

## Religion Prize Goes To Unsung India Leader

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**H**E has spent more than 40 years helping the poor in India's most remote villages. He has persuaded millions to forgo smoking, drinking, and gambling. He has planted hundreds of orchards to help revitalize his country's ravaged environment.

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Yet none of this is what Pandurang Shastri Athavale set out to do. Mr. Athavale, better known as "Dada," or "elder brother," has dedicated his life to teaching India's neediest that God exists within them and to look for the qualities of God in others. The progress made in the more than 100,000 villages he's worked in, he says, is a natural outgrowth of that simple truth.

"Religion that instills self-esteem, evokes emotions, and [sublimates] ego will strengthen [human] bonding and bring man closer to man," says Athavale, a frail man with a Gandhi-like sense of calm.

In recognition of his efforts, Athavale was awarded the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion on Wednesday. The prize, in its 25th

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## RELIGION

# A Spiritual Movement That Aids India's Neediest

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year, is the largest in the world, with an award of \$1.2 million. It has been awarded to, among others, Mother Teresa, the Rev. Billy Graham, and Russian author Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

Global investor Sir John Templeton, who is American-born but lives in the Bahamas, established the prize in 1972 to award innovation, creativity, and advancement in the field of spirituality - a discipline that is often not given enough recognition, he says.

"Who could have imagined that the world would now be spending a billion dollars a day on science research," Mr. Templeton asked at the standing-room-only press conference. "We are hopeful that in the long run, one-tenth that much can be spent on research for new means of information to supplement the wonderful ancient scriptures. I believe the benefits to humanity will be even more vast than we've already seen through medicine and all the other sciences."

Athavale's work has indeed been far-reaching. According to the Templeton judges, his message and work have improved the financial status and morality of more than 10 million in India, while contributing to healthier living conditions. He has created farms, fishing boats, and orchards that help feed the hungry and are worked by volunteers. He has also established a trust fund that provides short- and long-term grants, a program to promote cultural endeavors, social centers for children, and women's discussion groups.

These projects have resulted in people of all classes working together despite the country's rigid caste system.

"Seeing is believing," says Jay Bathani, from Kalamazoo, Mich., who grew up in India and first found out about Athavale a dozen years ago and went to see the work for himself. "When I visited the villages, I saw a total transformation at all levels," he



**PANDURANG ATHAVALE:** The \$1.2 million Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion recognized his spiritual message and far-reaching work in India's most remote villages.

says. "When I saw with my eyes, I said, 'Is this true? Yes, this is true.'"

Despite his impact at home, Athavale and his teachings are not well-known internationally, even among those who study India and Hindu. The reasons, supporters say, is that Athavale does almost no formal outreach and proselytizing is frowned upon. Athavale and his followers seek no donations. He says if their doings are God's will, they will be supported.

To Athavale, the source of all good is God, and one can only achieve good by keeping spirituality in one's focus. "No other law can control human beings except religion," says Athavale. "All other laws disappear. In Eu-

rope, there were big kings ... they were good rulers, but they disappeared. Yet still Roman Catholicism is controlling the human mind.

**'Behind the ritual there is something, but we have lost it. I want to reestablish this again.'**

- Pandurang Athavale

"In religion, there is a power, but we are not using it," he says. "Behind the ritual there is something, but we have lost it. I want to reestablish this..."

At the root of Athavale's teachings is a concept called *swadhyaya*, or self-study. Athavale and his followers, called *swadhyayees*, approach the downtrodden and explain to them that they hold God within them. The recognition of inner spirituality gives them self-respect and propels them to live up to a higher standard, Athavale says.

An important component of his mes-

sage is the value of work. He encourages his followers to dedicate their skills and time to God rather than self-advancement. "We must accept this principle - that God is determining and operating our whole life. If God is working for us 24 hours a day ... then I must work for Him also," he says.

Athavale stresses that his teachings are not limited to any one religion. What he is trying to convey goes beyond religion, dealing instead with a universal truth.

He explains by comparing his work to the discovery of gravity. "Gravity is not Western. It is the truth. Christians are Western people, and they discovered this, but it is not their law. It is a universal law."

Athavale, who grew up in a village near Bombay, was prepared at an early age for his life as a spiritual leader. His father and grandfather were religious scholars. His grandfather founded a private school to teach him, and others, classic literature, several languages, Western and Eastern philosophies, and science.

Early in his career, Athavale wrote scholarly studies of the Hindu holy book, the Bhagavad Gita. When he was 34, he made his first devotional trip into the impoverished villages around Bombay. As his daughter, Jayashree Athavale-Talwalkar, who translates for him, explains, "His studies gave him understanding, his experiences gave him insight."

To Betty Unterberger, a history professor at Texas A&M in College Station, the result is a powerful message. Dr. Unterberger, who nominated Athavale for the Templeton prize, first encountered his work a decade ago at a religious conference in India. "There was no question in my mind that this was a gathering of international spiritual import," she says.

Unterberger particularly appreciates the concept of each person having his or her own divinity. "I see this as a rediscovery that we are created in the image of God," she says. "And once we realize this, it can transform the world."