

WHEN a son was born to Vaijanath Shastri Athavale, a learned brahmin and prosperous farmer from Raigad, on October 19, 1920, he seemed to know that the boy would be extraordinary. So the child wasn't enrolled at the modern school in Roha, the small town where they lived. Instead Shastri set up the Saraswati Pathshala, a small home-based learning centre in the old *gurukul* tradition. Here his son, Pandurang, spent his childhood studying grammar, logic and philosophy in the Vedic and Pauranic tradition. But the demands of modern times were not ignored and English was also taught. As a young man Pandurang spent hours devouring a vast variety of contemporary literature at the Asiatic Society in Mumbai.

At that time, neither Vaijanath nor Pandurang could have imagined the scale of action which would arise out of this learning. Today, that work involves lakhs of people who are part of the Swadhyaya community. This effort is a rare mixture of traditional values and modern needs. On May 6, Pandurang Shastri Athavale's success will be further recognised when he receives this year's Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, from HRH Prince Philip at Westminster Abbey, London.

The urge to explain the Bhagavad Gita and make it accessible to the masses has gripped many Indians for over a thousand years. Maharashtra has a particularly rich tradition of saints and social workers who undertook this ambitious task — from Sant Dnyaneshwar to Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Vinobha Bhave in this century. They all used contemporary language to convey the eternal message of the Gita — devotion and action.

The same urge seemed to have gripped Pandurang Shastri at a young age. But he did not merely want to preach the subtleties hidden in the Gita's 18 chapters. He was disturbed by the vast gap between devotion and action in the everyday life of most people and set out to bridge this gap.

When Pandurang Shastri moved to Bombay in 1942, he began giving discourses at the Bhagavad Gita Pathshala at Madhobaug. His father had started the Pathshala in 1926. Initially, the audience consisted



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Last year, in his acceptance speech at the Magsaysay Award function, Pandurang Shastri said: "We Swadhyayees try to bridge the gap between the haves and the have-nots, but we are not socialists. We are engaged in remov-

Dreams for mankind

RAJNI BAKSHI profiles Pandurang Shastri Athavale, winner of this year's Templeton award for Progress in Religion, who has taken the message of the Gita to thousands of villages and transformed millions of lives

only of old and retired people. But soon it was clear that Shastri's discourses were not limited to helping people seek death-bed solace from the 'Song Celestial'. He stressed that there is no substitute for *swadhyaya*, or the study of the self, throughout life.

Thousands of people flocked to his Madhobaug lectures and gradually a Swadhyaya community was forged. Pandurang Shastri addressed the problems stemming from modern materialism and the despair and frustration that haunt most people's lives. "This pain and grief shall not be in vain if it gives birth to a new social order," he says.

His answers were derived directly from ancient Vedic wisdom. But the principles had to be given new form. For instance, fasting on *ekadashi* (the 11th day in the lunar cycle) is a traditional Hindu practice. There are 24 *ekadashis* in a year. Instead of fasting, Pandurang Shastri urged people to set aside 24 days every year for *Bhakti Pheri* (devotional visits). A group of around 10 Swadhyayees from the cities

would go to the villages, spending nights at the local temple or other public spaces, going from door-to-door for "heart-to-heart speaking" with the residents. The purpose of the *pheris* is to help people become conscious of the divinity within them.

Over the years, as the pace of urban life increased, the *Bhakti Pheri* period has been shortened to six days. Another six-day programme, called the *Teerth Yatra*, is held by Swadhyayees every year between January and April. These programmes cover virtually all the districts of Gujarat and Maharashtra and some areas of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, West Bengal, Orissa, Bihar, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka and Goa.

Yet Pandurang Shastri states that the word movement does not apply to the Swadhyaya community. Swadhyaya, he says, "is an attitude of the mind. Swadhyaya is the right perspective or the vision which enables one to understand the deeper aspects of religion and culture. Swadhyaya is neither an agitation nor a revo-

lution, it is an attempt to lead life in the light of God's wisdom and to be ever ready to work for him."

As the numbers of his congregation have grown, a variety of social and political streams have eyed them as a possible base. But Pandurang Shastri has steered clear of most controversies. There was no avowed 'stand' on the Ayodhya dispute but followers say that Dada, as he is fondly called, has said that the demolition of the Babri Masjid was not the right way to deal with the dispute.

The Templeton Foundation's announcement of the \$ 1.2 million 1997 prize credits the Swadhyaya community with reaching out to nearly one lakh villages and improving the lives of an estimated 20 million people. In many places, the statement adds, "gambling, drinking and wife and child abuse have been replaced with co-operative efforts that have spiritually elevated the downtrodden, vastly reduced crime and fed the poor."

But, as Pandurang Shastri himself has said, "We have planted some seeds in a small plot. They have begun to yield flowers and fruits." These have the power of example, but, "Unless others are inspired to do similarly around the world, peace, contentment, equality, unity and well-being will only remain a dream for mankind." ■

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