismatic religious community as a devotee, mediator, and theologian. Rigopoulos describes his approach as ‘sympathetic’, in contrast with that of scholars who study gurus employing a hermeneutics of suspicion.

The opening chapters present Kasturi’s life story and an overview and evaluation of the four volumes of *Sathyam Sivam Sundaram*. Later chapters present information on Kasturi’s work within the Sathya Sai Baba movement, a transcript of Rigopoulos’s 1985 interview with Kasturi, discussion of the Shirdi Sai Baba movement and its connections to Sathya Sai Baba, and a theological overview of the deity Dattātreya as he relates to Sathya Sai Baba’s assertion of his status as an avatar. Finally, Rigopoulos outlines the last years of Kasturi’s life and assesses his significance within the Sathya Sai Baba movement. A listing of works by and about Narayan Kasturi is included as well.

Rigopoulos argues that Kasturi’s hagiography of Sathya Sai Baba must be read in light of the conventions of the *carita* genre of biography in which miracles and other supernatural events are central to the narrative. He refers to the substantial scholarly literature on hagiography in India, and other scholars’ studies of Sathya Sai Baba, offering occasional brief criticisms. His focus, however, is primarily on Kasturi’s life and work rather than a detailed engagement with the scholarly literature on the structures and functions of the genre of hagiography and the *carita* or the nature of the transnational Sai Baba movement. Rigopoulos highlights some of the ongoing controversies that swirled round Sai Baba’s materializations of *vibhūti* (sacred ash) and other items, as well as purported miracles such as a Polaroid photo taken of Sathya Sai Baba that as it developed revealed the god Dattātreya. He also considers the complexities of Sai Baba’s connection to Shirdi Sai Baba—Sai Baba’s followers accept his claim that he was a reincarnation of Shirdi Sai Baba, while Shirdi Sai Baba’s followers generally do not—and provides an in-depth analysis of how Kasturi drew upon multiple sources, such as neo-Vedanta ideology and Puranic accounts of Dattātreya, in order to craft a theological portrait of Sai Baba.

*The Hagiographer and the Avatar's* greatest strength is its careful and detailed depiction of Narayan Kasturi as a close follower of Sathya Sai Baba, a figure who might otherwise have remained in the background of Sai Baba's story despite his central role in crafting the leader's authorized biography. Rigopoulos shows definitively how crucial Kasturi's work was in crafting a systematic theological vision of who Sathya Sai Baba was and the import of his teachings. The picture of Kasturi that emerges is primarily that of a committed devotee, but with less sense of his choices as a hagiographer. Kasturi, of course, had to make many decisions in what he wrote about Sai Baba and his life and teachings. Some readers may wish for more information about those choices and what Kasturi might have left out; a fuller picture of the hagiographical process might have considered other accounts of Sathya Sai Baba's life. Although Kasturi did write about the controversies surrounding Sathya Sai Baba's materializations, which some considered to be more sleight of hand than miraculous, he died before multiple allegations of sexual abuse and financial misdoings came to light in the 1990s and subsequent years, so we do not know how he would have come to terms with those allegations.

There are occasional hints of the challenges that Kasturi sometimes faced in his relationship with Sai Baba, who could at times be harsh in his statements and directions to his followers. Rigopoulos's closing chapter details the last few years of Kasturi's life, during which he faced family tragedy and his own declining health, with Sathya Sai Baba declaring that Kasturi gained direct knowledge of his soul or *ātman* at death. Rigopoulos quotes at length from a doctor who cared for Kasturi, and who testified that Kasturi's body did not decay but instead became fragrant before it was taken for cremation. Acknowledging that many of the accounts of Kasturi's last days are themselves a kind of 'hagiographication' of the hagiographer, Rigopoulos nonetheless deems these narratives 'realistic' (p. 275). In the end, his thoughtful and sympathetic presentation of Kasturi's life and work itself at times reads somewhat more as a hagiography of Kasturi than biography. Even so, those with interests in the Sathya Sai Baba movement and contemporary transnational guru communities will find much of interest in this book.

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Religions of South Asia, vol. 17, no. 2, pp. 232–233.

<<https://doi.org/10.1558/rosa.26590>>

Equinox Publishing Ltd 2023, Office 415, The Workstation, 15 Paternoster Row,  
Sheffield S1 2BX

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