Amazing! Such Service All Belongs To God
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A spiritual transformation is underway in rural India

V. V. Gokhale, Pune, Maharastra

A miraculous silent spiritual revolution is underway in over 80,000 Indian villages under the leadership of a living saint, Shri Pandurangshastri Athavle, also known as "Shri Dada." His swadhyaya service movement started in 1958 with a few villages in Surashtra (Gujarat). It has since spread to 18 Indian states and parts of Africa, England, USA.

In November '93, the "unbelievable until you see it" transformation was celebrated in 24 tribal villages surrounding Gavhali, in Dhulia district near the border of Maharashtra and Gujarat. It was Shri Dada's 74th year so his followers planted 7,400 saplings that day amidst Vedic chanting in praise of trees; 500,000 people came listen to his talks. Eighteen of the 24 villages around Gavhali have established Yogeshwar Krushi, "Krishna Farming," a term used by Shri Dada for spiritual community farming. Rich and poor farmers and landless workers pool their land and labor in divine friendship for annual bumper crops. The produce belongs to Yogeshwar (one of Krishna's names in the Gita) and is used for village's poor. Yogeshwar Krushi has been established in over 4,000 Indian hamlets, with the state of Gujarat leading.

Ten Years of Patient Service

Urban swadhyayis began in Gavhali area ten years ago with devotional friendship visits to these villages, then ridden with illicit liquor trade, crime and exploitation of the indigent illiterate tribals. They began by singing and chanting the glories of God

and talking about God's grace with the villagers. Living in small huts, temples and under trees during weekend visits, volunteers took their own food and did not ask the tribals for anything, not even tea, only to be allowed to nurture their friendship.

Even when threatened by gangsters they held firm faith in God, that He was present in everybody's heart. By devotional persistence they gradually made a few friends, then more and more. Within a few months the tribals started looking forward to the weekly chanting and stories from the Bhagavad Gita and Shri Dada's work in other places. Slowly, inevitably, they stopped quarreling, stopped smuggling and started helping each other from day-to-day. Some liquor-makers moved; some changed their ways. After ten years the work culminated with 400 doctors vowing at Shri Dada's Jayanti in Gavhali to build "Patanjali Hospital" there to serve local people.

Middle Class Army of Love

A deep thinker and analyst of religious and political philosophy both East and West, Shri Dada promotes a paradigm for social development that transcends both capitalist and communist models. He believes the educated middle class can wield a spiritual power. City engineers, merchants, tractor owners, carpenters, students and women, all swadhyayis, work with villagers, chanting and offering prayers. They build small cottages for the penniless, clear land, engineer small roads and dams for water and dig wells. Our family in Pune had the pleasure of four swadhyayi couples from Gujarat staying with us for 8 days. They cooked for us! And we went to 100 houses with them to talk about swadhyaya.

Swadhyayis do not accept monetary donations or government grants. The organization works like a family. There is no membership fee, no registered trust, no paid staff and no press conferences. I accompanied a lady from Pune who wanted to personally donate 100,000 rupees to Shri Dada. He was very sweet and loving but declined to accept the donation. He also does not accept or solicit donations in India or from non-residents elsewhere. Dada feels that when the need arises, God fulfils it, through his working devotees.

Shri Dada's Sunday morning lectures in Bombay on Gita, the Upanishads and

various works have been attended by large crowds for the last 40 years. Inexpensive publications without advertising detail programs along with their beautiful Sanskrit names given by Shri Dada, inspiring others to help.

Lord Krishna's Fishing Boats

From Veraval in North Saurashtra, to Goa in South Konkan a large number of fishing villages on the western Coast of India have been transformed by visiting devotees. Crime is down, while devotional and collective social activities are up. Twenty villages have constructed over 24 large fishing boats called Matsya-Gandha which belong to God. The ocean harvest is used for the common good. The beautiful Hindi movie called Antar-Nada focused on this utopian transformation of a typical fishing village.

The name Amritalayam-Nectar Centers-is conferred on a village where 90% of the people regularly and collectively attend the village temple and often discuss and help each other in solving local problems. There are more than 50 Amritalayam villages so far.

Vriksha Mandirs, Go-Rasa Villages and Trikala Sandhya

Fruit and other trees are grown and looked after collectively, sometimes by a number of villages coming together. There is no building or idol-worship, but the trees are worshipped as God's manifestation. There are more than 20 such large sacred orchards, called Vriksha Mandir's-Tree Temples. Among other things, Shri Dada is a religious ecologist. In July of 1993 he had asked his followers everywhere to plant tree saplings. Wife and husband were to jointly nurture their plants for 100 days with daily chanting of Narayanopanishad verses. On October 19th, 1993, it was announced that 7 million saplings had survived.

"Go-Rasa" villages produce milk for themselves, but do not sell any milk to the cities, as a matter of principle. In cities some stores now operate as collective efforts, belonging to God.

Bhakti is at the core of Shri Dada's teachings and all swadyayis worship three times daily-a practice is called Trikala Sandhya. Verses from the Gita and other spiritual books are sung during meals, at bed-time and upon arising in the morning to invoke the feeling of nearness to God, the first stage of devotion.

Educational Transformation

Dada has also set up six colleges for farmers' sons who return to the farm after graduation. There are no fees, no degrees, no teachers' salaries. They receive a good education in agriculture, Vedic traditions, scripture, Sanskrit, community work and peaceful collective cultural revival. The students become effective swadhyayis. They develop friendship, not for pleasure or profit, but the highest form of friendship in devotion, based on brotherhood of God. Thousands of swadhyayis in cities and villages also meet weekly for group chanting, planning visits to other villages and cities and scriptural study for which examinations are given freely.

Rev. Pandurangshastri Athavale says: "I pray to God to give you strength to do this spiritual work and solve man's family problems, his national and universal problems. But unless devotionalism becomes a social force, these problems can never be solved."

Contact: Sat Vishar Darshan, Vimal Jyoti 6/8, Dr. Wilson St. Bombay 400 000, INDIA

Sidebar: Principles of Shri Dada's Swadhyaya Karma Yoga

Excerpts from Shri Dada's Talks:

"Swadhyaya means self-study, introspection and the study of scriptures. Each one has to do one's utmost to elevate oneself morally and spiritually. It is only through spiritual awakening that man can stand on his own legs and face adversity. This self-respect and divine consciousness must be tapped. Each man must be made

aware of his divine heritage, that the Lord is with and within him.

"Religion, or dharma, must teach us to have respect for others. A reverential attitude towards the world is a natural corollary to the acceptance of God who resides in one and all. Love of God within, implying reverence of our fellow-beings, is bound to be translated into altruistic actions. This attitude will not allow man to sit idle and remain indifferent. It is bound to result in what the Gita calls "selfless activism." Swadhyaya work has shown that people can rise above self-interest and self-love to do the divine work of human upliftment. The rural visits are known as Bhakti-Feri (Devotional Trips). They result in Kriti-Bhakti (Devotional/Action) which transforms people for great collective action. The rich and poor, educated and tribals, young and old have been working together, with a true spiritual attitude and orientation.

"Everyone talks about the urgency to eliminate poverty. The words aid and help have become fashionable. It is a doctrine of helping the depressed out of pity and sympathy. But unless God in man is awakened, there is no hope of solving this problem between the have's and the have-nots. Economic differences will always exist. The have's and the have-nots must all be made aware of God with and within us. Such a spiritually awakened man cannot do injustice to others. And who can do this work? The mature (vanaprastha/elder), educated middle class. It is their duty.

"The Lord works with me. Naturally there is His share in my income. His share must be kept aside and offered to the temples, and the temples must distribute this wealth in the form of divine gifts. There is also another kind of wealth that arises from collective effort. The wealth produced in our Yogeshwar Krushi farms is spiritual. The farms belong to God alone. The Swadhyayis collectively cultivate the divine farm and the wealth is used to solve the socioeconomic problems of the same village. This swadhyaya work attempts to transform humanity into the global family of Yogeshwar."