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Hindu Spiritual Leader Wins \$1.2 Million Religion Prize

By Laurie Goodstein
Washington Post Staff Writer

NEW YORK, March 5—An Indian spiritual leader, who has shunned publicity and prizes for his work sparking a self-help movement among millions of poor villagers, today accepted the world's largest annual monetary prize.

Pandurang Shastri Athavale, 76, is this year's winner of the \$1.2 million Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, announced at a news conference here. He is the third Hindu to win the award in its 25 years.

Athavale, who arrived in a wheelchair pushed by his daughter Jayashree, is renowned throughout much of India but virtually unknown in the West. He is an educated Brahman who teaches that rich and poor alike are en-

dowed with an equal dose of inner divinity that, once recognized, can enable them to overcome self-hatred, prejudice and poverty.

He has mobilized thousands of volunteers to go to the villages around Bombay, live among fishermen and farmers as pious teachers accepting nothing, but implanting the ideals of self-respect and self-help. These villagers have initiated cooperative farms, orchards and fishing boats, with the harvests contributed to the neediest among them.

Athavale's movement, known as Swadhyaya, or "self-study," has no paid staff, budget or headquarters, but is said to have reached 20 million people in 100,000 villages. He said he would use the prize money to expand his movement.

Financial investor John M. Templeton said today he founded the prize in 1972 to recognize "new spiritual information," just as Nobel prizes have rewarded progress in the discovery of scientific information. Previous winners include the Rev. Billy Graham, Mother Teresa and Alexander Solzhenitsyn.

Athavale said today, "I have not advocated a new ideology or a new religion, but merely tried and picked from human culture certain universally shared principles."

When he was given the prestigious Mahatma Gandhi prize in 1988, Athavale doubled the amount of the award and returned it to its donors for them to use as they saw fit.

He has returned donations from wealthy benefactors, encouraging

them to contribute time instead in the villages. He has refused academic positions in the United States, Europe and Japan.

The nine Templeton judges include former president George Bush, Buddhist leader Rev. Nichiko Niwano and Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew I of Constantinople, spiritual leader of about 300 million Orthodox Christians.

Athavale came to their attention after Betty Miller Unterberger, a history professor at Texas A&M University, traveled to India in 1986 and saw 500,000 members of Athavale's movement at a rally. Many clambered up on stage and testified that their lives were changed by Athavale.

"I came home convinced that I was witnessing certainly another Gandhi," Unterberger said in an interview.