

Common Property as God's Resource

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Can God act as a vital force in development and management of commons? Whether you are a believer or otherwise, take a trip to any of the common property resources (CPR) created by Swadhyaya.¹ As you hear about the genesis and growth of the project, you will soon begin to recognize the role of God in energizing people to produce wealth altogether for their less fortunate brethren.

Swadhyaya (literally self learning or education but signifying self development in a wider sense) is an Indian spiritual movement. It is based on rediscovery of Indian (widely known as Hindu) religious and philosophical tradition for its relevance to contemporary global society. *Swadhyaya* enshrines the notion of a universal human religion across and above all religious barriers we encounter in the world today. Allegiance to *Swadhyaya* can be assumed by any one who vows to follow a simple regimen of reciting a few hymns of gratitude to God everyday and participation in a programme of learning scriptural wisdom. It is difficult to estimate the size and width of *Swadhyaya* following due to absence of recorded information on membership. Millions of men and women in several states of India and among the Indian diaspora abroad are known to observe elementary *Swadhyaya* discipline such as learning religious lessons and building new bonds of love and help. The vast majority of *Swadhyaya* followers (about 80 per cent) are in Gujarat. This region also serves as the house for the bulk of *Swadhyaya* work in development and management of common property resources. This work includes harvesting and conservation of water for irrigation

and other needs of the rural population.

Models of Governance

Where is God's place in the *Swadhyaya* paradigm of creating commons? It is common knowledge that all religious movements and organizations undertake their activities in God's name and under his overall command. God also probably oversees the moral and ethical force energizing social leaders and reformers except those who are devoutly agnostic. However, *Swadhyaya* offers a unique synthesis of the individual, society and God which needs to be brought out in a wider social-historical perspective.

Our main concern here is with generation and management of common property resources within a local community in the context of inequalities of status, wealth and power among individuals and groups. Our objective therefore inherently involves reallocation of resources and opportunities for mitigation of misery, deprivation, helplessness and indignity of the poor and the weak in the community.

We have over the millennia gathered experience of several models of human behaviour and organization for performance of this task. Human enterprise in the *laissez-faire* society before Karl Marx was governed by interplay of a variety of social forces such as individual want, greed, altruism and the authority and controls laid down by civil society (family, caste, village, religion etc.) and the state. In such a society, the poor and weak depend on the mercy of their better provided fellow citizens informed by the authority of political and religious rulers, apart from their moral

conscience. This is the essence of capitalist governance. The second, Marxian, model advocates the supremacy of the state and its agents at various levels as custodians of the interests of the poor and weak. This model aims at the abolition of all social, economic and political inequality (and hence suffering) under the supervision of collective authority acquired by a cohort of rulers. A third, call it Gandhian, alternative builds on the potential and observed hazards of concentrated collective power. It envisages the superior value of an average citizen's moral and altruistic consciousness and advocates voluntary contribution of material and social possessions to reduce human misery and indignity.

Our increasingly complex technological-urban-liberal-global civilization has, during the twentieth century, witnessed the ubiquity and absurdities of capitalism, Marxism and Gandhism. We now seem to be learning to mix these models in all areas of political and economic governance, although market and self-interest are constantly shadowing us to be honoured as our new gods.

Genesis of a New Paradigm

Let us try to comprehend how *Swadhyaya* and its emphasis on religion and god as the moving force of governance in this background.² In 1942, an extraordinarily gifted Maharashtrian Brahman scholar of 22 began to preach Indian scriptures in an area of central Bombay (now called Mumbai) predominantly inhabited by Gujarati-speaking middle-class traders and professionals. His name was Pandurang Shastri Athavale but he soon came to be known as Dada (elder brother) among his followers. Dada was entirely educated in a religious institution run by his father. He had also imbibed the wealth of historical, philosophical and literary knowledge stored in a uniquely endowed

library in Bombay. A proverbial combination of memory and wisdom enabled him to use his learning creatively in fulfilment of his responsibility as scholar and teacher.

Along with his command over Indian religion and philosophy, Dada's moral conscience exposed him to the reality of contemporary society, especially the exploitation, indignity and deprivation suffered by masses of lower caste, tribal and dalit (ex-untouchable) populations. As he progressed in learning and teaching, his social concerns took shape along four lines of intellectual reflection. One, he concluded that religion in ancient India was used as a social force to build and sustain human relations and also reduce human suffering, poverty and exploitation. Two, he believed that true religion has, in the course of history, been continually distorted and abused to serve vested interests of priestly classes and powerful people. Three, he was convinced that it was necessary and possible to redefine the content and quality of religion to regain its value as a living social force to deal with current problems of human suffering and exploitation. Four, he envisioned the religious approach to resolution of today's major socio-economic problems as the most effective and lasting for the well-being of future generations of our global civilization.

Dada's conviction and hope about the overarching role of religion in dealing with problems of human want, suffering and indignity was based on his judgement on global experience with alternative models of governance. In his view, the classical capitalist system had created progressively growing inequalities of wealth, status and power and compounding exploitation of the weak and poor. The analyst and visionary in Marx were a product of unique human understanding and sensitivity to the problems and prospects of capitalist society. Dada regarded Marx as a *rishi* (seer) as he was the first person in human history to propose and work for a world without poverty,

hunger and indignity. However, the Marxian prescription of concentration of power in a few people in the name of the working class was muddled by insensitivity to the universal human proclivity for selfishness, greed and lust for power. The third major alternative in the form of the Gandhian approach depended considerably on the moral and religious forces driving human conduct. It also incorporated special concern for the socio-economic agonies suffered by the poorest, weakest and most exploited sections of society. However, it left much scope for social arrogance among those who parted with resources and a sense of inferiority among those who received help from the rich. Dada's conscience was dominated by the need for a model of governance that would cut the social and psychological distance between the strong and the weak in society, between the giver and the receiver of resources. He wanted to create and strengthen social bonds among people at large. Building human relations became the central part of Dada's vision of social reconstruction.

And who could support him more effectively than God in this task of reconstruction? He placed God and religion above the walls of denominational loyalties and resurrected the nineteenth-century reformist notion of "brotherhood of man under the fatherhood of God". He advocated total faith in an indwelling God who is also all-pervasive, guiding and ruling everything that stands or moves. The main plank of a person's relation with God is *bhakti* (devotion) which should be performed in terms of active participation in work of community welfare and human dignity. Dada's concept of devotion is permeated by the idea of *kruti bhakti* (action-oriented devotion) as against the ideals of ritualism and renunciation notoriously associated with traditional Hinduism. In Dada's view, all input of effort for community welfare is *shram bhakti* (devotion through labour). Every worker should perform his tasks in the spirit of a *pujari* (worshipper). The wealth generated by such

collective effort is *apaurusheya laxmi* (impersonal wealth) and should be used for welfare of the poor and weak. A person using his talent or proficiency for community benefit is supposed to offer his efficiency to God. Dada developed creative definitions and interpretations of religious texts and rituals to stress that religion invariably serves to reinforce bonds of love and friendship, mitigate human suffering and uphold human dignity. This emerging message of synthesis among the individual, society and all-pervasive God was crystallized in Dada's discourses in the early years. Dada's lessons were imparted in the spirit of *Swadhyaya* (self development). This is the source of the *Swadhyaya* movement. The fraternity of expanding *swadhyayis* (followers of *Swadhyaya*) is identified as a *parivar* (extended family).

Religion as a Social Force

As this intellectual effort in regeneration of religion progressed, Dada faced the challenge of demonstrating the viability of his prescription in the current social milieu. His initial response to this challenge was to influence young minds through specially designed formal education. An institution was launched in Bombay to provide education at post-graduate level. Later, a few other schools were established elsewhere for basic school-level education for children of peasants. But it was soon realized that formal education would entail perpetual encounter with bureaucracy and dealing with large funds. Hence Dada decided against formal education as a main instrumentality for social reconstruction. Meanwhile, Dada's heart and mind were preoccupied with the plight of the poorest and exploited masses around him. At the same time, he was distressed by the growing clout of Christian missionaries among poor tribals and dalits. He looked for a way to reach these

downgraded and downtrodden children of his universal father.

He struck upon a unique approach to achievement of this goal in 1957-58. He inspired his prominent disciples to visit villages and spread the ideas of universal religion, human fraternity, selfless love and the social force of *bhakti*. The young intellectuals were persuaded to undertake rural trips as a part of their own *Swadhyaya* (development) and not as social or religious workers. They would bear all expenses on their visits and vow not to accept any hospitality from their hosts. They would normally spend two days in a month for this purpose as a new form of observance of the fortnightly Hindu ritual of *ekadashi* (eleventh day, dedicated to purificatory fasting). As these rural trips materialized, the visitors often had to show enormous patience and tolerance to overcome the apprehensions and resistance of their hosts. They generated interest among villagers in Dada's version of religion and God with popular devotional songs and tales. They conveyed the essence of *Swadhyaya* by inducting the villagers into the basic *Swadhyaya* discipline. The primary elements of an individual's *swadhyayi* status included *trikal sandhya* (recitation of a few Sanskrit verses of gratitude to God on waking up from sleep, at meals and at bedtime), attendance at audio-visual reproduction of Dada's discourses and meeting people to spread *Swadhyaya* message. These trips to villages were soon christened as *bhaktipheri* (round of devotion). *Bhatipheri* gradually snowballed as the main characteristic of a *swadhyayi's* status as *krutishil* (activist).

Trips of Divine Love

Thousands of *Swadhyayis* today are committed to regular *bhaktipheri*. *Swadhyayis* approach a

virgin area (household, settlement, village) with *bhavpheri* (goodwill visit). When a reasonable number of respondents show inclination, a *parayan kendra* (recitation centre) is set up to help them learn prescribed hymns and songs. As the people's interest crystallizes, a *Swadhyaya kendra* (self-learning centre) is promoted for weekly meetings and dissemination of socio-religious ideas with the help of printed literature and audio-cassettes of Dada's discourses. Special arrangements for women and children for such learning are made by means of *mahila kendra* (women's centre) and *bal sanskar kendra* (children's cultural centre). At the next stage, a video *kendra* (centre) is set up for weekly screening of video-cassettes of Dada's discourses. The schedules and sequencing of dissemination of ideas and information at all places and at each stage are regulated by the *Swadhyaya* headquarters in Bombay and managed through the institution of *motabhai* (elder brother or head of a unit). The work at the village and village-group level is coordinated by a single *motabhai*, while the activities at higher levels (district, zone) are managed by a team of *motabhais* with one overall coordinator.

Bhaktipheri is the most crucial part of *Swadhyaya* mission. At the initial stages, it inaugurated regular and close social contacts between urban middle-class people from upper castes and the relatively lower and poorer rural masses. This marked the beginning of an unparalleled social process of mixing and mutual understanding among conventionally segmented and insulated layers of the notoriously hierarchical Indian Society. As more and more people across caste and economic barriers in towns and villages pledged conformity to *bhaktipheri* the mission induced a chain process of new social ties. The urban *swadhyayis'* *bhaktipheri* not only spread the vital ideas and activities among the rural populations, but also turned large numbers of them into *bhaktipheri*

devotees. Rural activists visited other rural areas and took *Swadhyaya* to various sections of the rural communities. *Bhaktipheri* is a most effective method of reaching out to the last person in society in the image of Ruskin's famous idea of "unto this last" and Gandhi's "*antyodaya*" (rise of the weakest) programme. As *bhaktipheri* got rooted, Dada extended its underlying concept of moving around for love and God. He introduced an annual tour of *swadhyayis* in small groups to villages across sub-districts. Each group spent three days in the host village, lived with a local family and promoted Swadhyaya activities. These tours were known as *tirthayatra* (holy pilgrimage). *Bhaktipheri* and *tirthayatra* were designed to perform the role of ancient pilgrims and sages who travelled to spread God's message. At the individual level, this programme contributed to self-development, self-esteem and self-confidence. It helped people to get rid of addictions and bad habits to respect the indwelling God rather than to obey social discipline under command of a saint or guru. It also inspired people to cure themselves of egoism and arrogance. It reinforced unselfish altruism. At the community level, it created social bonds of love, tolerance, understanding, cooperation and equality before God among people across the barriers of caste, wealth, education and occupational status.

New Economic Role of God

Dada's mind then began to explore new areas of work in pursuit of his ideas on religion and God. His trips to villages made him aware of the conditions of stark poverty, suffering and indignity

among the lowest rungs of the rural socio-economic hierarchy. He then began to skillfully combine his interpretation of scriptural religion and his concern for the weaker sections of rural India to evolve experiments in collective action for generation and distribution of impersonal wealth.

The first experiment in this direction was undertaken in coastal villages in Gujarat and Maharashtra which contained masses of fisherfolk living in dire poverty. Dada inspired the relatively affluent members of this community to form a special fund from collection of their offerings to the local deity. This fund was used to provide financial help to poor families in the form of God's *prasada* (grace). Following what Dada regarded as the role of a local shrine in ancient days, it was used by Dada as a catalyst of new socio-economic bonds between rich and poor. This experiment served excellently to demonstrate the current relevance of an ancient religious ideal. Subsequently, the funds raised as God's wealth were used to acquire fishing boats called *Matsyagandha* after a legendary mother of an author of holy writings. The boats were operated by the local *pujaris* who combined fishing with songs of devotion and gratitude, converting a mundane economic activity into an act of worship. The income generated through this enterprise was partly distributed among the poor villagers as *prasada* and the balance was credited to a fund earmarked for future help to the poor and needy. Incidentally, a total amount of Rs.3.5 million was recently disbursed with Dada's blessings among young fishermen to enable them to launch small business enterprises.

The success of *Matsyagandha* led the way for several other projects of socio-economic collaboration and creation of impersonal wealth for community development through bonds of love and brotherhood by God's children in His name. A visit to Israel had left in Dada a deep impression

of the success of community farming in *Kibbutzim*. At the same time, he was agonized by the plight of the poor people in areas of Gujarat perennially hit by scarcity of water and vegetation.

Labours of Love and Worship

Beginning mid 1970s, he introduced several socio-economic programmes in creation of impersonal wealth and regeneration of physical environment in the acutely deprived Saurashtra-Kutch region in Gujarat. Among these programmes, *yogeshwar krushi* (the Lord's farm) involves farming by a village community on an earmarked plot of land. All farming inputs including labour are voluntarily contributed by members of the community in rotation. *Vruksha Mandir* (tree-temple) is a large plot of land leased to grow and cultivate orchards and forestry usually at a place popularly perceived as hopeless wasteland. The major inputs are contributed by people in neighbouring villages. Usually, twenty villages in a local area are chosen for this purpose. *Shridarshanam* (God's scenario) is collaborative development and cultivation of a large plot of land by people in a cluster of twenty villages. *Lokmath Amrutalayam* (the immortal abode of people's Lord) is a village temple built and managed by local people by voluntary contribution of all inputs and performance of daily worship by man-and-wife couples from all sections of the community.

The establishment and management of all these community programmes are organized on principles of collective action as prescribed by Dada. The decision to launch a project at a village or wider level is strictly supervised by Dada. He needs evidence that the majority (about 80 per cent) of the concerned population has accepted the basic *Swadhyaya* discipline of *trikal sandhya* and participation in weekly meetings. He also demands commitment from local *Swadhyaya* leaders that people will faultlessly honour their obligation to work as *pujaris* at given intervals to maintain and raise the quality of output. He constantly reminds them that the most crucial desired output of their joint venture is formation and reinforcement of selfless love across social boundaries and

prejudices. He continually reminds them of the spirit of God underlying every plant and shrub and drop of water. The income generated through all the projects is credited to funds reserved for the uplift of the poor in the respective communities - either immediately or in the long run.

While the majority of these socio-economic enterprises are still located in Gujarat, some efforts in creation of *yogeshwar krushi* and *loknath amrutalayam* have been made in other regions. There are at present over 3000 *yogeshwar krushi* farms, twenty *vruksha mandir* farms, ten *shridarshanam* plots and about a hundred *amrutalayam* shrines.

Recharging Water Reservoirs

As I have mentioned earlier, a large part of *Swadhyaya* work has grown in the arid regions of Saurashtra and Kutch.³ The problem of water scarcity in this region has serious implications for human and animal survival. With his unique humane awareness of this problem, Dada continually stressed in his discourses the critical importance of conservation and prudent use of water as a divine resource. "If you quench the thirst of Mother Earth, she will quench yours,"⁴ he advised his followers. Government and scientists were aware of the value of recharging of wells and tanks for augmentation of water resources, but no concrete plan of action had materialized for effective and affordable recharging. Dada's concerns and ideas inspired a group of *Swadhyaya* activists in Junagadh area to evolve simple and inexpensive methods of recharging wells and reservoirs. They received technical help and guidance from local farm scientists and technical experts. Groups of volunteers were organized at the village, sub-district and district levels. The volunteers received relevant technical training on water recharge.

The specific mode of recharging a well or tank depends on various factors relating to the size and topography of a reservoir. The main underlying principle, however, is simple. All water in the neighbourhood should be channelized into a waterhold in the vicinity of the reservoir and water should be diverted into the reservoir after filtering out silt, foliage and other undesirable substances. This process of recharging for the most part involves physical labour of digging and clearing soil. Capital investment is extremely low, limited to common pipes and filters.

The *Swadhyaya* activists developed proficiency in the methods of recharging by acquiring knowledge about the various types of reservoirs and their physical settings. They estimated the need of recharging about 80000 wells in the Saurashtra-Kutch region. By May 1994, about 23000 wells were already recharged. The Junagadh Swadhyaya group working on this project was determined to move around in the area and encourage owners of all wells to recharge them. Manual labour for the project was provided in the usual *Swadhyaya* spirit by fellow *swadhyayis* who offered their energy in the form of *shrambhakti* (devotion of labour). No reward in cash or kind was accepted by the voluntary workers who regarded the labour as an offering to the Lord.

Some friends and I observed in June 1994 an outstanding effort in recharging of water resources in a village where a project of constructing a simple check-dam to impound waters flowing in a rivulet was in the final stage of completion. A group of young men constituting the local unit of the *Swadhyaya* youth centre had conceived and undertaken this project to store the rivulet water in a tank created within it by means of the dam. The stones and soil dug out to make the tank were used to build a 100-metre long dam. The main purpose of this project was to preserve water in the river-

tank to raise the water table for wells in the neighbouring villages. The entire project was executed by an extremely innovative deployment of collective labour. Over a thousand men and women from villages around the dam site had offered their time and energy for the purpose in the spirit of *shrambhakti*. Typically, the males worked on the dam site for about six hours from 7.30 in the evening after they had finished work on their own farms. The females worked during the day in neighbourhood groups. The people had followed this pattern of work for nine months when we visited the place and they were expecting to finish the work within a week. Barring small amounts of money spent on explosives to break stone, no cash expenditure was involved in this work. Had the project been executed in a conventional manner, it would have cost around Rs.400,000.

The socio-economic results of the well-recharging project were visible to a casual observer. A farmer with recharged well could take multiple crops. Both the quantity and quality of output had improved. In several cases, recharging of a well on one farm had surprisingly welcome effects on the non-recharged wells in the neighbourhood. The availability of water had increased.

Shah (1997.) has lately collected information to suggest that 92-96 thousand wells were recharged in the area between 1992 and 1998 mainly through initiative taken by *Swadhyaya* and the *Swaminarayan* sect. "Then, there are back-of-the-envelope calculations; for example, Vayak and Khanpara (1994) estimated that the 10000 wells recharged in Kutch and Saurashtra during 1993-94 cost the farmers Rs.50 lakh (5 million) but raised the output by Rs.80 crore (800 million).⁵

Richness of Small Efforts

I learnt in one village about the multiple socio-economic effects of an ingenious programme for the disposal of water used for washing and cleaning by construction of soak pits. A soakpit collects drainage water which percolates underground to contribute in tiny quantities to the water table in a neighbourhood. Along with this advantage, the soakpit device also keeps the village streets free of slush and puddles with positive effects on the standard of cleanliness in a neighbourhood and the health of the people. The villagers claimed that the incidence of malaria and other water-borne ailments in the village had declined since the adoption of soakpits. As in the case of recharging of wells, the soakpits were made by collective manual labour organized by *swadhyayis* as *shrambhakti*. Raju et al (2000) have documented their recent experience with *Swadhyaya* efforts in soakpit construction in a village in Saurashtra.

Swadhyaya's programme for raising the water storage capacity of community tanks and ponds is known as *nirmal neer* (pure water). This helps in recharging of wells and reservoirs in the neighbouring areas. A time-bound (usually 10-15 days) project is designed to dig out soil from a tank and use it, as far as possible, for construction of a check-dam or for harvesting additional rain water from adjacent locations into the tank. All material (tractors, pickaxes, buckets) is provided by *swadhyayis* in the surrounding villages who are usually joined by non-*swadhyayis* in large numbers. The work is typically performed during evenings to avoid clash with the volunteers' routine work. Women and children share the load of work in large proportions. A visitor to a *nirmal neer* work-site cannot fail to be moved by the picnic-like social atmosphere as well as a

crusader-like spirit exuded by the volunteers in spite of very hard physical labour they perform at a time when they normally relax or sleep. The social bonding of love and goodwill which is created among *swadhyayis* as well as between them and others is truly remarkable. See Raju et al (2000), pp.12-15. According to information recently supplied by a *Swadhyaya* leader involved in *nirmal neer*, about 400 tanks have so far been covered under the project.

We have now plenty of evidence to suggest that the *Swadhyaya* approach to creation and maintenance of common property resources has much potential to serve as a pathfinder. *Swadhyaya* leads us to see how an enterprise can be promoted and serve its stakeholders effectively if it involves them all at all stages of its birth and growth. In fact, an economic project administered through popular involvement may prove more successful than a project sponsored and managed by heavy inputs from government or professional experts. I know of *swadhyayi* farm enterprises which were successfully developed with poor people's resources in spite of easy availability of funds from government. These poor people had built enough collective confidence to refuse outside aid and manage their needs by prudent pulling of their meagre resources. These included, at least in one case, young tribal women's spontaneous offer of their modest jewellery to raise money for more productive irrigation in their farms.

Social Work as God's Work

People's involvement is not altogether uncommon in government-sponsored or cooperative enterprise. Most voluntary agencies engaged in development work also recognize people's

participation as a valuable input. However, the sentimental and social forces driving people's involvement are replete with the conventional notions of service, sacrifice, donation, charity, generosity, obligation, responsibility and the like. A dramatic example of the limitations of achievement of goals in enterprise promoted with these honourable notions is provided by the world-famous *Bhoodan* (land gift) movement pioneered by the saintly Gandhian leader Vinoba Bhave in the 1960s. Bhave honestly and earnestly treated the world as a single fraternity and selfless love as the main cementing force for human bonds. His mission inspired thousands of social workers in most parts of India to dedicate themselves to reduction of poverty, illiteracy and indignity. Yet *Bhoodan* was founded on the pillars of sacrifice and charity. In consequence, self-interest of the rich and the powerful often dominated the needs of the poor. The movement yielded only modest results.

This is where *Swadhyaya* makes the difference. When a *Swadhyayi* is inducted in a community project, he is already intellectually attuned to believe that human cooperation and collaboration should be based on fraternal love, mutual respect and recognition of human dignity regardless of social or emotional disparities. Work for others is not social service or social work in the professional sense. It is an extension of devotion to God. Work for a *swadhyayi* is worship in an overarching sense. A *swadhyayi* learns to look upon the identity of every human being as a shrine of God. Hence commitment to work is commitment to God.

Matters of Sustainability

Can the *Swadhyaya* approach then be perceived as the most effective approach in development and

management of community programmes? The answer to this question involves issues of growth and replicability.

All ideas and activities characterizing *Swadhyaya* work today have emanated from a single source: Dada's extraordinary intellectual capability, vision and personality. Dada's ideas and prescriptions on religion, society and God are disseminated repeatedly and regularly to all *Swadhyayis* over the world with the aid of modern audio-visual technology. Video projections are especially effective in establishing and maintaining a personal bond between Dada and each individual follower. Dada spiritually and psychologically presides over all *Swadhyaya* gatherings, however small or large, anywhere in the world. All significant *Swadhyaya* work is subject to overall supervision and sanction from Dada. While Dada never projects for himself the role of a saint or superhuman being, large numbers of *Swadhyayis* have emotionally and culturally trained themselves to look upon Dada as a messiah.

Within this framework of Dada's perceived role, all *Swadhyaya* work proceeds at a rather slow pace. Dada, for good reason, is concerned about viability and sustainability of a project at the initial stage. Hence he looks for hard evidence of commitment of both leaders and supporters for an activity. This entails a great deal of caution and care in approval for a new activity. These factors should play an important role in forecasting the effects of adoption of the *Swadhyaya* model on accomplishment of specific goals of community development.

A related issue involves Dada's unique charismatic leadership. With the kind of personal involvement and sanctioning authority Dada holds, issues regarding succession are riddled with

doubts and uncertainties. Will *swadhyayis* look for Dada in his successor? Will the successor replace Dada in his role as seer and saviour?

A third question pertains to *Swadhyaya's* continuing commitment to tasks of community development. While all the major existing programmes have yielded excellent results, it is not uncommon for Dada and his supporters to stress that their major objective is to build and promote bonds of divinity and fraternity among people. The economic logic and outcome of the programmes are repeatedly projected to have secondary value. In fact, one often notices ambivalence in *swadhyayi* ideas and plans with regard to developmental work. For instance, a senior leader concerned with *nirmal neer* recently observed that this programme was not essentially designed to augment recharging capacity of tanks. Dada was from the beginning aware that a viable programme of recharging implied large financial and labour inputs which the people in the villages selected for *nirmal neer* could not afford. *Nirmal neer* was envisaged mainly as a demonstration and reinforcement of pure (unselfish) bonds of love among *swadhyayis* and others. The programme, I learn, is not likely to be resumed.

Finally, the long-term efficacy of the *Swadhyaya* model should depend upon how it influences the *swadhyayi* population in course of time. As the movement grows in size and territory, members may develop new ideas and aspirations. Should the movement be managed with a more formal organization? How should divergence of experience and opinion be incorporated in management of programmes and activities? Should it develop a political clout to deal with current social problems? How should one manage accumulated material resources in the context of the ideal of impersonal

wealth? How long and how well will *swadhyayis* be able to follow the principle of universal godhood and brotherhood in the face of the modern aggressively dominating god of greed, wealth and consumerism?

These and several other questions are raised from time to time by observers of *Swadhyaya*. But hardly do they diminish its value for the society we are destined to live in. A world containing the social, economic and spiritual yield of a movement as ennobling as *Swadhyaya* will always be a more decent place to live in than a world without it.⁶

Endnotes

- 1 I am grateful to Professor Vishwa Ballabh for inspiring me to prepare this paper at a short notice.
- 2 The information and observations on various aspects of *Swadhyaya* recorded in this paper are based on published sources as well as my contacts among *swadhyayi* activists since 1991. Numbers and dates mentioned at various places are likely to be approximate due to non-availability of authentic records. The principal published sources I have followed include Sheth (1997) and Srivastava (1998). A study of social change resulting from *Swadhyaya* made by a research team including me has also influenced my thoughts and perceptions. An overview of this research effort has been published in Shah et al (1998). I gratefully acknowledge my intellectual debt to friends and colleagues. Dada and his daughter Didi have been a constant source of love, affection, inspiration and information.
- 3 Information on recharging of wells and construction of soakpits included is largely adapted from corresponding information in Sheth (1997).
- 4 This admonition and some other information on well-recharging is borrowed from Shah (1997.).
- 5 Shah (1997.), pp. 18-20.
- 6 I am grateful to M Kaliappan for precious secretarial help.

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