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RELIGION

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Templeton Prize invigorates Pandurang Shastri Athavale's worldwide mission of service

Lavina Melwani, New York

The year was 1925 and Pandurang Shastri Athavale was all of five years old. Wrapping his tiny hand around his grandfather's finger, he accompanied the Vedic scholar to the forsaken tenements where the harijans, the untouchables, lived. There his grandfather, a strong believer in Gandhian values, would hold a discourse on the Bhagavad Gita especially for these outcasts of society. At that early age, the child learned about the healing power of religion. But he learned something more: when they returned home, his orthodox brahmin grandfather, having been in touch with the untouchables, would still undergo the ritual bath to cleanse himself. Young Athavale questioned this custom: if God resides in everyone as the Gita says, he reasoned, and the harijans were worthy of listening to its holy words, then why were they regarded as unclean? The seeds of serving God through serving humanity were sown in childhood for Athavale--and through his revolutionary Swadhyaya movement he has worked to move outcasts into the mainstream of society.

Indeed, if there is a Utopia on Earth, it is probably the world created by Athavale in thousands of obscure villages which are the heartbeat of India. Through the concept of bhaktiferi (devotional visits) he has spread a healing message of love to all communities. He has created amrutalayam (village temples) built by joint efforts of the villagers for people from all religions, castes and economic strata to worship together; yogeshwar krushis (farms for God) where the villagers give a few days of labor a year to show their devotion to God, with the village's needy sharing the produce; matsyagandas (floating temples of God) fishing boats on which the fishermen give their time for a few days per year, as devotion to God, and share the harvest with the needy. There are also vrikshamandirs (orchard temples) which are cultivated impersonally by the villagers and the produce given to the needy. Through the ingenious jeevan sampada ("wealth of life"), religious songs are recorded and distributed related to each Swadhyaya activity, explaining in song, for example, the proper religious attitude to take while caring for the trees in the orchard temples. There are gauras ("home dairies") which are village-level milk cooperatives, and bahna kendras, "ladies centers."

Nor are the children forgotten: bal sanskar kendras ("children's value centers") are socialization hubs for children, and dhananjay kreeda samuh ("Arjuna's sport group") promotes games and sports for the young. DBT--"divine brain trusts"--are discussion centers for youth. There is also the tattavajnana vidyapeeth ("philosophic knowledge center"), which offers a free two-year course in Vedic and comparative religion.

Does this sound like a fantasy? It is every inch a reality,

affecting the lives of over 20 million people in 100,000 villages in rural India. This seeming miracle is the work of Athavale, a non-assuming, simple man of God who has started a quiet revolution in India by changing lives in remote villages. In March, 1997, the world doffed its cap in recognition of his work, conferring on him the prestigious Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, valued at us\$1.21 million--the largest annual award in the world. Global investor John Marks Templeton instituted the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion in 1972 because he felt the Nobel Prize unfairly excluded spirituality from the disciplines it honors. This prize's monetary value exceeds that of the Nobel Prize. As Templeton points out, "It is not for saintliness or mere good works, it is for progress. The Swadhyaya movement is a new concept which thrills me. Look what a benefit it is--100,000 villages now living by the principles of Elder Brother Athavale. Now his disciples are spreading this same concept, and perhaps it will be useful in America and Europe and many other areas."

Over 6,000 Swadhyayees (the name given followers, meaning "truth seekers") gathered in Madison Square Garden after the March award announcement to felicitate Dadaji, as he is known, with flowers, song and dance. Like all their events, the flawless evening was entirely managed by unpaid volunteers.

Athavale's philosophy is logical and stunning in its simplicity. He explains: "It is my experience that awareness of nearness of God and reverence for that power creates reverence for self, reverence for the other, reverence for nature and reverence for the entire creation. And devotion as an expression of gratitude to God can turn into a social force to bring about transformative changes in all aspects of human life and at all

levels in the society."

Athavale was born in 1920 in the small village of Roha near Mumbai, the son of a Brahmin scholar, Vaijnath Laxman Athavale Shastri, who founded the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita Pathashala, a seat of Vedic learning. His grandfather was a headmaster and Vedic scholar under whose guidance Athavale learned not only classic literature, Sanskrit and Hindi, but also English, comparative religions and Eastern and Western philosophy.

By twenty, Athavale was preaching the virtues of the Bhagavad Gita and attracting people. In fact, in 1954 he addressed the Second World Religious Conference in Japan where his message was so impressive that he was asked to speak in other parts of the world. Athavale, however, chose instead to take the Gita to the villages of India, to teach people to live by its tenets. In 1956 he established his first social program, the tattvajnana vidyapeeth, to teach the Vedic way of life, which eventually developed into the all-India and worldwide movement it is today. In the USA alone there are about 15,000 followers at 350 centers in 38 states. Athavale's family are worshipers of Siva, but in his temples he gives equal honor to all Deities, for he believes that devotional temple worship is vital for concentration on God. He leaves the choice of Deity to the worshipers.

As a boy, Athavale would trudge miles rather than ask his father for bus money. When he was reprimanded, he would say, "Asking for money is not in my nature." Even today he never asks for donations or even for volunteers. Says Dilip

Patel, a member of Swadhyaya's US Devotional Associates of Yogeshwar, "I've been doing this work for 20 years, and it still amazes me. Dada never asks for anything. He merely says, this is an idea, and if you intellectually accept it, then it is your moral duty to do it. It has become second nature to us." At the awards ceremony, one of the Rockefellers asked what they could do to help him. Athavale replied, "Nothing," to which the surprised member of the billionaire family replied no one had ever before answered that way to a Rockefeller.

The fame and prestige has not made a dent in Athavale's frugal way of life. Says Patel, "He has a Spartan lifestyle; his needs are very few. He's a man who enjoys ideas, not possessions." He lives with his wife in a meager one-bedroom apartment in Mumbai--the same place where he has lived for 45 years. He gets up around 3am to meditate, and never misses his daily worship. His day is devoted to discourses and work. In the evening he relishes long walks, health permitting. Recently his poor health has put him in a wheelchair, but work is still his way of worshiping God. He takes no credit for the awards and the honors, knowing in his heart who orchestrates these happy events. Athavale smiles and says, "The Templeton Prize is God's love letter to me, and the delivery man is Sir John Templeton."