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Swadhyaya: Toward a New Order

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By Pramila Jayapal

The 1996 Human Development Report, compiled by the United Nations Development Programme, offers more evidence for a failed approach to development: The worldwide gap between rich and poor, it tells us, has widened faster than ever before. Today, the richest 20 percent of the world's population earn 85 percent of the world's income. The net worth of the world's 358 billionaires (in dollar terms) is equivalent to the combined assets of 2.3 billion of the world's poorest people, who account for a stunning 45 percent of the world's total population. In fact, evidence shows that economic structural-adjustment programs promoted by the "developed" countries have actually contributed to a regression of per capita incomes in most "developing" countries to their levels of the 1960s and 1970s.¹

The focus on "economic development" subordinates the wealth of culture, tradition and spirituality that exists in a country like India. "Inner" development is sidelined, while "outer" or material development becomes the ultimate apex toward which to ascend. Today, there is a loss of self-respect, a loss of any belief in interconnectedness to others, a loss of reverence for that which cannot be controlled by man. These factors, previously considered immaterial to the prosperity or progress of a society, are now proving to be integral to a more holistic, humanistic development.

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Since coming to India, my thinking on development has undergone a transformation. I have moved from believing that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) offer the "solution," to the realization that the kinds of solutions being offered by most development efforts (including those undertaken by NGOs) are treating only symptoms. What we need is nothing short of a new social paradigm, a new world order that emphasizes spiritual over material development, community over individual relationship, collaboration over competition. No institution — be it government, donor organization, or social-service organization — has been able to offer an acceptable large-scale alternative form of development to the current one. Many have tried and some have even been successful on a micro-level; but more often than not, the inextricable links between various aspects of a society's development as well as the sheer dominance of the existing order overwhelm most groups. In the end, the groups end up cutting off dead branches or trying to bring some back to life, rather than observing and attacking the agents of decay and rot.

This has become the case with many NGOs, originally the renegades that pushed for a change in government "standard operating procedures." Today, these groups often find themselves struggling to deal with issues of self-preservation, impure

1. According to Walden Bello's *Dark Victory*, from 1950-1980, the South (or Third World) had a rate of economic growth that was both higher than the North's during the same period, as well as than the rate for developed countries during their early stages of development. Poverty and destitution (in economic terms) was actually declining in the 1960s and 1970s in many countries, *sans* any structural adjustment programs. (Third World Network, 1994, pp. 2,7)

motives of staff and leaders, and the dilemma of meeting local and specific needs of a community versus working toward “replicability” and “sustainability.” Moreover, they are too often co-opted into taking government money or taking on government responsibilities. In the process, they become part of the system they were originally trying to change.

I am increasingly convinced that our entire approach to development is misguided. The close link between poverty or inequality and the host of other social problems (like literacy, caste, gender empowerment, etc.) indicate that these problems are merely symptoms of a society that creates and encourages poverty and inequality. As John Ruskin said a century ago, the rich are only rich by virtue of the poor. Our current system encourages accumulation of wealth by a small percentage of the world’s population, while a large majority continues on a desperate struggle to eat one decent meal every day. Efforts that focus on “fixing” problems, and on “helping the poor” reflect an implied social hierarchy of poor and rich, helpers and those who need to be helped, and a largely materialistic definition of poverty. Our new order needs to work toward equal allocation and saving of essential resources, an internalization of the fundamental “same-ness” of human beings, recognition of spiritual development over material, and a sense of responsibility for the consequences of one’s life and actions as they impact another’s.

During a short visit to the States in April, I shared some of these thoughts about the loss of spirituality in the modern world with ICWA Executive Director, Peter Martin. I felt particularly distressed seeing this trend sweep India, I told him, because India has such a wealth of spiritual experience and history. “Well, what is the answer?” he asked me. “How do you bring this sense of spirituality back?” I had no answers. I had seen so many NGO projects, so many efforts to try and restore some of what was being buried in consumerism and capitalism, but none seemed to be able to break the snowballing forces of the modern world.

And then, we encountered Swadhyaya (SWADJ-yigh). “A silent but singing revolution,” as one author has termed it, Swadhyaya uses spirituality as a basis for restoring individual dignity and establishing relationship between human beings. Swadhyaya has taken hold in over 100,000 villages across India; and its success springs largely from a completely new way of looking at the world and its “problems.”

My husband and I first heard of Swadhyaya at a conference called “Re-Thinking the Current Economic Order: Gandhi and Beyond.” The conference was about the focus on the current dominant economic paradigm: is it appropriate? If not, what should there be in its place? How is such a change to be brought about? The articulate and passionate voices of long-time socialists, the convictions of Gandhians for a world imagined by the Mahatma but never realized, and the urgency of those working in the field who feel frustrated with just

providing “Band-Aid” solutions — all crescendoed into one single realization: that a basic sense of reverence for something other than ourselves needed to be restored.

It was in this context that D.L. Sheth, an eminent professor from the Center for the Study of Developing Societies in Delhi, talked about Swadhyaya. It was our first light; and as we learned more, its rays shone strongly through an otherwise gloomy world prognosis. Luck, destiny, or hard work — we do not know (one rarely does in India) — but soon after, we met one of key people in Swadhyaya. One month later, thanks to this individual and Dr. Sheth, we were invited by the Gandhi Peace Foundation (GPF) to participate in a 5-day tour of Swadhyaya communities and projects across Gujarat state. The tour would culminate in a meeting with the revered, 76-year-old founder of Swadhyaya, Pandurang Shastri Athavale — or Dada (meaning, elder brother) as he is affectionately called by all Swadhyayees.

“Dada-ji is the first person since Indian independence that I would put in the same category as Mahatma Gandhi,” said Rajiv Vora of GPF to us prior to the tour. For those of us too young or skeptical to have been in the presence of true visionaries, it is our ignorance that makes us doubt such a possibility. And it is our arrogance that ultimately proves us wrong — thankfully. Shastri was recently granted the prestigious Magasaysay award for his vision and service, but it seems irrelevant given the magnitude of his work. Having met him and seen the work of Swadhyaya, my husband and I recognize that we had the unique fortune to be in the presence of a true visionary, to experience the fever of a movement that is slowly accumulating the power to shake the country and create a new order that I once had relegated to a dream.

* * *

Swadhyaya, meaning knowledge or discovery of the self, is about individual transformation through spiritual awareness. The goal of Swadhyaya — although it is not “goal-oriented” in any conventional sense — is to restore respect for a greater power and the creations of that greater power, especially respect for one’s self. In this process of individual transformation, societal transformation (often the primary but elusive goal of many social organizations and governments) occurs as a by-product.

Swadhyaya is neither a membership organization nor a political movement (although for the sake of convenience, I sometimes refer to it as a movement here). It is a “stream” of thought and consciousness that has now touched millions of people in 100,000 Indian villages, and in several countries around the world. Just this year, 1.5 million Swadhyayees collected on the sacred ground of Kurukshetra, the battlefield of the Mahabharata where Arjuna learned the meaning of *dharma*. This was a particularly meaningful location, as it is said to be the site where the

Bhagavad Gita² — the textual basis for much of Swadhyaya's teachings — took place.

Swadhyaya does not fit into our up-to-date concepts of methods of societal development because it has none of the features by which we have come to define such development: it is not interested in quick results or publicity (although it has been operating since the late 1950s with incredible "results," it has remained quite unknown to date); it does not report to any donor, religious body or controlling force; it has no political ideology or dogma; it is not concerned about "sustainability and self-sufficiency," issues which are actually moot in its particular context; and most importantly, it is not out to solve a problem or to do social work.

As prescribed in the Gita, Swadhyaya advocates a path to self-realization that revolves around *bhakti*, or devotion to God. It is predicated on belief in a world community where individuals are connected to other individuals as well as to Nature by virtue of their common Creator. Devotion to God is demonstrated in two key ways: first, through performing *pujas* (prayers) and other devotional singing or ceremonies. This kind of *puja* helps to purify the mind by concentrating it on the noblest, most sublime and divine object — God — from which it can absorb those pure qualities. The second way to express devotion to God is to donate one's "efficiency" — skills and talents — toward doing God's work. Together, these result in both individual and societal transformation.

Dada believes that a society can be healthy only if individuals in the society have self-respect. Self-respect develops in Swadhyayees when they understand that God is not in some temple or church, but rather *within* them. If God actually resides within me, goes the logic, then I am worthy of self-respect. And if God resides within me, then you also have God residing within you — which makes you worthy of respect. By virtue of our creation, we are *related* as brothers in the divine fatherhood of God. The relatedness and interconnectedness brings "man closer to man," a popular Swadhyaya slogan, and creates a whole new context for individual existence.³

Activities like *pujas* help an individual to preserve the feeling of the nearness of God. This is essential for reaching the ultimate and highest stage of spiritual de-

velopment outlined in the Upanishads: not only is God within each individual, but there is actually no difference between God and individual.⁴ Swadhyaya brings Upanishadic concepts of spiritual development first into the intellectual framework of an individual (some of whom, because of rigid caste systems or illiteracy, have never had access to these texts). Then, it seeks to internalize the concepts through the three paths mentioned in Indian scripture: devotion to God (*bhakti*), selfless action (*karma*), and self-knowledge (*jnana*). During the process of internalization, individual transformation begins to occur in action and thought.

Although the ethos of Swadhyaya is Hindu, it is not only for Hindus or Indians. The Gita, says Dada, is a human scripture that incorporates and applies to all religions. Slowly, Swadhyaya has gained acceptance among various groups of Christians and Muslims, both within and outside India. "Religion is a spiritual order to go to God — there may be different kinds of orders, therefore different religions," says Dada. *Bhakti*, or devotion to God, is present in all of them, and in this sense, universal to all.

The kind of devotion that Dada advocates is far from the "blind faith" so common today in India and around the world. One of Dada's initial followers, Hemraj Ashar, put it this way: "Dada speaks logically, but never says you must accept it. He never quotes any authority, never says 'This is in the Gita, therefore you must accept it.' He lashes out at blind faith, and is the first to criticize what is commonly called devotion or religion. Even while sitting in the temple, he would watch people taking and giving money for religion's sake and say, 'This is a bazaar, not a temple.'"

Despite Dada's plea for reason over blind faith, the constant references to God and devotion initially sent shivers down my spine. I suppose I have embedded in me many aspects of Western culture, a culture that often promotes the view that we are entirely responsible for our own lives, and a rejection of the idea of an external power to whom "control" must be surrendered at times — if not all the time. As I began to better understand the essence of Swadhyaya and listened to Swadhyayees talk about what it meant to have devotion to God, I understood that I could substitute the notion of a universal force — which I do have a belief in — for the term "God." The concepts hold strong in either case.

2. The Bhagavad Gita, a sacred Indian text, details one piece of the great epic, The Mahabharata. In the Mahabharata, there is a battle between two related families. Arjuna, one of the five Pandavas, is forced to fight on the battlefield with his own blood brothers. He hesitates and asks Lord Krishna's advice. Krishna advises him that he must obey his *dharmaic* duty and fight. This conversation between Arjuna and Krishna on the battlefield is the well-known and oft-quoted content of the Bhagavad Gita.

3. The terminology of Swadhyaya may sound male-centered or male-dominated. Phrases like "man to man" or "brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God" may imply, to some of us who are sensitive to the implications of "man"-centered language, that Swadhyaya ignores the equal role of women. In fact, this is not so. Swadhyaya is grounded in age-old concepts of spirituality and texts like the Gita that use terms like these to include humankind in general. There is also a sense of "political correctness" in India, and Dada would probably have little interest in altering these terms to make a point. In fact, Swadhyaya makes some hotly debated gender issues moot in many senses, since it focuses on the essential "same-ness" of all humans.

4. According to the Upanishads, there are three stages of realization in man's spiritual development: 1) *Tena Tvam Asi* (You exist because of Him); 2) *Tasya Tvam Asi* (You belong to Him); and 3) *Tat Tvam Asi* (That Thou Art, or you are God).

THE GENESIS

Pandurang Shastri Athavale (Dada) is a Sanskrit scholar and philosopher. When Dada was young, his grandfather (then a school principal) decided to start a Sanskrit school for his grandson that would, for twelve years, provide him with a thorough grasp of Indian shastras, logic and philosophy. At 25, Dada emerged from this course, only to voluntarily immerse himself for another 12 years in the study of Western philosophy, a task he felt necessary in order to understand and communicate with the West.

In 1954, at the age of 34, Dada attended the Second World Religious Congress in Japan. The paper he presented rejected the material track the world seemed to be moving on, and instead advocated the spiritual way described in the Bhagavad Gita. This path stresses the importance of *bhakti*, of performing one's duty to the best of one's capability but without any attachment to the fruits of the labor, and the idea that the individual is not "the doer." God is the "doer," the individual merely the pathway for actions to be carried out.

The audience was impressed with his words and the seeming "answers" to modern problems that were recorded in the Gita. They asked Dada where in India they could go to see these principles being lived out. This was perhaps the defining moment in Dada's life; a moment when some reports state the reality that he confronted that in their own birthplace, the principles of the Gita and the Upanishads were being lost to the monoculture of modernism. As a result of the 1954 Congress, Dada received several offers to chair philosophy departments in the US and UK, but he knew his mission and returned to India to continue teachings and discourses on the Hindu texts.

His followers over the next five to six years were a small but dedicated group. They had the fortune to have heard the voice of a man who would change the futures of millions of people. Although Swadhyayees today consist of a cross-section of individuals from Indian society (many of whom are rural), in the early days the small group of followers consisted of highly educated, mostly wealthy individuals who hailed from Bombay where Dada was based. Hemraj Ashar, now a very well-known attorney in Bombay, is a small, spry man who exudes intelligence. In his clear, soft and humorous voice, he told us about the genesis of Swadhyaya from Dada's mind into reality.

"For six years, in the 1950s, we used to listen to Dada as he talked about the Gita and the Upanishads. His central message was always that we are here to do God's work, and this is what we should be doing. I used to listen to him and think "Well, that is fine, but what can we do of God's work? He makes the sun rise and set — how can I help him with that? He must do his own work. What can I do to help?" Dada would talk about the brotherhood of man and how it was being lost. He told us that we needed to go to the villages and reconnect

with our brothers and sisters there. We should find out how they lived, these people related to us by virtue of a common Creator. At first, we didn't want to go. What would we say to them? What would they say to us? Dada-ji simply replied, "Tell them you are their brothers in God and you want to get to know them."

In 1957, a group of 17 people went on what was to be the first of thousands of devotional visits — *bhakti pheris* — to villages. Their mission was to meet their brothers and sisters in this divine fatherhood of God, and to establish a continued relationship of trust. So that villagers could not mistake the *bhakti pheris* as selfish or with motive, Swadhyayees were instructed not to take anything from villagers. They had to carry everything — from food, stove, blankets and lamps — with them. All expenses were born by the Swadhyayees. Dada also requested them to take transport only up to a central village, and then from that point to walk into the villages carrying their own supplies and luggage. Driving into the mud roads of a small village in a fancy Ambassador car or motorcycle could connote a hierarchy based on wealth, when the message of Swadhyaya is about the essential "same-ness" of all mankind. Perhaps Dada also wanted the city people to go back to the simplicity of years past where walking, talking and seeing the countryside were part of building a relationship with fellow travelers, with nature, with God.

The *bhakti-pheri* plays two central roles in Swadhyaya. First, it is the driving force behind the growth of Swadhyaya today. *Bhakti-pheris* are now carried out by thousands of people across India and, to a lesser extent, abroad in America, England and various African countries. The essential rules still hold — the message has not changed and individuals bear all their own expenses for the *bhakti-pheris*. Swadhyayees continue to visit the same people over a long period of time — Swadhyaya is *not* about visiting one family one week and another the next week. The basis of the visits is to build a relationship of trust, and to bring people to the realization that each individual, each living thing is divine. There is no underlying motive of conversion to a particular cult or religion, no intent even to "change" someone — just the desire to meet and know. It is precisely because of this lack of ulterior motive that Swadhyaya has been so successful. In many villages, we were told that 80 to 90 percent of the villagers were Swadhyayees. To be a Swadhyayee does not entail "joining" in any way — no membership fee, no induction. One becomes a Swadhyayee when one feels convinced by and enrolled in the essential principles of Swadhyaya philosophy. When this is so, Swadhyayees naturally and through self-inspiration take part in devotional activities and community activities through which they can do God's work. In this way, the Swadhyaya community forms.

The second role of *bhakti-pheri* is that is one of the primary ways in which individuals can internalize the messages of universal brotherhood and connectedness, and the principles of an inner God. By continually talk-

ing about the messages and the basic concepts of Swadhyaya, Swadhyayees say that they gradually begin to understand, believe and follow. Swadhyayees devote half of their yearly vacations to going on *bhakti-pheris*. And, they want you to know, they are not doing social work; this is their way of showing devotion to God and everything He has created.

Hemraj Ashar laughs when he thinks back to the first visits: the complete city misfits going to the villages, the doubts that they had in their minds, the discomfort of being the first to carry a message of divine brotherhood and worship that was long forgotten. But the 17 people who went were the beginning of Swadhyaya in India — the bridge which opened floodgates and let pure water cleanse the souls of millions.

SWADHYAYA IN ACTION: INDIVIDUAL TRANSFORMATION

It is not easy to understand Swadhyaya — the concepts are simple, but the changes that occur as a result are unimaginable in our present context. We are used to seeing small changes, changes that occur as part of a project designed to create those changes. I, like most people on our five-day tour of Swadhyaya communities and projects, went through a process of questioning, disbelieving and trying to find fault with, before finally accepting that this was *not* “too good to be true.” Appropriately, it is the exact process of logical reasoning that Dada advocates: believe only after you yourself have questioned and understood.

“There is no social problem that Swadhyaya does not address,” said one Swadhyayee emphatically to our group at the beginning of the tour. Most of us scoffed — if not aloud, then within. It is difficult to believe such a statement — particularly for a group of people who have an umbilical cord to cynicism and doubt. And yet, as our journey progressed, everyone — without exception — recognized that what we were seeing was profoundly different from any other movement, any other “development effort.”

A diverse group of individuals made the tour, all sharing a common concern for the ailments of today’s world, and particularly for the direction India was taking — a direction that seemed certain to put it on a path that neglected spiritual development of the individual. There was the Maulana, a revered Muslim leader known for his work of religious tolerance, and his intense love for the country. At 70, the Maulana made a striking figure with his long white beard, beautifully lined face and white robe. He took notes copiously, and would ask people to write in his small book their prog-

nosis of India’s future. There was a Rimpoche (high Buddhist monk) who had worked closely with the Dalai Lama for Tibet’s freedom. There were people from extremes of the political continuum — from the fundamentalist Hindu RSS party to India’s Socialist party. There were professors from well-known universities, journalists, social scientists, environmental activists and social reformers.

For four days, our group of 20 traveled through the state of Gujarat, listening to testimonies of individual transformation and community rejuvenation; of miracles and fulfilled dreams; of laughter and love; of social justice that had occurred — incredibly — as a by-product of this movement of change.

Our first stop was the *chawls* (poorer, slum areas made up largely of low-caste people) of Ahmedabad. The road to the first chawl we visited became bumpier as the car wound its way from the city outskirts to its center. We stopped at a muddy dirt road, the reddish-orange mud interrupted by puddles of cloudy water with sewage floating on top. The lanes were narrow, populated with buffaloes, people and children. A sudden spurt of heavy monsoon rain beat down on the tin roof of the shacks that lined the roads.

We made our way into a concrete room, whose walls were peppered with small shrines with pictures and statues of deities. These were strung with fresh garlands of flowers and marked with wet red paste, indicating a recent *puja*. The room was filled with men, women and children who lived in the area, mostly of the sweeper caste and widely considered “untouchables.” They greeted us with roses, streaked our foreheads with the same red paste to bless us in welcome. Murmurs of “*Jai Yogeshwar*,”⁵ the Swadhyaya greeting, echoed around us. A well-dressed man stood up and began speaking. The manager of the local State Bank of India, he lived only one kilometer away, and yet for 30 years had never bothered to come to this area. “I used to think that this caste was too low for me. Dada’s words changed me. I began to think if I won’t go there, then who will?”

A stream of shared experiences followed: there was Pushpa Behn,⁶ a strong, stout woman who used to get furious with the disparity between the way her Harijan caste was insulted and the way rich people were honored. “Because of my caste, I was not even allowed to carry the [Bhagavad] Gita! Now, not only have I learnt the Gita, I feel I have a head full of thoughts.” There was Narayan Bhai, a reformed alcoholic who said he gave up drink with the realization that God was within him. “If we leave our shoes outside the temple before going to see God, shouldn’t we keep our bodies pure if God is

5. *Jai Yogeshwar* means “victory to Yogeshwar.” Yogeshwar is the name that Swadhyayees use for God. Dada selected this name because it is universal across Hinduism, and does not connote any kind of sectarianism (as using a more popular deity like Krishna might).

6. *Behn* (meaning “sister”) and *Bhai* (meaning “brother”) are commonly attached to first names when addressing people in Gujarat. With Swadhyayees, it seems even more appropriate to do so, given the context of a universal brotherhood.

within us?" The accounts followed one after another, a stream of testimonies to personal change formerly unthinkable, a periscope into the troubled lives of before that had now opened to hope.

At the next *chawl* we visited, Bhav Lakshmi, lives a group of 18 families who belong to the *vagri* tribe. *Vagris* are untouchables who are said to have originally come from Rajasthan and are branded as lazy "good-for-nothings." (There are about 100,000 *vagri* people spread across the chawls of Ahmedabad.) But now, according to Raju Bhai, things are changing. He told us, choked with emotion, the story of his personal transformation. "I used to be a gambler, even running gambling in my own house. I was powerful in my community, people listened to me because they were scared of me mostly. I drank daily, and rarely went to work. I respected no one. I would beat my mother, and then take her gold chains to sell to make money for alcohol. I beat my wife and children. I didn't believe in God — what kind of God could have me live a life like this?" Tears were rolling down Raju's cheeks as he spoke. "I have changed with Swadhyaya. I do not gamble or drink. I love and respect my family. I understand that God is within everyone, including me. If I ill-treat others or myself, I am ill-treating God."

Even the attitudes toward the *vagris* among the police, Raju said, are changing now. Before, the *vagris* had such a bad reputation that if a crime was committed and there were five different suspects of whom one was a *vagri*, the *vagri* would invariably be charged. Now, if it is known that a *vagri* is also a Swadhyayee, the police actually release him.

We left the *chawl* to a line of singing people holding small wick lamps in their hands. As showers of red rose petals landed on my head and flitted down past my nose, I smelt their wonderful sweet fragrance. It was raining, but no one seemed to notice.

Dada says that Swadhyaya should reach "unto the last" — how much further can one go into social oppression than the untouchables? Since 1984, Swadhyaya has touched over one-fourth of all the *chawls* in Ahmedabad. At a recent meeting of Swadhyayees in Ahmedabad, 400,000 untouchables were present. Dada's display of love for these individuals stimulated thought in others. According to one of the *chawl* residents, "he welcomed us, held us. It made us cry to be loved in a way that we had never experienced before. Because of him, people who used to throw us out, throw vessels and stones at us, also began to see that we were their brothers, divine representatives of God." Now there is a new sense of pride within these communities, and a gradual breakdown of caste prejudices

among the higher caste groups of Swadhyayees.

How do these kinds of dramatic changes actually come about? This question was asked in numerous ways at different times by all of us seeking to comprehend how such total transformation could succeed. Consistently, Swadhyayees told us that the entire process of change began when they finally accepted that the motive for people coming to visit them on *bhakti-pheris* was entirely selfless. These visits, which showed that people who did not even know them and who asked for nothing except friendship, seemed to rebuild a basic trust in humanity and in self. "At first, when people started coming, we thought they were coming either for votes⁷ or money or some other motive. Nobody ever comes without a selfish reason," said Harshan Behn in Kajali village. "Why would they just want to get to know us? But then, when they kept coming back time and time again for years, taking nothing from us but just wanting to get to know us, we began to believe them."

"Because of him, people who used to throw us out, throw vessels and stones at us, also began to see that we were their brothers, divine representatives of God."

Many also talked about the important role that devotional activities — like the Trikal Sandhaya prayer, when thanks are given to God at morning, noon and night for waking, existing and sleep — play in bringing about their internal changes. These activities are a constant reminder of the nearness of God, and the innate good nature of man. Related activities like group prayers and meetings where people can get together and speak are part of building a new sense of interconnectedness to others. Within these activities, traditional roles are constantly being broken down. For example, at the small temples that have been constructed in many Swadhyaya villages (open to all religions), the role of *pujari* is rotated among the villagers. In traditional Hindu communities, *pujaris* are drawn only from high-caste Brahmins and are only men. In Swadhyaya villages, anyone who is doing God's work — *i.e.*, thinking and acting in accordance with ideas of respect for God, self and others — is a *pujari*. There is no exclusiveness. In the context of the deep-rooted ideas of caste and gender in Hindu society, this is a significant achievement in itself and speaks to the kinds of barriers that Swadhyaya is breaking through.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, *bhakti-pheris* are also essential for internalizing the concepts of an inner God and relatedness to other living beings. "As we talk about Swadhyaya, we bring understanding to ourselves and to others," said one Swadhyayee. "There is no specific time or date when change takes place. A process starts which moves inward and then spreads. It is a continuous process and one that takes time [something that Swadhyayees always emphasize]. We follow Dada's

7. It is common in many rural areas of India to have politicians come and make all kinds of promises to villagers in order to "buy" votes.

words that we must listen, practice and think. Swadhyaya affects our thoughts, makes us begin questioning things we have never questioned before."

In the end, though, the process of change is different for each individual — and often, inexplicable to the extent that observers would like to quantify and document.

EXPERIMENTS IN COMMUNITY TRANSFORMATION

Numerous experiments undertaken within Swadhyaya have reduced poverty and increased income of communities, or provided basic needs like water and irrigation to rural areas. Perhaps most important is that a new kind of community has been formed, a community where work is done for God and where individuals become closer to each other.

In the fishing villages along the coast of Gujarat, one fisherman's lucky day may be another's day of shortage. Mother Water is not always kind, and those fishermen who do not have their own boats usually work as labor on another's boat. On a good day, they earn enough to feed themselves. Life is hard. Inequality of income is often high, and alcohol a warm retreat from the harsh realities.

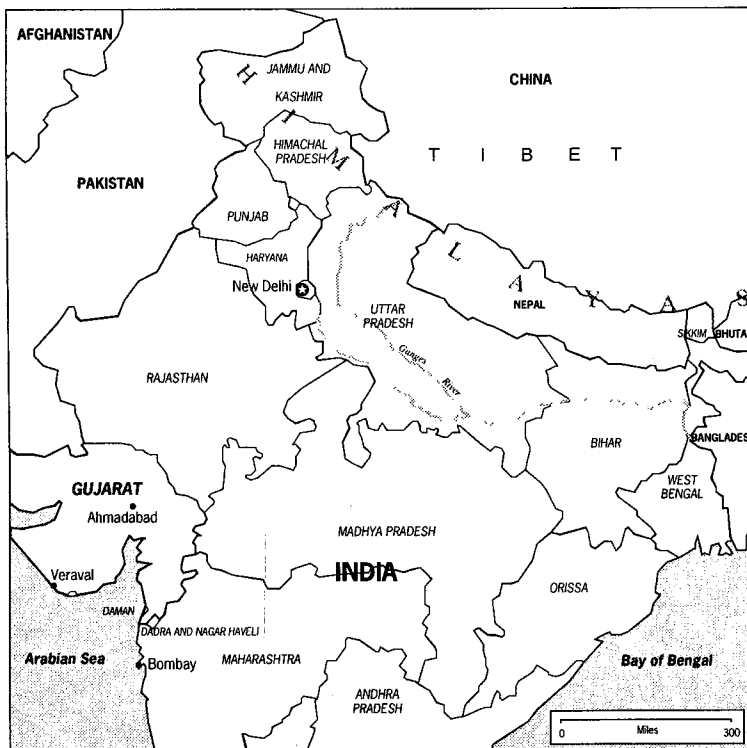
But not in this village in Veraval district and many others like it. Kalpesh Bhai's face lights up when he speaks of their Matsyaganda experiment. Kalpesh Bhai is one of hundreds who has contributed one day a fortnight of labor, as well as tools and building materials, to building a fishing craft for the village. Donating their labor — their "efficiency" — is an expression of their de-

votion to God. Every day, five different fishermen contribute their time to go fishing on the community boat. The fish they catch is sold in the market, and the proceeds are distributed to those in need. The distributions are considered "prasad" — offerings from God. As such, those who donate their efficiency do not develop a sense of superiority from "helping", and neither do recipients develop a sense of inferiority from being "helped". The wealth being distributed belongs to God, and in this sense, is impersonal.

The change Swadhyaya has brought about in the Saurashtra area of Gujarat is one of the most compelling. Recently, Saurashtra has suffered constantly from droughts; the land was parched and water a precious commodity. A bucket of water, we were told, could cost ten rupees during the dry season. Hundreds of wells across Saurashtra, even deep wells, were dry. The water table seemed as far away as the other side of the earth. Several years ago, the Government joined the despairing ones, and termed Saurashtra a wasteland. Saurashtrians, fearing for their futures, began to move out of the area, believing that abandoning their homes was the only course.

Enter Swadhyaya and the *nirmal nirs*. "We have enough water," said Dada. "We just are not collecting and utilizing it properly." The theory was that even with droughts, there was still enough rainfall to fill up ponds (called *nirmal nirs*), that could then be used to recharge wells and provide sufficient water for year-round use. The villagers committed to Dada that they would build 20 *nirmal nirs* in their villages in Saurashtra within a year. As with other Swadhyaya experiments, the ponds were built completely with the time and materials of the villagers themselves. Within a year, Swadhyayees had built not only the 20 they had promised Dada, but ten times that number! Over time, these *nirmal nirs* proved so successful that they not only recharged the wells, but collected sufficient water that the water table even began to rise. Seeing Swadhyaya's work, villages across Saurashtra began to do similar work. Today, one research organization has found that almost 80 percent of all such reservoirs that exist in Saurashtra have been part of or inspired by Swadhyaya. Saurashtra is no longer a wasteland. Out of barren, rocky lands, Swadhyayees have created lush green fields, grown crops where others have said it is impossible, turned wasteland into productive land.

All Swadhyaya experiments aim at bringing "man closer to man." One particularly good example of an experiment that has changed the notion of community and individual relationship is the Shri Darshanams. Inspired during a visit Dada made to Israel, where he visited a *kibbutz*, Shri Darshanams are also an experiment in community farming. A Shri Darshanam is a piece of land that has been



purchased by the Swadhyaya trust for tending by a group of 20 proximately located villages. (Only when 90 percent of all 20 villages are Swadhyayees is a Shri Darshanam started — and that too, only if the villagers request it themselves.) A different person (*pujari*) from each of these 20 villages is assigned to work on the land on specific days of the month, so that on any given day there are a minimum of 20 people working. Tools, labor and seeds are provided by the *pujaris*. Every month, an expert meets with a group of 15 people from the villages to talk about issues, problems and new ideas for farming. Ideas like non-chemical fertilizers, worming composts and other natural techniques to increase yields are introduced.

The *pujaris* spend eight hours working in the fields, and the evening hours talking, discussing ideas, learning and studying from other *pujaris*. Business men or intellectuals who do not know about farming come as *pujaris* also. They learn about the earth and agriculture from those who can teach them during the day, and then to contribute pieces of their efficiency during the evening hours of talk. When the crops are harvested, they are sold to Swadhyayees at market prices. The demand is great, because they are “*prasad*” — offerings (of labor) to God that have been blessed and have come back in the form of crops. Any remaining produce is sold in the regular bazaar. Profit goes back to the central Swadhyaya trust, which is used to fund similar purchases of land for such experiments, the Swadhyaya universities, etc.

Although inspired by the *kibbutz*, there are essential differences. Here, on days when individuals are not donating their efficiency to the Shri Darshanam, they are working on their own individual farms. Nor are they expecting any “returns” from their work on the collective farm. In fact, reaping a good harvest is not the primary purpose of this Shri Darshanam experiment — although this is often a byproduct of performing work with love and absorption. Rather, the purpose is to expand the notion of community, and allow individuals to give of themselves selflessly with no thought to their reward or gain. Men, women and children are taught to think of more than themselves, their own families, or even their own villages. They learn to respect the Creator and creations — creations like Mother Earth. The result is that individual, community and Earth all blossom.

In Swadhyaya, the philosophy is that *work* should not be left to God, but the *results* of that work should. “Dada provided us the opportunity to be detached from *our* house and *our* work, and instead, do selfless service,” said one Swadhyayee. “In this way, we improve ourselves spiritually. We also have an opportunity to give back to Mother Earth what we take from her,” said one white-bearded man, tenderly gesturing to the trees around him. Said another, “Our Shri Darshanam is proving that the statement that ‘man does not work without [monetary] incentive’ is false. “From 20 villages, we have made one community. Any sadness or need that exists in any other of these 20 villages is like it

exists in our village. This is the community that has formed. This is above the sense of ‘my’ village. It is one level higher — about God’s family.”

The experiments are too many to detail here: there is the construction of soak pits, that have reduced the amount of exposed human excrement and stagnating water, and consequently the incidence of diseases such as malaria and tuberculosis. There are new roads, new houses, productive fields — all built in the same spirit of serving God. And perhaps the apex of all experiments is the Swadhyaya Vidyapeeth — a school for children that teaches them about agricultural practices as well as providing them with a spiritual basis of thought that could help combat the dominant economic model outside. This is, from the very beginning, the creation of a new type of person.

THE RESULTS: SOCIAL WORK VERSUS BHAKTI AS A SOCIAL FORCE

Casual observers might look at the results of Swadhyaya and classify it as an NGO doing social work. To do this would be to wholly misinterpret the core of Swadhyaya, say Swadhyayees. There is a critical difference between using *bhakti* (devotion) as a social force, and doing social work. In Dada’s words, “In social work, we go to others with the idea that you are oppressed, and we are here to help you. This creates a social hierarchy. *Bhakti* is not about helping anyone — it is an expression of the feeling of love toward God. When you lose the concept of devotion, it becomes social work. When it becomes social work, issues of motive and fruits (*i.e.*, results) enter the picture.”

During the tour, I saw the strong tendency many of us have to focus always on tangible results, which include statistics by which we can measure “success” and “progress” — again, partly a result of the economic way in which these terms have been defined in recent decades. Although there is enough evidence to show these kinds of results with Swadhyaya today, looking only at these statistics ignores the real results: results that cannot be quantified but are even more meaningful, results such as an increase in inner peace, harmonious relations, a broader understanding of responsibility and duty, and most importantly, a new awareness of and respect for self — a true “empowerment.” It is *the* goal toward which many social workers, NGOs, governments and self-help classes have been striving, but failing to reach, for years. In fact, in many Swadhyaya villages, there is no longer a need for government projects or for NGOs. The problems are being resolved by individuals and communities.

Swadhyaya’s genius is exactly that it is not aimed at any specific social change; and yet, social change occurs in countless ways. Change, however, has not come quickly. The early Swadhyayees say that they often doubted that anything would ever happen. It took 8-10 years, they say, to begin to see any kind of change. Even today, although the movement continues to grow, the

process of change is a slow one. It will certainly continue to be so, as the transformation of the self does not occur overnight. But time is not Dada's concern. "The problems we have in society today will take at least two generations to resolve; and yet we do not even have the patience to wait two years," says Dada. His faith is what has inspired his followers the most. For me, this is the aspect of Dada that takes my breath away: to see, in my lifetime, a man who has the courage to look beyond today's realities and believe in the seemingly extravagant possibility of a new world order.

About a month before the tour, my husband and I were invited to attend one of Dada's Sunday discourses at a temple in Bombay. It was a rainy morning. We reached the temple and followed the streams of people who were walking into a big mud-floored, thatched-roof area. The mud had been saturated with the large drips of water coming through the roof, and the entire place was filled with huge puddles. On the right were areas for men and women to "check" their shoes. We did this, and then moved with the stream of people hitching up their saris, pants and dhotis to wade barefoot through the mud. Men and women separated to climb different stairways to a huge room upstairs that was already packed full of people sitting cross-legged.

The woman I sat next to was elderly, in a simple white sari and with a peaceful smile. She had become involved with Swadhyaya through her sister-in-law, who was one of Dada's first listeners. From Gujarat and close to Gandhi, my companion told me that Dada had stayed with them and they had known immediately that this was someone very special, someone who could one day lead the world — not in a political sense, but in a spiritual one. Like most Swadhyayees I met, she commented on how Dada's simplicity and genuineness amazed her. "He did not call himself a saint or an enlightened person, but that was one of the first thoughts in my mind — this is what a saint is like," she said to me. Later, she had been one of the first group to go to England on a *bhakti-pheri*. It was not until after I met her that I found out that this simple woman was also a millionaire, involved in running a very successful family business. Her authenticity of spirit and seeming lack of ego were enriching.

I mused to her that day that I was amazed at how many people had filled the room we were in. "There must be at least 1,000 people in this room!" I said wonderingly. She laughed. "There are 10,000 people here to see Dada," she replied. "There are about a thousand here, and then there are four other rooms that are even bigger than this. They are also filled with people. Dada speaks from here but there are speakers and televisions in the other rooms, so his face and voice are transmitted."

As we were talking, a murmur went through the

crowd. Dada had entered the room. Dressed in simple white *kurta* and *dhoti*, he had his hands folded in a *namaste*, and was walking slowly down the huge room toward us. In spite of the large number of people in the room, his eyes and body seemed to be greeting each one individually, acknowledging the divine in each soul.

His lecture that day was brief. He had recently returned from medical treatment abroad and still seemed weak, shaky. In his gentle voice, he told his followers that he had come to do *their* darshan — the term normally used to describe a "viewing" or audience with God or a God-like person. He joked several times, laughed, coughed — was human, connecting in the most personal of ways with every individual in the room. Dada talked about an understanding, awareness and respect for a spiritual power greater than us and greater than religion. The path to that power was questioning, learning, and only then believing. He inspired not just with his words, but with his very way of being.

"He did not call himself a saint or an enlightened person, but that was one of the first thoughts in my mind — this is what a saint is like."

After Dada's discourse, I stood at the window on the upper floor and looked out at the sea of people gathered in one of the muddy rooms below. They had congregated in small groups — laughing, talking and enjoying the aura of peace and companionship that permeated the room. I understood then that one of the most important manifestations of the individual and societal transformations that occurred through Swadhyaya was the recreation of a family of individuals, a family that extended beyond blood, religion, caste or community; a family that could potentially be the world.

My next meeting with Dada was at the end of the tour. He was sitting in the small worship area in the Swadhyaya Vidyapeeth, the large institution of learning for young Swadhyayees (similar in concept to the one his grandfather had started for him). From the huge, empty white marble room where people can stand outside and view the idols within the temple space, we entered the inner room. Dada was sitting casually on a marble stoop on which were displayed intricate statues of Yogeshwar. Again in his white *kurta* and *dhoti*, he spoke animatedly to us for a few minutes about Yogeshwar and the idols. There was a sense of reverence in the room; after having seen what we had seen, it was impossible not to feel awe for this human being who had inspired the rejuvenation of so many individuals and communities.

We were ushered downstairs to a large room. We sat in a semi-circle around Dada, our vision slightly blocked by a beautiful flower arrangement on a pedestal a few feet from us. "I do not need to welcome you," he said to us simply, "because you are family. I am happy that you are here."

The Maulana, in his quivery voice, stood up to speak

of his experience with Swadhyaya, first reiterating an emotional statement he had made on the second day of the tour that he would "join the Swadhyaya family." He continued this time, sharing his own experiences, dreams and disappointments: "The dream we had of a great nation at Independence, we could not achieve. Why? Because at Independence, Gandhi-ji's goal was for freedom, to throw out the Britishers. That was extroverted thinking that we needed then, thinking that focused outward. But after that, we needed introverted thinking, and that has not happened. We need to go within and question our ways, our lives. This is what I have seen happening in Swadhyaya."

The Maulana's words were significant in their welcome of Swadhyaya. Although Swadhyaya has no religious bars, there are many Muslims who have difficulty accepting Swadhyaya, in part because it accepts idol-worship (prohibited in Islam) as a legitimate tool to strengthen faith and devotion. Still, as one Muslim Swadhyayee told us during the tour, "We did not like Swadhyaya at first. We thought it was about religion. But then we found that they did not say leave your religion and join us. They talked about peace and happiness. This is true religion."

The Rimpoché, who had not spoken much during the tour, stood up next. He spoke carefully, knowing that the weight of his words would be great. He talked of how he had been moved by what he had seen. But, he said, "there is a fundamental difference that comes between me as a Buddhist and Swadhyaya. We do not believe in a divine creator, and this is what your movement is based on. Still, I am in agreement with the essential belief that change in society can come only from change in the individual. Without inner change, the world will soon be destroyed. I believe that the inspiration for this change will come from India."

The Rimpoché's words — in spite of the conflicts with his own Buddhist beliefs — also were an endorsement of Swadhyaya's work. The goals, after all, were the same — but the paths different. Moreover, Swadhyayees emphasized that their attempt to establish relationships with brothers and sisters of all religions will continue, whether or not Buddhists or Muslims feel they can follow the Swadhyaya practices. For Swadhyayees, their *bhakti-pheris* will continue with no bars for religion. After all, the "brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God" does not discriminate for religions; nor do Swadhyayees when it comes to establishing a fundamental interconnectedness with others.

There is no better example of this than Dada himself. Many of those on the tour tried to draw Dada into a discussion about religion, probing to determine his views on the Hindu-Muslim conflict in particular. He resisted all such attempts, as he always has done. "I believe in

the validity of all religions," he said. "Swadhyayees organize blood donation camps on the birth of the Prophet Mohammed, and on Christmas. We are not trying to appease anyone; we truly believe in all religions. I am not interested in politics, [in] whether the BJP or the Congress rules. I am not political, nor am I doing anything for political capital. I am only interested in having a human being rule. I am interested in the development of the human being." This was entirely consistent with what we had heard before: that Dada has been approached by several political parties, and has flatly refused to allow any of them to use Swadhyaya as an endorsement for their platforms.

As I am essentially from two cultures, the issue of whether Swadhyaya is applicable to people around the world is particularly important to me. I believe that "developed" countries have much to learn from India, particularly in the area of spirituality and interconnectedness. I could not help but imagine Swadhyaya in a world context, where it could offer new hope for a changed world.

"He has driven the movement with his vision, fed it with his own example of selfless living, and kept its energy strong with his own faith in the possibilities of the future."

As of today, there are several tens of thousands of Swadhyayees in countries around the world (including the majority of American states), but they still comprise primarily people of Indian origin (with the exception of a community in England that involves large numbers of people of Western heritage). Can Swadhyaya apply to all others? To accept Swadhyaya, individuals must believe in a higher being or presence. They must also be willing to give up many of the tenets of

material living over spiritual being, an especially difficult task in the West. It is not impossible, but it will take time — a factor that Dada has proven is not an obstacle forever. Even if Swadhyaya is not ultimately embraced by non-Hindus, its potential impact is still enormous. There are well over half a billion Hindus in India alone, more than 10 percent of the world's population!

The other major question that occupied many of my thoughts was what would happen to the movement after Dada's time. There have been too many sad examples of great movements that have died with the death of the founding visionary. To date, Swadhyaya has depended on the inspiration and nurturing of Dada. He has driven the movement with his vision, fed it with his own example of selfless living, and kept its energy strong with his own faith in the possibilities of the future. Today, Dada is not well, and Swadhyayees know that there will come a day when they will have to continue their work without him. They admit that he is irreplaceable, but they say that what he has started will continue. They are also practical. Swadhyaya — though not an organization or institution — runs with tremendous efficiency. There are informal networks (with constantly changing key individuals to avoid usurpation of power and to allow for maximum involvement) that have been built at various levels; groups of Swadhyaya

elders — big brothers and sisters, as they are called — are actively involved in most areas; and most importantly, preparations have been underway for some time to school Dada's daughter (Didi, or elder sister, as she is affectionately called) to lead the next phase. She is not Dada, say many Swadhyayees, but then who is?

Mahesh Shah, the organizer of our tour and a long-time Swadhyayee, is confident that Swadhyaya will continue after Dada because its success rests within each individual's own faith and devotion: Dada has started the stream of thoughts, but they now belong to Swadhyayees. "Dada analytically places before us some thoughts which we then internalize," says Shah. "I cannot say that I did something because Dada-ji said to. I need to understand it with my own intellect." It is the

hope of Swadhyayees and those of us watching that this internalization will provide the steam to keep Swadhyaya vitally alive.

"I have nothing new to offer," Dada said to us at that last meeting, smiling gently. "I am only restating what has already been said." These are almost the same words that Mahatma Gandhi often used. I understood Rajiv Vora's words to me that Dada belonged in the highest category of man, with Gandhi. What I saw — in Dada and in Swadhyayees — were living examples of a real search for truth, a re-definition of individual happiness and societal progress, a world of relatedness lost in modern times. And in their quest for individual truth, these Swadhyayees are creating truly dramatic transformations in living and thinking. □