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From Almaty to the Ashram: Spiritual Seekers, Enlightenment Tourists, Miracle Hunters and Pilgrims

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Abstract
How do individual narratives transform our understanding of the religious practices of modern Central Asians? Why do insiders' experiences matter in examining the sociocultural context of religious landscapes? Applying the autoethnographic method, this article aims to investigate the author's spiritual journey from childhood to adulthood; from the Kazakhstani metropolis of Almaty to an Indian ashram in Puttaparthi, Andhra Pradesh; revealing and re-examining the complex body of personal memories and activities relevant to devotional exercises. It explores four types of ashram visitors from Central Asia: spiritual seekers, enlightenment tourists, miracle hunters, and pilgrims, discussing the ways in which individuals internalize their spiritual journeys.

Keywords
Autoethnography, ashram, Central Asia, Kazakhstan, India

Autoethnography: writing about the 'Self'

Autoethnography is a relatively new genre of social science with interdisciplinary roots in anthropology, communication studies and literary arts, and affiliated with a wider range of qualitative study (Hughes and Pennington 2017, 7). It began as a provocative movement against colonial ethnographic methods and practices that supported detached observation and obliterated researcher individuality while providing them with full authority in representing the subaltern "others" (Gannon 2006, 475). The uninterrupted impact of colonial discourses and structures of domination on contemporary societies has been challenged by the capacity of autoethnography to accommodate and empower the subjectivities of marginalized voices. Autoethnography enables researchers to engage with insider knowledge and customs and embrace "the conflict of writing against oneself as one finds themself entrenched in the complications of one's positions" (Hughes and Pennington 2017, 10). Descriptions of lived experiences and reflexive narratives ingrained within the autoethnographic technique enable conceptual elasticity, while explaining the social

through the lenses of the individual (Rogozin 2015, 239). The researcher is integrated in the subject of their study through dialectical questioning and unveiling of the self. This fixation on examining the researchers' identities, power, privileges/deprivations, and practices helps to reveal nuanced layers in historical and social contexts.

Instead of searching to escape subjectivity, autoethnographic writers of the new millennium acknowledge the power of personal narratives and experiences that increase the scope and versatility of knowledge production. Autoethnographic methods in qualitative sociological research reverse and revisit the existing divisions between the social and individual, emotional and analytical, and theory and practice. Gannon (2006, 475) suggests that knowledge production in autoethnographic self-observational studies is obtained from specific bodies with sentiments, ideas and convictions that become possible only in certain sociocultural-spatial locations where memories, performances and meanings cross over. The strength of autoethnography lies in the explicit use of researchers' positionality, involvement and experiences as an integral part of the ethnographic research (Butz and Besio 2004). Bordieu and Wacquant's reflexive sociology resembles this approach in aiming to embrace self-referencing and relational representations of reality, extracting knowledge from reflexive writing about the self and injecting it back to the world (1992, 37). Opponents of the autoethnographic genre criticize it for its lack of scrutiny, which is considered essential under rigorous standards of ethnography; intellectual bias instigated by the exposure to subjective personal testimonies; and excessively emotional and therapy-like revelations. Despite these criticisms, the main flow of publications based on the autoethnographic approach began in the second half of the 2000s and had almost doubled by the first half of the 2010s (Rogozin, 2015).

This paper uses the autoethnographic approach to describe my spiritual practices in Kazakhstan and India over the past twenty-five years (1995-2020), focusing on the multifaceted spectrum of memories, practices, narratives and sociocultural contexts. The significance of this contribution lies in the fact that I have maintained sustained participation and full membership in the spiritual practices under investigation. In this reflective observation, I discuss the development of religious interest after the breakup of the USSR, narrating my family's spiritual path as a part of the existing social transformations. I also provide an original discussion of four types of ashram visitors in Puttaparthi, equipped with vivid examples and personal reflections. This article draws on my autoethnographic diary, memories, and conversations with my family, ashram visitors and Sai Baba devotees.

Writing about the "self" in the Central Asian context is a problematic and challenging task. Local perceptions and practices of what constitutes an individual and what pertains to the familial or collective are blurred. When I describe the narratives and evocative reflections of my family in this autoethnography, my voice resonates with their stories and memories. I could not rationally disintegrate myself from my family's experiences of spiritual practice. In the sociological categorization of ashram tourists in India, I relate to each group to various degrees, blending my observations with those of my family members and friends. The boundaries between self and others

are thin and subjective, especially in an autoethnography of spiritual practices in and from Central Asia.

The genealogy of my spiritual quest

Secularization was imposed on its territories by the Soviet state for seven decades. My grandmother recalled that when she was a headmistress of a school during Soviet times, she was required to keep a list of all religious students in the school, whom she was supposed to supervise and guide ideologically as a school executive. The unquestionable monopoly of atheistic values dominated the public sphere in the USSR, dictating social norms and normality. Alienated religious communities were demarcated and stigmatized as "potentially dangerous" and "unreliable." After the fall of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, religion and spirituality ceased to be a taboo and the tracking of religious practitioners as criminal elements by state institutions ended. Paradoxically, Soviet anti-religious propaganda had turned religion into a "forbidden fruit" (Bissenova 2017), and this long religious deprivation manifested itself in the immediate fascination of many with the previously forbidden knowledge flooding both public and private domains in the post-Soviet period. My family was no stranger to these fundamental sociocultural transitions.

The spiritual quest of my family began with my aunt, Gulzhan, who while engaging in her doctoral research in Mathematics at Novosibirsk State University (NSU) in 1992, expressed a strong desire to understand the underlying purpose and meaning of world religions. "The framework of one orthodox religion seemed too 'stuffy' for me," she explained in our conversation. "As a scholar, I was looking for some reasonable explanation as to why people had worshiped Jesus for so many centuries, even though he was not a famous poet, writer, warrior or king. I wondered what the power of this man was." After familiarizing herself with major religious texts translated into the Russian language – The Quran, Bible, Bhagavad Gita and the new-wave philosophies of Carlos Castaneda and Ramana Maharshi – she came to the conclusion that "God certainly exists," but was not convinced about accepting one particular religious practice. "I visited churches and mosques in Almaty, attended the gatherings of the society for Krishna consciousness, but everywhere I was told that only their path was righteous and, in order to follow it, one needed to denounce other religions". This restrictive mindset discouraged her from joining any of these religious groups.

Perhaps this religious ambiguity was, in part, conditioned by the multi-ethnic character of our family. My grandmother is an ethnic Russian, born in the rural Siberian village of Ust'-Tarka, her parents were culturally Orthodox Christian. My Kazakh great-grandfather, Iskak, was a devout Muslim and, even during Soviet times, secretly prayed five times a day regardless of the consequences. His six children however, embraced Soviet atheism and were convinced that their father could not liberate himself from archaic religious concepts. Ironically, a few decades later one of them became a practicing Muslim. Such a mixed ethnic background creates a wider range of choices for religious affiliation, complicating the journey of spiritual self-identification. In the multi-ethnic setting of Kazakhstan, ethnically diverse family structures are widespread. Even street billboard marketing and commercial advertisements on the local TV stations normally ensure representation of ethnically mixed families to preserve the national principles of interethnic peace.

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Without having selected any religion, Gulzhan returned to Almaty from Novosibirsk in 1995 and signed up for yoga. This was where she first heard the Vedic Gayatri mantra. The rhythmic sounds provoked in her a strong emotional impulse and blissful ecstasy. Out of curiosity she decided to ask her yoga instructor Tatyana about it. The teacher explained that the Gayatri mantra was the main song from the Rig Veda and that it uplifted energy vibrations in the body ("kundalini"). In the past, students needed to undergo rigorous spiritual practices before being able to listen to it. After few more yoga classes, their conversations became deeper, Gulzhan wanted to learn more about this mysterious vedic knowledge and invited Tatyana to her house for dinner, a casual practice in hospitable Kazakhstan. Tatyana revealed her own spiritual experience and spoke about the Indian guru Sri Sathya Sai Baba. She showed a small picture of his smiling bronzed face surrounded by a crown of black curly hair and added, "God is alive, and he lives in Puttaparthi, his name is Sai Baba. He promotes the unity of all religions, declaring that there is only one religion, the religion of love; there is only one language, the language of heart; there is only one race, the race of humanity; and there is only one God who is omnipresent." Gulzhan immediately felt a connection to this Indian guru and his unifying approach to all world religions. She also thought that in the new age it made sense for the spiritual messenger to appear in a hippie-like form, breaking away from the serious images of the ancient gods.

Her initial acquaintance with Sai Baba's teachings and books written about him by other authors like Phillis Krystal (1985), Howard Murphet (1971), Mario Mazzoleni (1991) led to her sign up for advanced spiritual classes facilitated by Alexander Zamrii, husband of Tatyana, who had great experience of yogic and other Eastern spiritual practices. This literature was available in an Almaty bookstore and in the yoga studio. My aunt also convinced my mum, her younger sister, to join the program. During Zamrii's course they learnt about meditation, pranayama breathing, the basics of karma laws, and reincarnation. Towards the end of the program, Alexander Zamrii shared his experience of visiting Sai Baba's ashram and some of his spiritual revelations as the result of the trip. My mum recalled this episode: "We were sitting in a circle on the floor with our legs crossed in the "lotus pose." When Zamrii talked about his amazing ashram visit and impressions of Sai Baba in India, everyone was excited to listen and visit the sacred place too. It did not resonate on the same level with me. Yet, when somebody in the group said, "I would give a lot to see Sai Baba, but unfortunately I don't have the financial means to travel to India," I thought that nothing was stopping me from going to India and that should book my flight. My mum decided to take me with her.

This was how I, a little girl, on a hot day in July 1996, was headed to Almaty International airport with my mum, a twenty-eight-year-old banker in pursuit of spiritual enlightenment. The shabby Soviet airport was overcrowded with Indian medical students. My image of India in that period was shaped by the popular Bollywood films "Seeta Aur Geeta" (1974) and "Jagte Raho" (1956), geography books, and thrilling narratives about Sai Baba. My grandparents were cautious about the trip as India was not the most common destination for tourists from Kazakhstan at that time. Pilgrimage to Indian ashrams was not then a socially-embedded norm; this changed only in the mid-

2000s. Only four passengers on our flight were not of Indian origin: the two of us, a KIMEP University student named Irina whom my mum had met shortly before our journey to the Indian ashram, and her boyfriend Dima, a young financial analyst from Almaty. Irina's sister, Svetlana, and her husband Andrey had gone to the ashram a few weeks before us and were supposed to meet us at in the village of Puttaparthi in Anantapur district of Andhra Pradesh.

There was no direct route for us to reach the ashram. We arrived in New Delhi and went to the railway station. The plan was to book train tickets on arrival for the Karnataka Express from Delhi to Dharmavaram. During the busy summer season, all the train tickets were sold out. We had to stay in New Delhi for a few more days, during which we visited local history and art museums and temples. Apart from the gentle and comforting breeze from air-conditioners in the museums, I vividly remember the colorful images of Hindu gods and stories about their extraordinary courage, devotion and struggles. From then on, along with Nickelodeon characters, heroes like Sita, Rama, Hanuman, Vishnu and Shiva became present in my life through comics, books and stories about them. Reality and myth often blur in one's childhood, but the bright images of kind and righteous heroes certainly left a strong imprint on my imagination.

The small temple in the village of Puttaparthi dedicated to Sai Baba in 1949 has gradually transformed into a gathering venue for millions of spiritual pilgrims of different faiths from various corners of the world. Near the entrance gate, we were welcomed by a statue of Ganesh and a waving Svetlana, who helped us to our accommodation and informed us of the daily routines and organization of activities of everyday life inside. During her stay, Svetlana shaved her hair to symbolize the "renunciation of the previous karma." Such action was not a prerequisite for spiritual practice, but rather a personal choice. After unpacking and changing our clothes to traditional Indian dress, we went for the first auspicious viewing ('darshan').

My first visit to Sai Baba's ashram left indelible impressions of magic, rigorous spiritual dedication among visitors, and the vivid excitement of new beginnings. We woke up in the early morning to attend the Om-chanting and silent meditations in the temple, followed by the auspicious viewings of Sai Baba, during which he meets with ashram attendees and walks through the lines of the meditative mass. Sometimes he gave blessings, collected letters, and invited groups for conversations. After meetings with Sai Baba, people informally gathered to share what they had experienced during the interview. This routine was repeated every day, enveloping and calming the mind. For adults, a conversation or special audience with Sai Baba was desired since they could discuss important issues with him or ask for a blessing. For children, listening to the mesmerizing Indian music and smiling at strangers seated around on the floor was already sufficient. During my childhood, I do not remember Sai Baba as a special focus of my attention. Yet, he was always present in the background of everything that happened within the ashram, on the posters in canteens, in conversations, and even in children's games. For example, I remember that, after returning from the ashram, I made my kindergarten friend Kamila pray to Sai Baba to ask him to reincarnate her parents who had died in a car accident. I truly believed that Sai Baba could make anything possible if one asked for it with an open heart.

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This is how my family's spiritual quest led to the teachings of the Indian guru. After this first exposure at a very young age, I continued exploring his teachings. The religious tolerance of his philosophy resonated with my family's understanding of modern-age spirituality. My Russian-Kazakh family background conditioned a genuine curiosity towards different religious paths and our middle-class privileges allowed us wider geographical mobility for ashram tourism from Central Asia to India. Since that first trip to the ashram in 1996, we have gone on a pilgrimage almost every year for the past twenty-five years. During the last four years I travelled by myself or with various family members and friends, and only the Covid-19 pandemic limited my ability to travel there.

Figure 1: My mum, me and Irina near the ashram gate on Chitravatji Road, Puttaparthi, summer 1996, family archive

Four Types of Ashram Visitors

Over my twenty-five years of regular ashram visits, I have observed many types of tourists from Central Asia who have come to Sai Baba's ashram in Puttaparthi. I have categorized them into four unique types: spiritual seekers, enlightenment tourists, miracle hunters, and pilgrims. They can be distinguished from one another by significant differences in their motives for visiting the ashram, their degree of knowledge of Indian philosophy, and their willingness to engage with the ashram lifestyle and spiritual practices. The following diagram summarizes the key points of distinction between these groups of visitors. I also describe each category individually below.

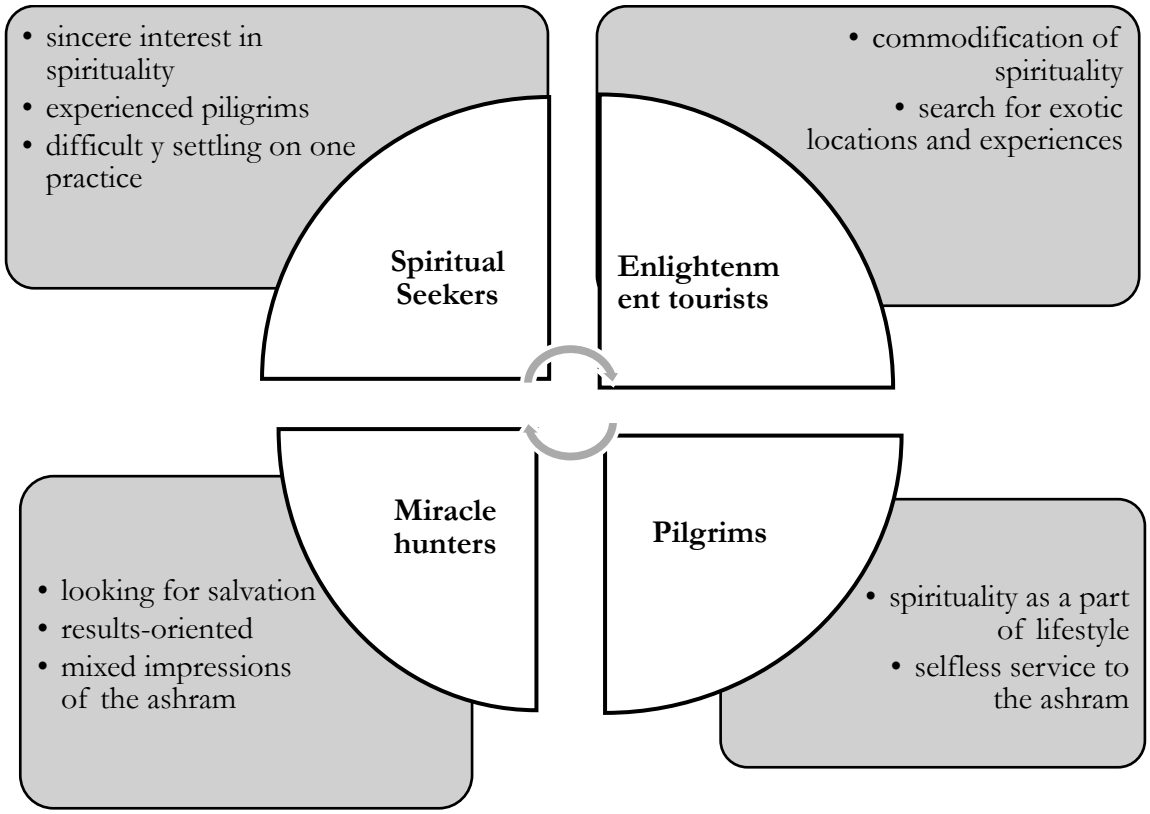

Figure 2: Four categories of Ashram Visitors

Spiritual seekers

Spiritual seekers come to the ashram in search of individual spiritual experience and self-revelation. Normally, such visitors are equipped with some prior knowledge of Eastern Philosophy and have practical training in meditation. They have often already visited other Indian ashrams or sacred places in the Middle East, South Asia, Europe or Latin America. Spiritual seekers represent the most 'professional' class of new-age pilgrims. They manage to collect unique perceptions of rituals and practices from different religions and geographical locations. The main strength of spiritual seekers lies in their multi-dimensional vision and experience of different religious sights. The superficiality of these experiences and their inability to progress in-depth within one spiritual practice makes them lifelong vagabonds, flitting from one petal of spiritual wisdom to another. While collecting the nectar from various spiritual schools and ashrams, they find it difficult to settle down and commit to a single religious school or tradition.

Curious artists, psychologists, healers, politicians and academics from Central Asia could be identified from within this group of spiritual seekers. Farida,[1] a prominent psychologist from Almaty, visited Sai Baba's ashram in the summer of 2015, motivated by the desire to discover new instruments for self-development – techniques that she can both practice herself and offer to her patients. Farida spent a few days reading Sai Baba's books and attending free ashram workshops and seminars on meditation, heart opening and selfless service to society. Eager to absorb new information and making new contacts and friendships with other post-Soviet ashram attenders,

[1] Name has been changed

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Farida declared her dedication to Sai Baba's teachings, meditation and spiritual lifestyle. After returning to Almaty, she eagerly started to implement the ritual habits developed during her ashram stay: waking up at 5 AM to chant Vedas and discussing the illusory nature of material attachments and relationships. The magnetic power of the ashram routines seduced Farida, and she would visit Sai Baba's ashram three to four times a year, explaining her actions via "the need to reconnect with the silent divinity inside." I bumped into Farida in Almaty a year after we had last met. She still meditated but did not go to the ashram anymore. She had switched to Buddhism instead and now travels to Tibetan monasteries.

Enlightenment tourists

Enlightenment tourists visit the ashram as a part of their tour entertainment package, which often also includes group shopping, sunbathing in Goa, riding elephants in Jaipur and a panchakarma treatment in Kerala. Normally, such tours are accompanied by energetic group leaders, for whom exotic and fashionable ashram tourism represents a source of personal enrichment. Business tourists approach spirituality as commodity; they are willing to pay for it. In some cases, these tours cost from one to four thousand US dollars (depending on the length and the number of stops) on top of the flight and accommodation expenses. By contrast, a room in the ashram normally costs two dollars per day with no other fees involved in staying there.

Central Asian elites and middle-class citizens who are cautious about visiting Indian ashrams alone join such tours in an attempt to gain exciting life experience and feed their curiosity. After the visit of the first lady of Kazakhstan, Sara Nazarbayeva, to an ashram in the early 2000s, many wives and family members of Kazakhstani elites followed in her footsteps. Some of these come well-prepared for their ashram retreat, having read and watched documentaries; others may have just seen the film "Eat, Pray, Love" (2010) with Julia Roberts and fantasized about finding a quick path to enlightenment during their three-day stay in the ashram.

I knew three active female tour guides from Central Asia who regularly arrived at Sai Baba's ashram with large groups of such enlightenment tourists. All three claimed to possess some supernatural skills such as the ability to interpret dreams, speak to the dead, or heal with reiki energy. Each of them had a charismatic personality and a mystifying aura, always surrounded by the ring of their obedient groupmates. The group would learn about the ashram and internal practices from their group leaders, who shared their own subjective vision of Sai Baba and his relationship with spirituality. For the majority of enlightenment tourists, memories of the ashram quickly fade under the multitude of other attractions offered by India. For a few, however, this ashram tour becomes the first step towards their spiritual self-realization, invoking a genuine impulse to learn more about Eastern philosophy, meditation, and Sai Baba.

Miracle hunters

The visitors I call "miracle hunters" attend the ashram as their last resort for salvation, hoping to resolve serious health problems or relationship difficulties. Many people turn to spirituality as their coping mechanism to deal with life's hardships. People with disabilities, cancer patients, infertile

couples, and men and women struggling to find their soulmates and build lasting relationships come to Puttaparthi expecting to find a divine remedy for their issues. Many testimonies have confirmed Sai Baba's healing qualities and his sharp intuition which allows him to give valuable advice. My grandmother, who struggled for thirty years from back pain (diagnosed rheumatism), fully recovered after talking to Sai Baba. She said that "his piercing gaze" struck her to the depths of her essence. In a single moment she could vividly observe the kaleidoscope of her entire life, filling up with the energy of love and total self-acceptance. Since this brief incident eighteen years ago, she has never experienced back pain again.

My great uncle Baibolat Omarov was initially skeptical of our trips to Sai Baba. As a successful businessman and mathematician, he thought that we were absolutely confused in our spiritual choices and engaging in some "sect nonsense." He maintained his convictions for twenty years until one day he decided to go to the ashram with us because his son had been married for seven years but his wife had failed to conceive. During his ashram stay, he prayed and learned about basic spiritual rituals like meditation and mantras. He enjoyed the quietness of the ashram lifestyle as it reminded him of the Kazakh auyl (village) of his childhood. Shortly after this trip, his son shared the joyful news that he could be expecting a grandchild. The baby was conceived without any medical intervention. He was born strong and healthy. On his second ashram visit, my great uncle came with his grandson to express his gratitude to Sai Baba.

Such miracle stories are quite typical among ashram visitors. They have become mundane for me as I have heard thousands of such miracles over the past two and a half decades. Experiences of ashram healing attract miracle seekers and fuel their hopes for the brighter future. Some of those hopes are destined for failure, others result in a happy ending. Miracle seekers consider the guru as their personal doctor and adviser. One of my school classmates was terminally ill, and the best Central Asian and European hospitals could not facilitate her health situation. She visited the ashram with her mother twice, unfortunately without any positive results. Disappointed in the lack of a spiritual healing, she never returned. Many miracle hunters formulate concrete goals for their ashram visit, and some of them leave disenchanted. Others benefit from a spontaneous "miracle" and disappear. The number of miracle seekers decreased drastically after the death of Sai Baba in April 2011; they lost interest in visiting the ashram without the living guru's presence. A small percentage of inspired miracle seekers, however, transform into devotees and begin a journey of spiritual self-discovery in which individual self-transformation becomes the core miracle in itself.

Pilgrims

Devotees make up my fourth and the final category of ashram visitors. For loyal disciples of Sai Baba's teachings, visiting an ashram does not represent an autonomous activity, but rather one which is integrated within a coherent spiritual lifestyle. The major feature of devotees lies in their acceptance of Sai Baba as their spiritual guru, and the willingness to nurture their individual divinity though self-realization.

The ashram retreat is an unnecessary endeavor as devotees are already engaged in daily and weekly spiritual exercises suc as meditation, mantra chanting and philosophic discussions. For

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others, the ashram symbolizes a place to catch up with like-minded people. A small group of devotees from Central Asia made a radical choice and moved to Puttaparthi permanently. Residing inside the ashram longer than three weeks is not allowed, so they rent or buy accommodation outside of the main ashram gates.

It is extremely hard to distinguish devotees in a large and diverse crowd of ashram visitors. Often such people do not publicize their devotion, they remain quiet, self-conscious and enthusiastic about helping others. On the territory of the ashram, there are three public canteens with South-Indian, North-Indian and European cuisines. Devotees volunteer to assist in food preparation and distribution, cleaning and washing dishes. The majority of ashram residence staff and canteen workers are engaged in selfless service, they rotate every season. My uncle Rahimbek Keltenov loves cooking, so every time he visits the ashram, he prepares 1000 vegetarian *mantys* (dumplings) in the European canteen with some extra help from the post-Soviet group. The Central Asian team also used to distribute *baursaks* (fried dough bread) and vegetarian *Nauryz Kozhe* (traditional nomadic soup) in the local canteen. This collective, selfless work unites devotees from different countries.

As a part of the cultural program, devotees sing in various choirs during Christmas and all major Hindu celebrations such as the day of Guru (Guru Purnima) and Sai Baba's birthday. Apart from Russian songs, we used to sing in Kazakh, Uzbek, and Azeri. Normally the music program includes themes of the power of the soul, the glory of God, the divinity within each human being, the unity of all religions, and the celebration of life in the surrounding nature, sky and creation. My cousin who has also regularly visited the ashram since she was a teenager shared that Sai Baba's philosophy helped her to grow up with the idea of a "safe world." Only later in life did she notice from conversations with friends their underlying worry and stress about "the hostile reality." She believes that the ashram experience instilled in her a solid foundation of trust in the universe which makes her more resistant to changing environments and circumstances.

For devotees in Kazakhstan, the Puttaparthi ashram became a home away from home. The head of the Sai Baba Central Asian Association described the ashram as the "microcosm of the ideal state," providing excellent free healthcare services and free basic and higher education, as well as drinking water supply for the rural areas of the Andhra Pradesh state (anonymised author's interview, 2020). In her view, the most important contribution of Sai Baba and his devotees is revealed through the moral component of those charity programs and activities.

In Almaty, my cousin and I attended a Sunday spiritual school (Balvikas) where we were taught to meditate, memorized Muslim, Christian and Vedic prayers, and discuss stories about universal human qualities such as nonviolence, right conduct, truth, peace, and love. We used to prepare uplifting performances for local hospitals, prisons, elder homes and orphanages. The senior group members distributed food and other donations, while children hosted the cultural program. This life experience influenced my professional choices and helped me develop my creative and public speaking skills.

Figure 3: Sai Baba's birthday celebration, November 1997, Almaty, family archive

Today, there are about seventy Sai Baba devotees in Central Asia, forty of whom live in Kazakhstan. In Uzbekistan the Sai Baba Association was dissolved due to intensive state repression in the mid-2000s. Such numbers could be explained by the less repressive character of Nazarbayev's politics towards religious organizations in Kazakhstan before 2011 and his international commitment to fight against global terrorism and religious extremism. Since 2003, six Congresses of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions were hosted in Nur-Sultan. During the second congress, the President of Kazakhstan declared his views on the possibilities of interreligious dialogue: "The incompatibility of many religious doctrines is overrated [...]. The unity of God, which all world religions affirm, clearly shows this. All great religions talk about serious spiritual transformation, forgetting their little human differences before God" (Nazarbayev, 2006).

After October 2011, however, officials changed their laissez-fair approach to religious organizations inside the country when the law "On the Religious Activity and Religious Associations" was introduced. This law increased state authority over every religious activity, from getting municipal permission for registration to regular updates and examination by the local authorities on religious exercises. The new law primarily targeted the growing threat of religious extremism in Central Asia, however, by default it affected the legal status of small spiritual communities like the Sai Baba organization. Registration of a religious association at the republican level with fewer than five thousand members considered as illegal (The Law on Religious Activity and Religious Associations, 2011, Chapter 4:4). Like in other Central Asian states, the Sai Baba Organization in Kazakhstan functions as a public charity association.

The group of Almaty devotees has changed drastically with time. Only four of its initial members remain. Some still practice on an individual level; others have changed the direction of their beliefs entirely or have become agnostic. As with any group, people make individual decisions about their engagement in collective teamwork and spiritual practices. Devotees drift away for a

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variety of reasons: personal misunderstandings within the group, change of spiritual practice, migration to a different city or country, and pressing health and life issues.

The relatively small group of current devotees in Kazakhstan comes from different walks of life, encompassing entrepreneurs, educators, doctors, and artists. They put joint effort into their charity projects: garbage collection, weekly feedings of the homeless, volunteering at the medical camps in rural areas of Kazakhstan and community education projects. These friends, like-minded enthusiasts and religious companions engage in selfless service in the ashram and their local region.

Figure 4: Medical Volunteer Camp, Sairam, South Kazakhstan, 2016[2]

Conclusion

This autoethnographic story is built on my memories and lived experiences engaging in spiritual practices and visiting Sai Baba's ashram in Puttaparthi over the past twenty-five years. Sai Baba was a world-renowned guru, which is why knowledge about him reached Central Asia. The paper briefly explored the genealogy of the growing interest in religion after the collapse of Soviet Union and mapped my family's post-Soviet quest for spiritual knowledge. It bridged together two spaces, Central Asia and India, with a special focus on spiritual tourism.

In the second part of this paper, I dealt with the typology of ashram visitors. I propose that there are four distinct categories of ashram visitor: spiritual seekers, enlightenment tourists, miracle hunters and devotees. Each type of ashram pilgrim pursues a specific set of motives for traveling to Puttaparthi, possesses a varying degree of knowledge about spirituality and Sai Baba's philosophy, and forms a short-term or lasting bond with the sacred place. Every category was supplemented by original testimonies, where the domains of time, space and memory intersected. The four proposed categories are fluid, evolving and interconnected. A spiritual seeker could transform into a devotee, while the enlightenment tourist can return to the ashram as a curious miracle hunter. It must be noted that the authority of these stories might be distorted by the author's means of observation

[2] Photo retrieved online 12 November 2020 from the Sathya Sau Universe website: https://saiuniverse.sathyasai.org/2016/international-camp-organised-in-kazakhstan/

and this analysis could be different from the myriad of perceptions of Central Asian spiritual seekers in Indian ashrams.

My paper shows that autoethnographic descriptions can illuminate the discussion on the complexity of spiritual identity in Central Asia. Such descriptions introduce the missing contextual and phenomenological nuances of religious practices from an insiders' perspective and add to the growing body of literature on the contemporary religious landscape in post-Soviet Eurasia. This paper contributed to this special issue's use of the autoethnographic method by illustrating the social worlds of spiritual practices through the lenses of individual insider experiences and providing an alternative venue for marginalized voices.

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