

[Athavale Earns Award](#)

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HONORED

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Pandurang Shastri Athavale, founder and leader of a spiritual self-knowledge movement that has liberated millions from the shackles of poverty and moral dissipation, secured the 1997 Templeton Prize for Progress in Religion. The award was announced on March 5, 1997 at the Church Center for the United Nations in New York City.

Begun in 1972 by renowned global investor Sir John Templeton, who felt that the Nobel Prize unfairly excluded religion from its honored disciplines, 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. Valued at £750,000, (US\$1.21 million), it is the world's largest annual monetary award.

Many Templeton Prize winners have been well-known personalities such, as Mother Teresa, who won in 1973, Rev. Dr. Billy Graham in 1982 and 1983 recipient Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. But most have earned the prize through pursuits often removed from the public eye--including Baba Amte, a wealthy Hindu lawyer who abandoned the comforts of money to develop communities in India where lepers and others now

live their lives with dignity and compassion.

The late Sir Sarvepalli Radhakrishnan, president of India from 1962 to 1967, used his position to offer a healing voice of universal love and wisdom for all, regardless of race or religion. He also advocated a non-aggressive military posture with Pakistan and worked to end political corruption. For his efforts, he received the prize in 1975.

Athavale, 76, known as Dada (brother) by his co-workers, began bhav pheri (devotional visits) in 1954. With less than 20 helpers, he went to the villages around Bombay to spread the 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 meaning self-study.

Swadhyaya has spread to nearly 100,000 villages across India and is estimated to have directly improved the lives of 20 million people. Athavale's Hindu philosophical beliefs ask 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. This belief has led to the betterment of individuals and communities around the world.

In nominating Athavale, Texas A&M University professor Betty M. Unterberger wrote, "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 March press conference in New York, Athavale said, "This award is to advance the 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. 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."