

Truth of the Matter

# Give with grace, receive with dignity

Lead a moral and caring life with the help of *swadhyaya*. Pandurang Shastri Athavale explains

**M**any people want to know how I came upon the idea of *swadhyaya*, today practised by 20m Indian farmers and fishermen in 100,000 villages.

*Swadhyaya* is based on the recognition that God is the source of all life and dwells in every human being. It is a life-transforming world view which encourages self-esteem, the dignity of all, and the discharge of gratitude to God through work-oriented devotion.

I was deeply disturbed by the human degradation I saw around me, by narrow self-interest which generated inequalities, injustice and hatred. Like many others, I could see the causes but found no satisfactory answers in the various "isms", models and institutional arrangements that claimed to have answers. The cures only aggravated the disease.

The two dominant ideas, liberal-capitalist-welfarism and socialism seemed only to reinforce the exploitative structures that widen the gulf between the "haves" and the "have-nots" within and between nations. Human dignity suffers whether the intervention comes from private charities or government subsidies.

While the capitalist model brings concentration of wealth, worsening class conflict and gross commercialisation of human relations, the socialist model suffocates individual creativity and initiative. Neither ensures the popular participation needed to overcome misguided development.

For me the turning point came when I saw how the God-centred world view was being devalued by the man-centred one. Quite early in my work, I concluded that much contemporary misery was due to the absence of a spiritual dimension to our lives. What was needed was to instil the idea of God as a constant companion. Only that understanding could give us the sense of being one with the divine and worthy of self-respect. I exist because God exists; I am related to everything in the universe because our creator is the same.

The idea of one divine family,

of being children of the same God, will remain hollow if it is not put into practice. What comes in its way is the gulf between the "haves" and the "have-nots" and the multiple disabilities from which the "have-nots" suffer.

**I** always felt that although the rich and the poor share an equally charitable disposition, the poor feel helpless and lacking in confidence.

Our work-oriented worship has to be based on reason, advance our spiritual growth, express gratitude to God, and become a powerful social force.

To this end we devote a day or two of our time and skill in collective projects as an offering to God. These projects range from farming and fishing to water conservation and sanitation. The needy benefit without having to feel small, as it is their devotional offering blessed by the Lord.

We call it "impersonal wealth". It is vastly different from enterprises such as co-operatives, communes and the self-help initiatives of voluntary groups because its motivational force is so different.

Impersonal wealth belongs to God and its recipient takes it as divine benediction. He or she pays no interest and signs no deeds.

Today, the production and distribution of "impersonal wealth" runs into millions of rupees and is totally self-generated. It is free from the feelings of superiority or inferiority which occur with charity and from the dependency syndrome of state welfare schemes. The divine and graceful nature of such giving and receiving under *swadhyaya* auspices is totally different from the dry exchanges of the marketplace, which lack grace, warmth and emotional bonds.

*Swadhyaya* helps men and

women to lead a moral life, a caring life. It allows them to relate to other fellow beings on terms of equality and harmony. It gives them the confidence to create self-directed, self-reliant communities.

I could go on, but what I want to stress is that although *swadhyaya* might seem peculiar to India, its essence is global and universal. Its essence cannot be limited by divisions of culture, language, race or religion.

I have tried to show how it can be done in a plural and multicultural society.

*Swadhyaya* is a vision of human possibility, but the motivation has to come from within people who have the urge to change and to join with others, wherever they may be.

*On Tuesday, Pandurang Shastri Athavale, who was born in Bombay in 1920, will receive the £750,000 Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion.*