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TEMPLETON *PRESS RELEASE*  
FOUNDATION  
March 5, 1997

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March 5, 1997

11:00 Hours (New York) Eastern Standard Time

**PANDURANG SHASTRI ATHAVALE WINS 1997 TEMPLETON PRIZE FOR PROGRESS IN RELIGION**

NEW YORK, March 5, 1997 -- Pandurang Shastri Athavale, founder and leader of a spiritual self-knowledge movement in India that has liberated millions from the shackles of poverty and moral dissipation, has won the 1997 Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion. The announcement of the award was made at a news conference today at the Church Center for the United Nations.

In honor of the 25th anniversary of the prize, H.R.H. Prince Philip will present the award to Athavale at a public ceremony, scheduled to be held in Westminster Abbey on May 6th. Begun in 1972 by renowned global investor Sir John Templeton, the prize is given each year to a living person who has shown extraordinary originality in advancing humankind's understanding of God and/or spirituality. The Templeton Prize -- valued at 750,000 pounds sterling, about \$1.21 million -- is the world's largest annual monetary award.

With less than 20 co-workers in 1954, Athavale (pronounced Ah-TAH-vah-lee), 76, began bhaktiferi (devotional visits) to the villages around Bombay to spread a message of love for God and love for all people, considered by the workers to be God's children. Believing in self-knowledge as the preliminary condition for an inner growth that leads to a loving, enlightened, social concern and outreach, Athavale initiated the practice of swadhyaya -- a Sanskrit word that roughly translates to self-study.

Swadhyaya (pronounced swah-DEE-ah) has spread to nearly 100,000 villages across India and is estimated to have directly improved the lives of 20 million people. Based on the Bhagavad Gita (Song of God), the holiest text in the Hindu religion, Athavale's philosophy asks people to recognize the inner presence of God which, he says, leads to a sense of self-esteem as well as an awareness of the divine presence within all persons. Again and again throughout India and other parts of the world, this belief that all persons are divine brothers and sisters in the family of God has led to the betterment of individuals and communities.

So vast is the sweep of Athavale's efforts that it has been compared to the social revolution of Mahatma Gandhi. But, while Gandhi advocated equal rights for India's so-called "untouchables," Athavale's Brahman swadhyayees (pronounced swah-dee-AAYS) openly mix with all other classes, an act unheard of during the strict caste system of Gandhi's time. And when class and religious riots swept India in recent years, Athavale's swadhyaya villages were free of strife.

Athavale -- referred to as "Dada" by his co-workers, an affectionate term that means "elder brother" -- has specifically sought to bring *into* the mainstream of society communities long treated as outsiders by caste Hindus. Among those *who have* benefitted most are the fishing villages of India, where gambling,

drinking, and wife and child abuse have been replaced with cooperative efforts that have spiritually elevated the downtrodden, vastly reduced crime, and fed the poor. It has also dramatically improved the economic outlook for the communities. Increased attention to personal and community hygiene have resulted in a marked decline in health problems.

Since its founding, swadhyaya -- which teaches equal respect for all religions, races, and creeds -- has spread across the subcontinent and is now active in nations around the world, including the United States, Canada, Germany, Sweden, Portugal, Kenya, South Africa, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates, Fiji, the West Indies, and Surinam.

Athavale's work is often described as a "silent" revolution in that it has starkly changed the lives of so many people, yet has succeeded with a minimum of fanfare. Most notably, it has been conducted with virtually none of the negative attributes often associated with the spread of a spiritual movement. It has no formal hierarchy and not a single paid worker. Proselytizing is discouraged. According to Athavale, a person must first be a good Christian, Jew, Muslim or other devotee in order to be a swadhyayee. Swadhyaya, he says, is best shared by example and heart to heart and mind to mind discussion.

Swadhyayees seek no private or public funding. Even unsolicited donations are declined. When Athavale received the prestigious Mahatma Gandhi Prize in 1988, he doubled the amount of the prize and returned it to its donors to be used as they saw fit.

Swadhyaya is also bringing positive changes to the environment. Swadhyayees have joined together to lease plots of land in Maharashtra and Gujarat which have resulted in new orchards and forests in places once barren. They tend the trees on a rotational basis as devotion to God. The survival rate for these groves, known as vrikshmandir (orchards for God), is nearly 100 percent. They have followed similar practices in establishing yogeshwar krushis (farms for God) where each swadhyayee within the villages has an opportunity to work on the farms several days a year as a form of loving devotion.

In nominating Athavale, Texas A&M University professor Betty M. Unterberger wrote:

"A spiritual revolution has created an increased awareness of God within and a spirit of self-esteem, self-confidence and self-reliance.... Motivated by a deep commitment to the service of God's work, Athavale has sought nothing less than the creation of a divine world undergirded by a divine current of thought."

In a statement prepared for the press conference today, Athavale said:

"This Award is to advance human spirit's quest for love and understanding of God and expansion of spiritual resources. I see it as a tribute to the conviction that existence of God is central to life and true religion is the guiding principle of life.

"Through Swadhyaya way of thinking and life, I have tried to activate a sense of Divine by raising the consciousness of being the children of the same God through thoughts and purposive collective action for common good. It is my experience that awareness of nearness of God and reverence for that power creates reverence for self, reverence for the other and reverence for the entire creation. And devotion as an expression of gratitude to God can turn into a social force to bring about transformative changes in all aspects of life and at all levels in the society."

Athavale's receipt of the award follows something of a pattern in the Templeton Prize. While many Templeton Prize winners are well-known personalities -- such as Mother Theresa, who won in 1973, 1982's winner Rev. Dr. Billy Graham, and 1983 recipient Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn -- most have earned the prize through pursuits often removed from the public eye. In 1995, for example, mathematical physicist Paul Davies won the Templeton Prize for his wide-ranging inquiries into the workings of the universe that breach the barrier between science and religion. Last year's recipient was Bill Bright,

president and founder of Campus Crusade for Christ International.

Athavale was born to Brahman parents in 1920 in the village of Roha near Bombay. His father, Shri Vajinath Laxman Athavale Shastri, founded the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita Pathshala, a seat of Vedic learning in Bombay. His grandfather, a headmaster and Vedic scholar, started a private school to teach the young Athavale classic literature, comparative religions, Eastern and Western philosophy, logic, history, several languages, including English, Sanskrit and Hindi, Vedic scriptures, grammar, physics and various social sciences. His education also included intensive reading at Bombay's Royal Asiatic Society Library.

By his early twenties, Athavale started gaining popularity from his teaching and preaching of the Bhagavad Gita, winning the respect of people around him with the integrity of his character and the power of his message. Among his most significant messages is that of devotion to God through an awareness that God dwells within each person. Work is worship, according to Athavale, when it is done in devotion to God.

In 1954, Athavale was invited to present a series of lectures at the Second World Religious conference in Tokyo. There, his interpretation of the Bhagavad Gita received an enthusiastic reception from fellow delegates who offered him various positions in philosophy and religion in the United States, Europe, and Japan. Athavale refused, choosing instead to return to India with the aim of establishing a community living by the ideals of the Bhagavad Gita.

Now, more than four decades later, that singular goal has made a positive difference for millions of people, breaking barriers of caste, reforming lives of crime and abuse, bringing care for the needy, and fostering a political revolution of cooperation, creative decision making and equality for all without regard for race, class, or religion. In recognition of those incredible strides, Athavale has been awarded the 1997 Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion.

# Indian religious activist wins Templeton prize

By Ika Rishari  
RELIGION NEWS SERVICE

NEW YORK — An Indian Hindu religious activist, who for more than four decades has taught that service to God is incomplete without service to humanity, yesterday was named this year's winner of the \$1.21 million Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion.

Parthivraj Shastri Athavale, 76, won the world's largest annual monetary award for directing a movement that last year alone saw hundreds of thousands of volunteers, at their own expense, spend two weeks or more visiting India's poorest villages in pilgrimages designed to uplift themselves spiritually while also advancing the self-respect and economic condition of those they visit.

"Social work and divine work are the same for me," said Athavale in an interview. "Both serve society and God. Giving a day to God by working for society is the kind of worship that is worthwhile," he said.

Athavale's followers — called "Sradhyavets," a Sanskrit word that roughly translates as "those who seek self-knowledge" — have, among their projects, established village farms and orchards whose produce is distributed to the needy and have provided boats to poor fishermen who



St. John Templeton, left, founder of the Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion, with Parthivraj Shastri Athavale, an Indian spiritual leader, who was named this year's winner of the \$1.21 million award.

share part of their catch with those even more destitute. More than 10 million people in over 100,000 Indian villages have been helped by Athavale's movement. "We use devotion to God as a social force," he said. Athavale discourages proselytizing and preaches respect for all faiths. "Mr. Athavale's innovation is that

he has taught spiritually not by overt teaching, but by living it daily." Sir John Marks Templeton, the retired Wall Street investor who established the Templeton prize in 1972, said at a news conference: "He asks nothing of the villagers and gets them self-esteem and practical knowledge of God."

Other Templeton winners include Mother Teresa, the Rev. Billy Graham, former British Chief Rabbi Lord Jakobovits, Russian writer Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Campyris Crusade for Christ founder Bill Bright. No restrictions are placed on how the prize money may be spent.

Athavale, who suffers from heart problems and moves about mostly in a wheelchair, said he would spend the prize money among the various projects undertaken by Sradhyava Parivar ("family of those who seek self-knowledge"), as his movement is called.

The movement accepts no government funds or private donations, charges no fees and has no formal hierarchy or paid staff. All projects are financed directly by volunteers.

The Templeton prize winner is selected by an international board of nine judges. This year's judges included the Orthodox Christian Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, former President George Bush and Robert John Russell, director of the Center for Theology and the Natural Sciences in Berkeley, Calif.

STAR LED GER 3/6/97

March 6th 1997



Associated Press

RECOGNIZED: Sir John Templeton, left, poses Wednesday with Pandurang Shastri Athavale. Athavale was awarded the \$1.2 million Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion.

# Templeton prize given to Indian spiritual leader

NEW YORK (AP) — An Indian spiritual leader who founded a religious movement based on selfless love for the poor won the world's richest prize for achievement in any field Wednesday.

Pandurang Shastri Athavale, 76, was awarded the \$1.2 million Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion.

He said he would put the money back into the Swadhyaya movement, which sponsors housing and agricultural projects throughout India. It has reached an estimated 20 million people in nearly 100,000 villages without a single paid worker.

"We are trying to develop this selfless love. I don't want anything from any villager, not even a cup of coffee. But I want to see: What is my brother." Athavale.

The Templeton Prize was established in 1972 by investment manager John M. Templeton to recognize people who advance the world's understanding of religion. It will be bestowed at a ceremony at Westminster Abbey on May 6.

Born to Brahman parents in 1920 in a village near Bombay, Athavale became a respected teacher of the Bhagavad Gita, a sacred text of Hinduism.

In 1954, trying to apply principles of his faith to practice, he and 19 others began visiting villages urging people to recognize the presence of God within themselves and their neighbors.

The basic message of Swadhyaya — a Sanskrit word meaning self-study — is that all human beings are divine brothers and sisters in the family of God.