A Spiritual Movement That Aids India’s Neediest

RELIGION

By Christina Nifong
Staff writer of The Christian Science Monitor

NEW YORK

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

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.


In recognition of his efforts, Athavale was awarded the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion on Wednesday. The prize, in its 26th 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 a 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 Bathari, from Kalumzao, 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 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 internationally, even among those who study India and Hinduism. The reason, 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 Europe, there were big kings ... they were good rulers, but they disappeared. Yet still Roman Catholicism is controlling the human mind."

"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 sattvagaya, or self-study. Athavale and his followers, called sattvagaya, 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 message is the value of work. He encourages his followers to dedicate their skills and time to God rather than self-enancement.

"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.

At the root of Athavale’s teachings is an understanding that the human mind can be controlled by God, who is the source of all good. This concept is known as sattvagaya, which means "to seek the true self." Athavale teaches that by focusing on the true self, one can achieve spiritual growth and connect with God.

Athavale also emphasizes the importance of self-discipline and the value of hard work. He encourages his followers to dedicate their skills and time to God rather than self-enancement. Through his teachings, Athavale aims to help people recognize their inner spirituality and live up to a higher standard.

The Templeton Prize, established by Sir John Templeton, is awarded annually to an individual or group whose work has advanced humanity through religion and spirituality. Athavale was chosen for his contributions to spiritual education and his efforts to promote understanding and cooperation among people of different religions and cultures in India.