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YOUTH

A Young Welcome for Athavale

Templeton Prize winning spiritual leader inspires America's Hindu youth

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The whole world heard of Pan Durang Shastri Athavale when he was honored with the Philippine's coveted Magsaysay Award in 1996 and the million-dollar Templeton Prize in religion in 1997. His organization, Swadhyay Parivar, has made an impressive impact in America with Vayashta Sanchalan, "Youth Rallies," at classy locations across the country, including Chicago's All State Arena (May 11), Los Angeles' Arrowhead Pond (May 18) and New York's Madison Square Garden (May 26). Fifteen to twenty thousand people attended each of the exquisitely organized events.

These expansive functions were put together at the last minute, thanks to the Parivar's well-honed human machinery of dedicated volunteers of youth as well as adults. One of the core national volunteers told Hinduism Today, "We received a call from Dadaji ["Elder

brother," as Sri Athavale is affectionately addressed] in April asking us to go ahead with the youth rallies. The dates and venues were decided in hours following that phone call." The chosen venues are normally booked months in advance, but still they secured the dates they wanted. "Our only clout was the divine will and the divine hand," he said. As with every volunteer I spoke with, he did not want his name mentioned. So common do they find this divine hand in their work that the Parivar members have a saying for itâ□□"Love letter from God to us in our work."

There was not a single paid advertisement of the events in any of the media. The news is spread by word of mouth. No invitations were sent by mail. Rather, every single family attending each of the events was invited in person with a home visit called bhav pheri, "friendly or loving visit." In the Los Angeles area for example, about 700 Parivar members took it upon themselves to make visits, mostly unannounced, to the homes of their friends, acquaintances and neighbors. They invited each in person with a free pass, and gave a small brochure containing the Trikal Sandhya Shlokas. Chanting these shlokas, or sacred verses, three times a day is a central practice for followers. Before they departed, they offered a brief prayer.

In a mobile society with everyone's overscheduled days, this was thoroughly impractical, both for the visitor and the visited, yet it was carried on with missionary zeal, repeating visits for the not-at-homes. One of my friends was actually annoyed when two swadhyayees (members) showed up at her door one evening, minutes before she had to leave for a social event. She asked them why they had not called her before, and asked me, "Why do they have to resort to the visiting practices of the Mormon church?" Of course, she was probably unaware that it is just this in-person approach that has made the Mormon church one of the most successful in America.

As I approached the expansive and elegant venue of the Arrowhead Pond for the May 18 event in LA, I could see the flags of 35 countries where the Parivar has active centers flying high above the parking lot. Three hundred young girls clad in white cotton salwar kameez, with black shawls of the Parivar symbols across their shoulders, stood joining their hands to form a human chain, signifying the Parivar's motto of unifying the whole world as one family. They shouted Parivar

slogans as the car carrying Jayashree Talwalkar, affectionately known as Didi, the daughter of Parivar founder Pandurang Shastri Athavale, entered the premises.

Inside the arena, more than 15,000 people had gathered for the four-hour event. The stage was decorated with a giant torch that is the symbol of the movement, as well as three circles signifying Trikal Sandhya, and a globe of the Earth surrounded by a human chain, all crafted out of paper. Didi, who is standing in for her aging and frail father, was ceremoniously welcomed by the Parivar, as well as local dignitaries.

She summarized the teachings of her father in her half-hour talk in Hindi. "Dadaji, you have breathed an elevated sense of humanity in each human being with your teaching that the same God dwells in the heart of all, leading them to drop their complexes, and reminding each one of their divine mission in life," she said. "All matter is inert. It is the chaitanya or the sentient principle that gives momentum to people and their ideas. You have to pick up the ball of the movement and

run with it."

Dadaji himself then was brought into the arena in a wheelchair, and said a few words. The audience gave him a tremendous welcome. Thousands lit the lamp sticks that had been handed out in advance. The sparkling lights waving from all four levels of the auditorium was a spectacular scene.

Next, 300 young men and 100 women, ranging in age from 16 to their early 30s, marched into the arena and moved in formation to finely choreographed steps. They held in their hands two-foot-tall torches with live flames, striding proudly in rhythm to the invigorating, patriotism-charged song "Jalti Mashal Hathmein Yuvan Chal Pade" ("With burning torch in hand, the youth stride forth"), sung with fervor by the musical ensemble. The torch is the symbol of their movement, and its meaning encompasses the advancement of culture, putting into practice the noble thoughts from the scriptures and accomplishing great deeds for the movement and the nation.

The event was grand, and after I reported back to Hinduism Today about it, the editors requested I learn more about this energetically successful organization, especially how they are able to elicit such enthusiastic youth involvement. The extravagant event was free, and when asked about this, the coordinator said, "When you attend a lavish wedding, do you ask that family how much money they spent or wherethe money came from?" He refused to give even a ballpark figure, shrugging it off as a family matter, and insisting that there is no fund raising in the Parivar, no charity; everything is done on the basis of devotion.

"Ever since the Parivar's early days, 60 years ago, Dadaji had taken an ayachak vrata, the "not-asking vow," that he would never solicit any money, directly or indirectly, from any individual, institution or government. He has not only maintained it for himself, but his millions of followers have kept the same principle," the coordinator explained. The 16,000 to 20,000 Parivar members who

attend 300 centers spread across U.S. cities do not pay any membership, nor is there a formal membership ritual, no membership drive, but an open-door policy exists for persons of all creeds or class to attend their hour-long session every Sunday morning, mostly comprising prayer, scripture study and discussion.

"We do not believe in any superstition," the coordinator explained. "Dadaji has always said, 'Understand why we should love God and then do it fully. God is not just with you but within you. He does not work for you but with you.'"

The grass roots movement of Swadhyay Parivar began in 1942, when Sri Athavale, then only 22 years old, started giving discourses on scriptures at a humble pathashala, religious school, in Madhavbaug, Mumbai.

Sri Athavale taught, "God is the source of all life and He dwells in every human being. It is a multi-faceted, life-transforming world view that encourages self-esteem, concern for dignity of all and a discharge of gratitude to God through work-oriented devotion." The Parivar's motto is the brotherhood of all under the fatherhood of God. Today they claim some three million followers, coming from diverse religions, in 35 countries around the world.

One of the national-level coordinatorsâwho, again, did not want to be namedâtold me, "We do not classify ourselves as a religious organization. The Parivar (literally, "family") is based on the concept of an extended family, and we are bound by a spirit of selfless love and service to fellow humans, like a family of millions. It is God-centered work, and work for others is rendered in the spirit of service to the God. We have no titles, no hierarchy, but only

responsibility of coordination." Although led by principles culled from Upanishads and the Gita, they do not restrict themselves to Hindus.

"The God is not only in the sky and not only in the temple, but He resides in the hearts of all." This basic tenet of the Parivar propels an individual into dynamic action, transforming religious doctrine into a plan of action. The way the coordinators describe it, it is an injunction for karma yoga (seeking spiritual advancement through doing of good works) with dedication and action, with the yogas of jnana (spiritual knowledge and enlightenment) and bhakti (devotion) blended into it. To these their leader Athavale has added his own concept of sadhan yoga, "instrument yoga," which consists in one's being an instrument of divine work in family and society.

The emphasis in the movement is to inculcate the Parivar's spirit among the youth, and keep its torch, its resplendent spirit, burning bright, forming the motivation behind this year's four youth rallies, including the one that took place in London June 9.

Speaking with some youth members, I found the US-raised kids quite fond of their Sunday sessions at the Swadhyay centers. A 22-year-old recent Berkeley graduate said that at age six her parents first introduced her to the movement, when she was thrilled to make friendship with "Other kids who looked like me," referring to the Indian skin color. Then the weekly hour of stories, discussions and shlokas grew on her: "In the eighth grade I visited India. When I saw the Parivar's projects with the fishermen community and the farmers' tree temples, I could see a pulsating life that was far beyond the life we normally see in the US here. It was eons away from entities like the consumerism

that is rampant in US," she shared with enthusiasm. "Dadaji has always said that whatever you can do most efficiently, offer that to God."

She offers her expertise in Bharata Natyam in helping choreograph dances and dramas of kids for the Parivar. I asked, "How does the Swadhyay shape your personality, dreams and ambitions?" She said, "I developed a pride, not superficial but deep, about my culture. Whatever my efficiency is, that is what God wants from me. I did not just learn mantras by rote, but understood their solid application in life. There is an intellectual aspect of Parivar and an emotional one. Dadaji's life is not that of a hypocritical leader; he has dedicated his entire life to the service of God and humanity."

Her 15-year-old sister, a 10th grader, is also one of the 600 avid members who attend one

of the five Swadhyay centers in Northern California. "After our prayers and scriptural stories, we have interesting, stimulating discussions on topics such as, 'Is television good or bad,' 'Does God exist?' or 'Reincarnation,' for which we prepare our points ahead of time." Both the girls had participated in many aspects of the youth rallies, from participating in the human chain, to helping fashion the dÃ©cor and the torches. "The classes fulfill my emotional as well as intellectual needs. The two-week annual camp brings together kids from all over the nation. It is a friendship, a sorority heaven that we look forward to. I want to be involved in the Swadhyay Parivar all my life," the US-born teenager shared ebulliently with me.

The Sanchalan event at the Arrowhead Pond, which I attended, rang with not only respect, but a strong devotional sentiment for Dadaji. Coupled with the enthusiastic comments of

the above members, one question lingered, "Is there a deification of the person, of Dadaji, in the Parivar?" The 22-year-old liked my question, and answered, "Dadaji is against such an exalted position. He never wants anything for himself and has always maintained that whatever he teaches has been said before and done before, though maybe in a different form. What I feel for Dadaji is a profound sense of gratitude. It is a moving feeling to see him," she said. "Dadaji has dedicated his life to us," her younger sister chimed in.

The coordinator elaborated on the point that "Dadaji has always taught us to see God in ourselves and fellow human beings, and the divinity in each one of us. We love him like a cherished elder brother. He has been the unifying force of the entire Parivar."

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journalist living with her husband in Los Angeles. She has a degree in education and an M.A. in Sanskrit language and literature.