

Religion and Development in Contemporary India: The Self-Study Mobilization of Swadhyaya and the Calling of Transformations¹

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The political, ethical, social, philosophical problem of our days is not try to liberate the individual from the state and its institutions but to liberate us both from the State and the type of individualization linked to the State. We have to promote new forms of subjectivity [..]

Michel Foucault (2005), *Hermeneutics of the Subject*, p. 544.

Exiting from the palaces and mansions of the powerful, faith—joined by philosophical wisdom—is beginning to take shelter in inconspicuous smallness, in those recesses of ordinary life unavailable to co-optation.

Fred Dallmayr (2005), *Small Wonder: Global Power and Its Discontents*, p. 4.

Post-independent India confronted with the challenge of building a society of dignity has witnessed varieties of mobilizations. While some of these have been political such as the Naxalite movements others have raised issues of self-development, cultural identity and societal transformations drawing inspirations from religious and spiritual traditions of the land. The self-study mobilization of Swadhyaya has been one of the most-widespread mobilisations emanating from the religious and spiritual traditions of the land but now globalized and at work in different countries around the world. Swadhyaya means study of self but self here does not mean only possessive individualism nor ego but a universal dimension within oneself which is connected with others as a reality as well as possibility. As a major departure from many aspects of India's spiritual traditions where self-study and self-development are more often pursued in a mode of isolated meditation and lonely quest, self-development and self-study in Swadhyaya are practiced also in devotionally active relationships with others. In Swadhyaya efforts in self-study and self-development are encouraged to be linked with going out to and with the other and creating life-elevating *prayogas* or projects.

Foundations of Swadhyaya

Bhakti (devotion) is the foundation of Swadhyaya. The idea of indwelling God that God resides in every heart and works in every body is at the core of the vision and practice of Swadhyaya. Swadhyaya draws inspiration from Bhagavad Gita that God resides in everybody's heart.³¹ There is a universal connectedness in every heart as a locus of God.

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³ For the Swadhyaya founder Pandurang Sastri Athavale, Gita possesses the quality of a *prasada*, i.e., simplicity of language and benediction. Gita encourages us to “appreciate the poetic view of life” (Athavale 1970: 69). But for Athavale, “The poetic ideal of life however cannot eradicate from its root the passion from human mind. If the chapter on Bibhuti Yoga is to be fully understood in true perspective, one must remember

Bhakti or devotion is an acknowledgement of this inner divinity in oneself and others. In Swadhyaya, as Ramashmy Roy, one of the earliest social scientists reflecting on the work of Swadhyaya tells us: "Devotion is not simply worship. Devotion is an orientation, an outlook that induces one to develop one's capabilities to the fullest and then open them in the source of God who resides in all human beings. It thus combines in itself both knowledge and action" (Roy MS: 36). The idea of indwelling God as a foundation of Swadhyaya gives a new self-identity to participants. As Rahenema argues, power and empowerment are perceived very differently here: "[...] The very notion of *Aham Brahma Asmi* [I am Brahman] excludes by definition the concept of anyone's powerlessness" (Rahenema: 14).

Bhakti is usually thought of as an emotionally charged relationship with one's divine interlocutor but Swadhyaya makes a distinction between Bhava Bhakti and Kruti Bhakti – emotional devotion and actional devotion – and emphasizes the need for both. In Kruti Bhakti one embodies one's devotion in concrete acts of labor and love for and with the other. For Swadhyaya, one is impoverished without the other. Athavale, the founder of Swadhyaya says: "I see Bhakti as an understanding of God's profound love for us. We respond to that in the form of active concern for His creation" (Athavale 1997: 9). Linking self and other through Bhakti and pointing towards a perspective of responsibility Athavale writes: "Bhakti is our entry point through which we develop bonds of brotherhood. Because of its voluntary nature, obligations are self-incurred. From passive spectators and helpless victims we become responsible for our lives and the world in which we live" (ibid).

Bhaktipheri or devotional travel is the starting point of this realization of one's responsibility to oneself and the other where one goes out to meet with the other in a spirit of devotion. In Bhaktipheri one comes out of oneself and meets with the other. Bhaktipheri is the first step towards self-development as co-development. "Bhaktipheri is not only indicative of person's resolve to take time out from his busy life to offer it to God and do God's work. It is also indicative of the person's willingness to explore, consolidate and enrich his self knowledge and, at the same time, make others partners in this process" (Roy MS: 43). Swadhyaya movement began when 19 young people undertook Bhaktipheri from Bombay to the villages of Gujarat in 1958. Bhaktipheri is a foundational act of Swadhyaya in both a genealogical as well as constitutive sense. It is in fact continued Bhaktipheri for twenty years which led to the widening of the circle of Swadhyaya and also the starting of its many socio-economic projects in well-being.

Bhaktipheri provides an opportunity to come out of oneself and realize that one is not just one's ego, or just social role; it provides an opportunity to experience homelessness, touch the transcendental dimension within oneself and the other and establish new relationships. While Bhaktipheri can be conducted anywhere, for example in UK Swadhyayees from London going to Leicester, in Indian context it has the primary meaning of going to the village, predominantly by town dwellers but also by villagers from one village to the other. In Swadhyaya going to village, moving from one village to the other, is

that it is an attempt on the part of the Lord to bring near God who is outside Nature and far beyond it, without degrading him or without his deneration. The God in Heaven becomes the God in Nature, the God in Nature becomes the God who is Nature, the God who is Nature becomes the God within the temple of the body and the God dwelling in the temple of the body is finally identified with him – the devotee. The chapters on Vibhuti Yoga and Viswarupa Darshana Yoga make the devotee a really God integrated personality. This is not sublimation, but purely a conversion of the outlook towards Nature and its objects" (Athavale 1970: 70).

considered a spiritual work par excellence.² Probably after Gandhi this is the most vibrant initiative in civil society where going to village and undertaking rural development is considered redemptive and transformative for the self. To understand the crucial significance of village in Swadhyaya the following comments of Ashis Nandy are helpful: "[...] Many Indians have come up to own up the colonial city as the self, the village as the other [...] This reimagined village cannot take care of itself [...] All initiatives in the village, including remedies for social discrimination and institutionalized violence must originate in the city. [...] As the flip side of the same story, the village of imagination has become a scene, pastoral paradise [...] The village symbolizes control over self; the city reeks of self-indulgence and the absence of self-restraint" (Nandy 2001: 12-13). In Swadhyaya, it seems, both these imaginations of the village are at work. While Swadhyayees go to villages, in fact, as a spiritual pilgrimage much of the critical discussion about work in the village is now concentrated in the city. While earlier members of the Swadhyaya decision-making and deliberative body were also from the village, now they are mainly from the district or the *taluka* or block (county) headquarters.

Swadhyaya presents itself neither as a movement nor as a voluntary organization but as a *Parivara*- family. But family as the foundational metaphor of Swadhyaya, Athavale himself tells us, "is not a structural perspective. It is a perspective of shared divinity and caring family" (ibid).⁴

In Swadhyaya, both the rich and the poor are encouraged to participate in a set of activities which is meant to bring 'man closer to man.' In Swadhyaya *bhaktipharis* continued meeting between those who have knowledge and wealth and those who do not have become the starting point of a critical reflection on the existing life and building collective foundations of welfare and well-being. This begins with a series of projects where people can come together and share their time and labor. Among the farmers, this initiative is called *Yogeshwara Krisbi* or Lord's farming. The Swadhyayees of a village take a piece of land on lease and cultivate it. They cultivate it through their own labour. Swadhyayees consider their work in community farming as an instance of *sharamabhakti*, devotional labour. They consider their work as worship and themselves not as volunteers but as *pujaris*, worshippers. Whatever is the produce from collective farming is considered as *apoureshaya laxmi* or impersonal wealth by the Swadhyayees. Ideally this wealth belongs neither to individuals nor to the communities but to God. One-third of this wealth stays at the village level and the remainder is deposited in a Trust in the name of the village at the Swadhyaya headquarters in Mumbai. Similar is also the arrangement in case of the community-fishing boat among the fishermen which is called *matsyagandha*. This is manned by the *shrama bhakti* of the fisher men in the community.

⁴ Pankaj Jain, a participant as well as researcher of Swadhyaya helps us understand another dimension of this emphasis on village in Swadhyaya. He suggests that people in the cities did not respond well to Swadhyaya's messages: "When Dadaji formally launched Swadhyaya in 1956, people were largely secularized in cities in post-independent India. Urban Indians had no interest or search for anything to do with religion" (Jain 2004: 14).

⁵ But there are certain recent organizational changes in Swadhyaya which point to the limit of Swadhyaya's self-conception of itself as a family. During a recent interview a leader in Ahmedabad tells us: "Swadhyaya has grown in all directions and in haphazard manner. Didi [the present leader of Swadhyaya] has now to make it an orderly organization. Earlier a lot of compromises were made keeping in mind the need of individual workers. Now some workers may have to be sacrificed to maintain the purity of the organization." But what is important is that still Swadhyaya continues to present itself as a family. For present-day Swadhyaya leaders, the greatest challenge is how to keep it family like and, at the same time, have strict organizational discipline.

Swadhyaya applies similar approach to creating institutions of collective well-being in case of different communities. Among the diamond cutters it has an experiment called *Hira Mandir* or the Temple of Diamond which works through the same principle of generating impersonal wealth through *shramabhakti*. Among the businessmen it has an experiment called Parivara Stores. The doctors of a locality come together and run a hospital through the same principle of *bhakti*.

While the above are community or group specific programs there are also many programs which bring different communities together. One is the *brukhamandir* prayoga or the project of the tree temple. In the tree temple, people from surrounding villages and towns, from different social and professional backgrounds--farmers, fishermen, and doctors--come and take care of the community garden. They worship plants and trees in this garden as gods. Sri Darshana is another project in agriculture which works at a supra-village level where villagers from surrounding twenty or more villages come and work together. All these projects provide Swadhyayees opportunities to work "selflessly" for the generation of impersonal wealth and the creation of the common good. Swadhyaya argues that as individuals work on their own firms and professions and generate profit for themselves there must be also such platforms of creativity and productivity where they do not produce for themselves but do so for a common good.

Swadhyaya's practice of devotional labor makes it part of the genre of practical spirituality in societies and histories where people of faith drawing inspirations from various sources—religion, science, art, and spiritual realizations—undertake concrete activities to transform human suffering and create conditions of beauty (cf. Giri forthcoming). Practical spirituality does not become a victim of ideological construction of poverty in the postwar development discourse; rather it acknowledges universal human and social suffering and seeks to transform conditions of suffering through creative struggles and works of beauty. In practical spirituality, there is no dual division of the world into developed and developing as all of us are suffering beings and we are all in need of transformative actions and self-development. Practical spirituality also emphasizes learning, especially co-learning, mutual learning, and contingency and challenges us to go beyond the authoritarian closure of both religion and development.

Swadhyaya's emphasis on devotional labor as it creates seeds within itself for practical spirituality resonates with movements from many traditions such as Habitat Humanity in the US where its followers build houses for low-income families. It also resonates with works on human development initiated by Mata Amritanadamayi Matha in India with a global reach and Satya Sai Seva Dala. Matha Amritanadamany Devi has been building houses for poor and low-income families and after the Tsunami her Matha has redoubles its work in building. Similarly Satya Sai Baba has undertaken projects to create water canals and channels for drinking water in drought prone regions of India. The germs of practical spirituality in Swadhyaya also resonates with another significant work in human development in India, namely the integral education movement where participants drawing inspiration from Sri Aurobindo and Mother builds schools embodying a child-centered pedagogy and working in materially difficult situations with little money (cf. Giri 2004).

For its welfare activities, Swadhyaya says that it does not accept any grant from the State nor any donation from the rich. *Shramabhakti* or devotional labor where time and labor are not sold through the media of money and market (cf. Offe & Heinze 1992) is the source of impersonal wealth here. The vision and generation of impersonal wealth has a spiritual foundation in Swadhyaya. God is a partner in one's time and labor, hence the wealth generated does not solely belong to the actor, God has a share in this wealth too. This share of God must

be taken out for doing God's work which means working for creating a better condition of material and spiritual life for God's children. Swadhyaya believes in the following dictum of Manu Samhita—the Laws of Manu-- that when one is 18, one should keep 8th part of one's income for one's use and one part ought to be taken out as God's share for deployment in God's work and when one is 81, 8th part of one's income must be utilized for God's work, and one part for one's use. Pandurang Shastri Athavale, the leader of Swadhyaya, has a commentary on *Sri Suktam*, a series of prayers offered to Goddess Laxmi, the Goddess of Wealth, in which he develops a spiritual approach to wealth. This spiritual approach to wealth where one is required to be related to wealth in a non-possessive, non-proprietary and impersonal way has a potential to overcome the limitations of private capital in the creation of a good society, a task which has remained unfinished in the agenda of modernity. Marxian vision and practice of abolition of private property was a step in this direction but it did not succeed. A spiritual relationship with wealth accompanied by a project of radical democracy in society where social institutions are governed by principles of justice and spirit of moral argumentation may provide us a way out of the continued problem of rapacious private capital as a source of obstacle to realization of full human potential and many distortions and exploitations in society (cf. Giri 2002a).

There is however the challenge of theory and practice in this project too. The vision and projects of Swadhyaya focus on spiritual regeneration of impersonal wealth but in practice there still seems to be a lot of gaps in terms of realizing this normative potential of relating to wealth in a non-possessive manner and using the so-called "impersonal wealth" generated out of Swadhyaya collective projects for the well-being of the poorest of the poor in the local communities. Only one-third of the *Mahalaxmi* (impersonal wealth) generated stays in the local community and two-third of it is sent to a Swadhyaya-run Trust in Mumbai. Even at the level of the local communities in many instances this one-third is not fully utilized even if there is a lot of deprivation. Moreover, local followers of Swadhyaya share this wealth only with the fellow members of Swadhyaya family, not with all the poor, downtrodden and the low-caste of the village

Swadhyayees are proud to tell that Swadhyaya is not a *panth* (sect) but a *samjhan* or understanding. Furthermore there is no formal membership of Swadhyaya --- one can come and go at any time. But in 2001, twenty one followers of Swadhyaya, all of them very active and some who had pioneered the initial Swadhyaya Bhaktiphari in 1958, were expelled from Swadhyaya. This outward explosion for the first time followed probably a long internal struggle within Swadhyaya Parivara about many issues such as proper use of impersonal wealth generated out of devotional labor, but most crucially about succession. Athavale did not have his own child though he has been married for long and he had adopted his brother's daughter. Jayashree Talwalkar, Dadajee's adopted daughter who is also known in Swadhyaya Parivara as Didi, was chosen by Athavale to be his successor. This was not accepted by those Swadhyayees who had found some supposedly serious character flaws in Didi.^{6[9]} Many of them were expelled in January 2001. It is important here to take note of the circumstances in which they were expelled. In December 2000 Swadhyaya organized a huge celebration in the banks of Narmada in Bharuch to celebrate the 80th birth day of Dadajee. Didi and her supporters used this also as an event for the coronation of Didi. According to a sympathetic observer of Swadhyaya: "This seemed to have been a violation of the arrangement Dada had

⁶ The alleged issue was Didi having an extra-marital relationship. There was also serious question about her prudent use of Swadhyaya resources.

agreed to: The affairs of Swadhyaya would be managed by a committee of senior and dedicated swadyayees and Didi would not be the sole authority."

The brief description of the story of Swadhyaya shows us that like all of us, individually as well as collectively, Swadhyaya has a contentious dimension to its history. This contentious dimension in Swadhyaya's history is probably related to the foundational principles of Swadhyaya itself. Bhakti and Gita's Karmayoga are foundations of Swadhyaya. These bring Swadhyaya's devotion to the social field and create the possibility of an enriching intertwinement between spirituality and human development. But Swadhyaya is not only concerned with open-ended spiritual quest as one of its most foundational practice Bhakti-pheri would suggest. Swadhyaya, especially its founder Athavale, is equally concerned with order. He writes about it clearly in his *Thoughts on Glorious Heritage*: "If we want vedic culture to survive we have to maintain the age old traditions. To this end, the Upanishads are absolutely necessary. But above all we want Manu and the social life envisaged by him. Let Manu come first and then the Upanishads" (Athavale 1975: 84). Athavale defends the system of Varna and caste allocation by birth. Drawing on the so-called scientific arguments from eugenics and biology that "inherent attributes are hereditary, acquired one's are non-hereditary," Athavale writes: "Viswamitra had acquired Brahmin attributes, he had not inherited them because he was not a Brahmin by birth and therefore Vasistha refused to recognize him as one" (ibid: 101). Did such a conception of inheritance make Athavale choose her adopted daughter as his chosen successor? But here Athavale's defense of Manu needs to be put in perspective.⁷ As Daniel Gold writes: "Dadajee accepts the significance of birth caste, pointing to the relevance of training" (Gold 1998: 181). Athavale urges us to appreciate the fact that in Varna Vyavastha everybody had an occupation. Athavale argues: "Equality should not mean equality of opportunity but equal guarantee of the means of livelihood" (Athavale 1975: 175). Probably keeping the contemporary condition of destruction of livelihood of shoemakers in mind Athavale writes: "[...] a Vaishya can diversify and will be able to do the business of a shoe maker also. As more skilled in salesmanship, he will earn more than the shoemaker. In the course of time, the shoemaker will be wiped out. Similarly if a Vaishya and a carpenter compete the carpenter will be ruined or will have to become the slave of the Vaishya. Equality of opportunity may thus ruin the weak or make them slaves" (ibid: 192). In these days of capitalist globalization when the only normative value is profit making no matter whether it destroys others or not Athavale's arguments needs to be at least heard.⁸ Athavale further challenges the egalitarians and what

⁷ During a recent interview an associate of Dadaji from his early days but who is no more in the present structure tells us: "Dadaji was radical in his personal life but while expressing his views he was traditional. We have to understand that Dadaji started his work as a preacher of Bhagvad Gita in a pathasala, he was not a social worker, nor a reformist. He was a Brahmin."

⁸ That this is not a fiction of imagination can be appreciated by reading the following accounts of the condition of the leather workers in India:

The leather industry in India has been modernized and technology and market have taken over the art and skill of the Madiga [a low-caste people dealing with skin and leather]. Now those who matter in the industry which fetches nothing less Rs. 8000 crores per annum, for Bharat's exchequer, are the Brahmin, the Bainya, the Kamma, the Reddy and the Muslims, not mention the all-gobbling Globalizing Market itself. The stigma of pollution by leather has been removed by the Mammon of big money. In the bargain, the Madiga, the Chamar has been alienated from his own work and product, his sweat and blood. This is not the language of Karl Marx in a new

he write needs to be heard by those who do not find the individual income distinction of the present as an assault on human dignity: "[According to Manu] the highest wages should not be more than four times the lowest wages. Who is a socialist?" (ibid: 179).

There is no point in hiding also these foundational premises of Swadhyaya either by the participant or the observer but what is certainly helpful for all of us concerned is to suspend our quick judgment and resist the temptation of either one-sided celebration or total condemnation. Instead there is a lot to learn from Swadhyaya. Swadhyaya Parivara has spread to thousands of villages and towns in Gujarat, Maharashtra and some other parts of the land as well as in the USA, the UK and other countries in the West and the Middle East. "The SP followers have taken up a wide range of programs of individual and social development. The membership of Swadhyaya Parivara has expanded to several millions of whom" 200,000 are active Swadhyayees (Shah [et.al](#) 1998:6). Now nearly two lakh active Swadhyayees undertake Bhaktipheri and they have also done outstanding work in local communities in field such as water harvesting. Swadhyaya has given a new normative vision to million of people that life is not only *bhoga* (consumption) but is also a continued striving to enrich oneself and others. Majid Rahenema who unlike many others is not a mesmerized sociological observer of Swadhyaya still writes. "From what I have seen, particularly in the villages, it has brought to ordinary human beings a new sense of dignity, different meaning of the self. It has helped them discover new ethical dimensions to their individual and social questions" (Rahenema 1998: 52).

Athavale started his work by going to the down-trodden sections of society such as fisher-folk community--Agri, Bagri, and Sagri as they are told in Swadhyaya discourse. Dada wanted to make everybody a Brahmin while at the same time retaining the caste. "Dada has given yagnopaveeta (sacred thread which only the twice born caste Hindus are entitled to carry) to fishermen and other lower caste Swadhyayees, a blasphemous act in the eyes of the orthodox" (Srivastava 1998: 23). But this may not be so blasphemous as both Brahman spiritual teachers as well as low-caste social movements have provided their followers sacred threads irrespective of caste (see Rao 1979).

In his work, Athavale has also taken steps to bring about reconciliation among warring groups. A notable work here is the reconciliation and peace established between Kharwars and Mers in Porbander. Dada facilitated such reconciliation by holding a Satyanarayan Puja in which families from both the communities would sit with the idol of Satyanarayan and pray. It was not a grand sacrificial puja; it was a low-cost affair. Actors of Swadhyaya have also worked with many critical communities and cases. Shraman Munja was an underworld don in Porbander. While in jail he accepted Swadhyaya. He seemed to have renounced the path of violence and was killed by his rivals. Another instance of much talked about change is the village Nandrekh in Saurashtra which has featured in Shyam Benegal's film on Swadhyaya entitled *Antarnada*. This village had the notoriety of being a dacoit village. People in the surrounding villages were afraid of the people of this village. In fact, Benegal's film features a person who had killed another person in another village on contract. Probably first time in my life, I had the opportunity to shake hand with somebody

avatar! This is the raw fact of the Madiga, still doing the polluting work, whether at home, in his crude vat or in the modern leather factory, where technology has taken over. Madiga still provides the manpower, does the dirty work, and earns a pittance. The removal of this alienation from the life and work of the Madiga is a question of his Human Rights and the Right to be Human (interview with Dr. Nandini Joseph, Central Leather Research Institute, Chennai in Maliyekkal 2003: 29).

who had committed a murder. This person is an active member of Swadhyaya Parivara in this village. This village is part of Kandhi Sri Darshanam and is close to the village Untwala where I did my fieldwork. People of Nandrekh now lead a normal life and they also have an Amrutalayam in their village. Nandrekh is presented as an example of transformation taking place in society as a result of Swadhyaya work on self-development and Bhakhpheri as co-development.

Swadhyaya, Self-Development and Social Transformations

Swadhyaya's socio-economic projects to generate impersonal wealth and to create space where people from different backgrounds can come and work can be looked at as developmental projects. But Swadhyaya says that it is not primarily a project on social development. It does work with self and society and whatever happens in society is a by-product of one's work with oneself.

Swadhyaya gives emphasis on self-development. Development is not just an extraneous process in economic development and political empowerment; it is primarily an initiative in developing one's intellect and heart. It is fundamentally a work on inner transformation. Swadhyaya emphasises the need for "self-cultivation as a means of both personal development and social reconstruction" (Roy MS: 37). Swadhyaya's discourse of self-development can be appreciated by listening to Pappot Bhai, an important grassroots leader of Swadhyaya in Saurashtra, Gujarat. As I was once accompanying Pappot Bhai and his team in the village of Supasi near Veraval Pappot Bhai asked me: "Is building road the only meaning of development? Developing mind, intellect and heart of human beings—is it no development?" This question of Pappot Bhai could be asked to the project of development which, despite its shift from economic development to human development, does not have within itself any striving for development of human heart. Swadhyaya challenges us to reconstitute development not only as an ethical project of trying to do something good to the other but also as an aesthetic project enabling one to discover one's own inner light and engage in developing oneself as a work of art.^{9[13]} This aesthetic work of Swadhyaya challenges us to go beyond the interventionist conception and model of development. As Rahenema argues: "Right action involving others starts always as a personal work on oneself. It is the fruit of an almost divine kind of exercise, which usually takes place in the solitude of thought and action" (Rahenema 1997: 131).

Swadhyaya believes in color, not in mechanical uniformity. Swadhyaya has given new names to different deprived social and caste groups which were earlier being designated only in a negative manner such as fishermen being called *machimar* – the killer of fish. This can be looked at as part of a creative identity formation. Bringing a sense of color to the task of social transformation, Swadhyaya speaks about *pancharanga keranti*—economic revolution, political revolution, social revolution, emotional revolution and spiritual revolution.

^{9[13]} For instance, as suggested in the following lines of Foucault:

What strikes me is the fact that, in our society, art is now linked to objects, rather than to individuals or life itself [...] But couldn't we ourselves, each one of us, make of our lives a work of art? Why should a lamp or a house become the object of art—and not our own lives?

Different Swadhyaya Kendras create a climate of self-development, civil society and a rich associational life in their respective locales. These create a public sphere of meeting and conversations. These Kendras also provide opportunities for learning and they constitute the normative horizon of the everyday terms of discourse. The most important source of learning is the weekly video kendra where Dada's prabachana is shown. In his prabachana, Dada talks about the values of life such as gratitude, self-development and responsibility and touches many issues in history, philosophy, religion and spirituality. Those who come to attend Dada's video prabachana come with their notebooks.

Swadhyaya has also instilled a habit of reading in some. Their number may be less but its significance can not be undermined. Because of Swadhyaya some men and women spend their spare time in reading. The books they read are, of course, Swadhyayee books but they contain seeds of self-development. Even if they do not have spare time they create time for this. The Vidya Premabardhan Pareekhya of Swadhyaya also creates a climate of reading and learning. The illiterate men and women also take part in this.

This work of Swadhyaya in inculcating an aspiration for learning has been particularly significant in case of the farmers. Here the Swadhyaya alternative educational system of *Rishi Krishi* (being a farmer as well as sage) culminating in education at the Tattwagyana Vidyapeeth where sons of farmers as well as sons of other professionals study together create new opportunities for learning for the farmers as well as other participants of Swadhyaya. Swadhyaya is an initiative in people's education which is akin to many movements in society and history around the world such as the folk high school movement in Denmark. Inspired by N.S.F. Grundtvig and Kristen Kold this movement created new schools of life especially for the children of the farmers and strove for realization of "Enlightenment for Life" and "People's Enlightenment" (cf. Borish 1991). At the core of this striving for a new enlightenment was a realization that enlightenment does not "come from rote study of class room texts" but from life itself and this resonates with the strivings and aspirations of many of the practitioners of Swadhyaya we have met in this journey of us.

For some Swadhyayees, because of Swadhyaya there has taken place a lot of socio-economic development in villages. But other self-critical Swadhyayees present us a more nuanced and sober picture of the role of Swadhyaya in people's socio-economic development. Says a young son of a Swadhyayee, "The socio-economic development and agricultural development of the villages are not solely due to Swadhyaya. For him increase in productivity in the field is not because of Swadhyaya. He says: "*Vichar Ayato Manav Badal Saketebe Magar Khetar Kaise*--if Vichara (referring to Swadhyaya thought) comes human beings can change but how can the field?" I discussed with him the significance of well-recharge for the increase in agricultural productivity. He agreed with me and said that increase in productivity in his farm is a result of his well-recharging. In his words: "I did well-recharge two years ago. It has given a lot of benefit to me. Now my water pump runs for many hours, water level does not come down. Previously before Holi, we could run the water pump only for an hour."

But the Swadhyaya well-recharging program is only part of the story. The increase in agricultural productivity is part of the wider agricultural development which is a generalized one, and it is not solely due to Swadhyaya. Increase in water, enhanced methods of cultivation, increased use of pesticide are part of the wider agricultural development. Both the Swadhyayees and non-Swadhyayees have prospered as a result.

Some self-critical Swadhyayees admit: "As much change should have come to villages has not come. There is not much difference in behaviour in the village between those who

do Swadhyaya and those who do not.” But they agree definitely on one change: "Before Swadhyaya came there was a lot of theft in the village but this is no more. Whatever things you leave in the field stays in the field. Earlier both the *kbeduts* (farmers) and *bin-kbeduts* (non-farmers) used to steal. But this is no longer the case."

Different actors in the discursive and social field of Swadhyaya have a differential understanding of the meaning and challenge of development. For Swadhyayees, development consists of developing the mind and intellect of the individual and all the prayogas are initiatives in the development of the individuals and the group. But the non-Swadhyayees of the village have a different developmental expectation from the Swadhyayees. For them, Swadhyaya should build road, cowsheds, give help and credit to the needy in the village. Here we may listen to the comments of Raoji Bhai of Simar: "What development is there you can see by looking at the condition of road of the village!" At the same time Swadhyayees counter such charges by saying that "the goal of Swadhyaya is not to build roads, help the poor, open orphanages and *Annachatras*." These are the work of the social workers. Swadhyayees never fail to assert that they are not social workers but *Bhaktas* and Swadhyaya is neither a social service organization nor a developmental agency. But is Bhakti as a mode of engagement divorced from social commitments and responsibility? There is need for a greater dialogue between the discourse of *Bhakti* and social work, self-development and social development in Swadhyaya.

Swadhyayees speak about *pancharanga kranti*—five-colored revolution—emotional, social, economic, spiritual and political. Swadhyaya has initiated a relational revolution which has its impact in all the fields, most notably the emotional and the social fields. Emotionally Swadhyaya has inspired its participants to discover the soft and subtler dimension of life and in the social field it has created manifold relationships across boundaries of caste and gender. Swadhyaya has impacted upon the economic life of people by creating new opportunities through social networks, by instilling a respect for one's labor and time, by cultivating the art of working together, by helping people realize their inherent and God-given potentiality, and through such important initiatives such as well-recharge and water harvesting which have contributed to enhanced agricultural productivity and generalized well-being. In the political field Swadhyaya states that it has initiated a revolution by replacing electoral contest at the village level with selection. But in none of the multi-caste villages I have worked not a single low-caste person has been nominated as a *sarpanch*. "Selection not election, consensus not contest" has been used as an ideological tool to continue traditional caste and leadership structure in the villages. But another aspect of political revolution that Swadhyaya states that it creates is that it urges citizens to realize their dignity as a human person and citizen. As a Swadhyayee leader once told me, "Once one realizes that one has dignity one is not a purchasable commodity. One would cast one's vote according to one's conscience."

The significance of Swadhyaya lies in generating a relational revolution. Swadhyaya's vision and practice of *shramabhakti*—devotional labor—is an important part of it. *Shramabhakti* brings people from different castes and socio-economic backgrounds together. It has also the potential to overcome one of the annihilating dualisms in Indian tradition, namely the dualism of labor and intellect. In the traditional caste hierarchy, the low-caste have been burdened with the task of labor and production while the Brahmins have been assigned the task of learning, mental labor and abstraction. There is an epochal need for both Brahmins and Dalits to learn from each other in a transgressive manner the *habitus* and values of learning and labor. Dalits can learn the *habitus* of education from Brahmins as Brahminical castes can learn the art of labor from the Dalits. But this is not

possible as long as protagonists of Dalit politics stick to Dalitization as the sole route to emancipation and Brahminical sociologists look at any effort at human betterment as an instance of Sanskritization and offer it as the sole model of social and cultural development (Giri 2002a; Ilaiah 1996). Because of Swadhyaya's emphasis on learning Sanskrit slokas and indirect stress on vegetarianism it is tempting to look at Swadhyaya as an agent of Sanskritization. But Swadhyaya's vision and practice of *shramabhakti* has the potential¹⁰ of embodying a simultaneous cultivation of labor and learning thus going beyond one-sided Brahminization and Dalitization and nurturing a new dialectic of self-realization. It has also a potential to transform the current disembodied conception of civil society and public sphere by bringing to the fore the significance of labor, a labor which at the same time is devotional.¹¹

Swadhyaya has also instilled in its participants an urge for self-development. But self-development has a particular formulaic connotation and manifestation in Swadhyaya. The discourse and narrative of self-development is confined to particular tropes such as people leaving gambling and drinking, husbands stopping beating their wives etc. But self-development does not touch on structural issues such as some influential Swadhyaya followers encroaching the village common land. It also does not address the structural roots of poverty. While Swadhyaya states that tackling poverty requires a change in one's mind and self-conception that one is neither poor nor helpless as one already has within one's heart God as a co-presence realizing which one can overcome one's sense of powerlessness and always take creative action, it still does not acknowledge the structural roots of poverty such as the present land distribution system and class and caste structure.¹² In recent years it has self-development in Swadhyaya has not included development of courage to struggle for truth and justice in the face of violence unleashed by the organization on dissident and autonomous followers.

¹⁰ A fuller realization of this potential still calls for more transformation in Swadhyaya as in Swadhyaya's division of labor the low-caste followers such as the fishermen are assigned tasks such as security and the high-caste Brahmins, supervision.

¹¹ Conceptions of civil society and public sphere in the West, for example that of Habermas, are mostly discursive and do not have a component of embodied participation. Swadhyaya's *shramabhakti* helps us go beyond it and in this way resonates with Gandhi's (1954) conception of bread labor and Ulrich Beck's (2000) conception of civil labor.

¹² One Swadhyayee brother says: "Why there is starvation? Poverty is a product of maldistribution and maladministration. Manusmriti says you should not keep money for fifteen years. Why should you blame Swadhyaya? Why are you bringing somebody's baby to my house?"

Swadhyaya and the Wider Challenges¹³

Self-development also means developing capacity for being responsible for the other. In critical situations and events such capacities are tested. In the last years Gujarat has gone through two calamities-- the earthquake in Kutch and other parts of Gujarat in January-February 2001 and the communal carnage in 2002. The later shocked the conscience of not only the nation but also the entire world as innocent people mostly belonging to the minority Muslim communities were butchered and burnt alive when the Government at both the State and the Center not only stood silent but also actively connived with the killers. While Swadhyaya provided some relief to the victims of natural disaster in Kutch it was silent in the face of the man-made communal holocaust in Gujarat.

In September 2003 I had visited Bhuj, Kutch to understand the impact of the earthquake and the work of organizations such as Swadhyaya. During our discussion one Swadhyaya leader told: "Dadaji was much pained. He had called a meeting of the Swadhyayee workers of Kutch. He urged us to do something concretely about shelter. We said: Dadaji, it would take time. But Dadaji stressed that it is important that people should stand on their feet. They should also start working on their fields. How long can I give?" He continued: "Swadhyaya started the work of construction and repair of the damaged buildings. Swadhyayee engineers undertook the survey. There were Swadhyayee masons from Aurangabad working in the reconstruction sites at half the rate since they had also to support their families. But during construction and repair the *shramabhakti* of the concerned person was a must. Dadaji had also insisted that everybody including the richest of the rich should build only one room so that all the laborers are not busy with building only for the rich."

But for Swadhyayees the most important help that Swadhyaya provided was not in providing relief. According to a young Swadhyayee in Ahmedabad: "Other organizations sent truck loads of relief materials, we sent some but we stood besides people. We gave Dadaji's thoughts to the people in these times of despair. Is it any less?"

But what was the response of Swadhyaya to the communal carnage in Gujarat in 2002? During a discussion a leading intellectual of Ahmedabad told me: "What is shocking is that most of the so-called spiritual organizations in Gujarat such as Swadhyaya and Swaminaryana which had provided relief during the earthquake remained silent during the communal carnage in Gujarat."¹⁴ During my visit to the tribal village of Bandol near Vijaya

¹³ As we begin this section it is helpful to note what N.R. Seth had written about Swadhyaya way back in 1998:

The greatest challenge in trekking along this path is how to sustain balance between the constraints set by the Swadhyaya principle and the limits of the splendor of public approbation. As time goes, the dialogue with the outsider may become more complex and demanding. More and more questions will be asked about whether Swadhyaya is Hindu. Professional analysts and observers will look around for islands comparable to Swadhyaya and return with unanticipated questions. The response of the fraternity at various levels to events in the environment may change and become diverse over time. That may entail need for redefinition of what should be transacted in a dialogue and how. But there is no escape from such transactions (Seth 1998a: 138).

¹⁴ In this context what Harsh Mander writes deserves our careful consideration: "[...] Where also, amidst this savagery, injustice, and human suffering was the 'civil society,' the Gandhians, the development workers, the NGOs, the fabled spontaneous Gujarati philanthropy which was so much in evidence in the earthquake in Kutch and Ahmedabad? The newspapers reported that at the peak of the program, the gates of Sabarmati Ashram were closed to protect its properties. It should instead have been the city's major

Nagar I had a discussion with the sarpanch of the village who comes from Bajrang Dal. He said: “Some of the tribals from the village had gone on rioting to Vijaya Nagar and one of them was killed. Then the whole lot went from our village and burnt the houses of Muslims.” I asked the Swadhyaya leader of the village whether Swadhyayees had joined in the riot. He did not give a categorical answer but said: “When the death drums were beaten it gave a warning to everybody. So all of them, it seems, had to go.”

While Swadhyaya did not provide any relief to the victims of communal carnage a majority of whom were Muslims some individual Swadhyayees had taken a courageous step in countering communal violence. Notable here is the work of Ratna Bhai in Sabarkanta. In the last anti-Muslim program in Gujarat many of the Dalits and tribals were mobilized to become a part of the brigade of killing and looting. Ratna Bhai, himself a tribal, considered it his moral responsibility to stop this in his own area. In this he and his friends were inspired by the Swadhyaya spirit of humanism. In fact many of the Swadhyayees have articulated their response in the face of communal carnage in terms of humanism: “*Ham Manavata Badi He* [we are humanists.]” Says Ratna Bhai: “On the first day all of us were terrified. We could not make any sense of it. But afterwards we moved from village to village with some friends. We told our Adivasi Samaj that we should not take part in this carnage.” Ratna Bhai tells us about this with a painful heart: “The tribals were used in this riot. They were used as labourers in this looting and killing a few but I told the people of our tribe that we should not be a party to this killing.”

Since Swadhyaya Parivara had not publicly taken a stance against the riots, I asked Ratna Bhai whether he was at all concerned or afraid about what the Swadhyaya leadership might think about it. He said: “Yes I was a bit concerned but realized that I have also my duty as a citizen and a human being.”

Thus there are courageous and critical actors in Swadhyaya like everywhere else. The silence of Swadhyaya Parivara in the face of the communal carnage needs to be understood in its inherent complexity taking into account human fear and finitude. It also challenges us to acknowledge that silent work for divinization is also one way of addressing communal bigotry. As a senior Swadhyayee in Vadodara told me: “The whole climate was such that no body was in a mood to listen. The whole communal disturbance is perpetrated by the politicians and why should Swadhyaya be responsible for this? It is not our sphere of work. How can we convince those who are fighting for temples? Dogs are sleeping in many temples and now these people are fighting for a temple. In this farce we have to be a spectator and continue our work.”

Swadhyaya’s work in many people’s lives is significant in helping them overcome any apriori hatred to other religions. Notable here is a discussion I had with a young follower of Swadhyaya in Virle Parla, Mumbai. He says: “Swadhyaya brings hope to my life as a citizen. I have a hope that people can come closer. Dadaji has made us understand that to be a Hindu is not to be bound by geography. Whenever a Muslim visits me I invite him to my table, sit down with him, and share a sweet with him. It is my simple action. My behaviour is

sanctuary. [...] It is one more shame that we as citizens of this country must carry on our already burdened backs, that the camps for the Muslim riot victims in Ahmedabad and other parts of Gujarat were run almost exclusively by Muslim organizations. It was as though the monumental pain, loss, betrayal and injustice suffered by the Muslim people is the concern only of other Muslim people, and the rest of us have no share in the responsibility to assuage, to heal and rebuild” (Mander 2004: 28).

humanly and it is an outcome of Dadaji. I am grateful to Dadaji that I did not have to be limited by communalism.”

Modernity, Tradition and Socio-Religious Mobilizations: Understanding Swadhyaya in a Comparative Perspective

Swadhyaya has the potential to deepen, interrogate and transform the contemporary development discourse and this depends on its ability to creatively build on tradition. As Athavale says: "I tried to rework traditional ideas. I wanted to minimize cultural shock of existential living and enable man to accept new ideas in old framework" (Athavale 1987:9). Swadhyaya is part of a long tradition of socio-spiritual mobilization in Indian history and society though a bit more tilted to Manu than to Narshi Mehta.^{15[14]}

When one looks at Swadhyaya one cannot but think of Sarvodaya. Sarvodaya means welfare all (Gandhi 1954; Kantowsky 1980). Sarvodaya was an important initiative in social development in pre as well as post-independent India with the participation of Gandhi, Vinoba Bhave, Jaya Prakash Narayan and his followers. In post-independent India Sarvodaya had initiated land-gift (Bhoodan) and village-gift (Gramdan) movement (see Oommen 1972). It also emphasized on the self-development of agents of development. The same emphasis on self-development is also found in the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement in Sri Lanka pioneered by Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne and inspired by the Sarvodaya experiment in India. For Ariyaratne Sarvodaya means not only welfare of all but "awakening of all through sharing" (Ariyaratne 1998: 92). Like Swadhyaya developmental projects beginning after nearly twenty-years of Bhaktipheri in villages, Sarvodaya in Sri Lanka began with a holiday camp on the part of students and teachers of Nalanda Vidyalaya, an elite Buddhist school of Colombo, in the village of Kanatoluwa in 1958.^{16[15]} Since then Sarvodaya in Sri Lanka has grown into a large movement in Sri Lanka with its various self-initiated works touching more than half of the total villages of Sri Lanka. During a recent visit to the village Hikkaduva near Gale, Sri Lanka, I saw the work of Sarvodaya Shramadana Samiti Bank with its work in savings and credit. The Sarvodaya Samiti of the village also runs a pre-school with the help of volunteer teachers who themselves are children of earlier generation of Sarvodaya volunteers and workers suggesting that the Sarvodaya tradition of "sharing of one's time, thought and energy" moves on from generation to generation.

Sarvodaya in Sri Lanka strives to reawaken "four principles of personality development" in its participants as well as people at large— *Metta* (Loving Kindness), *Karuna* (Compassion), *Mudita* (Sympathetic Joy) and *Upekka* (Equanimity) (Kantowski 1980: 47). The Sarvodaya Shramadana movement in Sri Lanka also built upon transformational revival of Buddhist tradition embodying what Gananath Obeyesekere and Richard Gombrich

^{15[14]} As we have already seen before Athavale's tilting towards Manu for the preservation of social order. Narshi Mehta is an important Bhakti poet from Gujarat.

¹⁶ It is interesting to note that Swadhyaya bhaktipheri also began the same year in 1958. Like well-placed people from Bombay going to different villages of Gujarat here was also a movement of the educated and high-class sections of society to the down-trodden sections. As Kantowski writes: "Ariyaratne later admitted that this first experiment was meant mainly an attempt to give the urban elite an insight into the real living conditions of some of their low-caste fellow-country men in the rural areas" (Kantowski 1980: 41-42).

(1988) call conjunction of Protestant Buddhism and Bhakti. Embodying a quest of engaged Buddhism Sarvodaya concept "starts with the individual, " he or she trying to cleanse one's mind or thinking process (Kantowski 1980: 46). But individual also has to "recognize that there are unjust and immoral socio-economic chains which keep the vast majority of people enslaved" (Ariyaratne quoted in Kantowski 1980: 46). While both Swadhyaya and Sarvodaya represent "the resistance of human soul to its destruction by society" (Roy MS: 12), this is a major difference between Sarvodaya in Sri Lanka and Swadhyaya that the former links self-development with the need for structural transformation of structures of inequality, domination and poverty the later is silent about it. As we will see, Swadhyaya's silence on the structural roots of poverty and powerlessness puts limits to its ability to create social transformation. Another difference here is while Sarvodaya in Sri Lanka receives funds from the Government as well as multilateral donor agencies Swadhyaya does not receive any such. We of course have to acknowledge a foundational difference that while both Sarvodaya in India and Swadhyaya strive for self-development Sarvodaya Shramadana movement in Sri Lanka building as it does on Buddhist tradition strives for realization of *Anatta* (no-self) which would enable participants to free themselves from the chains of "craving (*tanha*), illusion (*moha*) and aggression (*dosha*)" (Kantowski 1980: 73).

While Sarvodaya is active in Sri Lanka as a social mobilization it seems to have lost much of its fire in India. But Swadhyaya despite its probable inevitable routinization and cult-formation is still active and widespread. The resurgence of Swadhyaya in Gujarat from 1970s onwards had to do with disenchantment with the bureaucratization and institutionalization of ideals of life such as Gandhi's by both the government as well as Gandhians.^{17[16]} Swadhyaya's aesthetic turn and non-austere moves also matched with the aspiration of a socially conscious rich and upper class who found in Swadhyaya a new mode of relating to society without feeling guilty about their wealth and life-style.¹⁸ Bhaktipheri and devotional labour in Swadhyaya prayogas gave them a meaningful space of realizing the universal dimension with oneself and one's fellowship with others. But one divergence here between Swadhyaya and Sarvodaya is that Athavale despite his presenting himself as Dada or

¹⁷ In this context, Gita Dharampal-Frick, another scholar of Swadhyaya, also writes:

In the situation of instability which became more pervasive from the mid-1970s when formerly propagated slogans began to ring hollow and post-independence India seemed to be undergoing a crisis of identity, holistic visions, providing coherence and orientation in the present, must inevitably have exerted a forceful appeal. Set against the overcentralization and overbureaucratization of the state, the family-like functioning of Swadhyaya—with its non-hierarchical and self-reliant localized networks stressing individual integrity, social altruism and spiritual mutuality—appeared for many to present a viable antidote to the seemingly indomitable 'evils' of corruption, casteism and communalism (Dharampal-Frick 2001: 279).

¹⁸ The relationship between aesthetics and austerity is a multi-faceted one. On the one hand thinkers such as Gandhi and Illich urge us to realize the beauty that radiates from a life of austerity. For Illich, "austerity is a mode of being in the world that enhance 'graceful playfulness' in personal relations [...]" (Esteve & Prakash 1998: 204). "It does not exclude all enjoyments but only those which are distracting from or destructive of personal relatedness" (Illich 1973: xiii). In Swadhyaya there is an attentiveness to gracefulness in personal relations but they are not austere in a strict Gandhian sense of wearing only handspun dress or not wearing golden ornaments. As a woman leader of Swadhyaya tells us: "Earlier when my husband was in Sarvodaya I used to feel guilty while wearing golden ornaments. But not any more." But during our discussion we had not discussed whether wearing dazzling ornaments in the company of others who are poorly clad may enhance graceful playfulness or not.

elder brother soon led himself to be deified. The social implication of this deification has been a dynastic succession in Swadhayya and a systematic effort to make Dada the maker of all that is in Swadhayya. During a fieldwork conversation in Nasik one Swadhayee told me: "Dadajee has created all these prayogas and we are only taking our breath under his shade."¹⁹ Such a proprietary approach to Swadhayya has led to bitter quarrels and struggles over resources and authority. This has led to brutal assaults on critics of Swadhaya's present mode of management including murder of a critical member of Swadhayya from the US in Ahmedabad on June 15, 2006 for which some of the members of the present leadership team at the local level have been arrested.

Athavale is not a native Gujarati; he was born in Maharashtra. One hundred and fifty five years before Athavale Gujarat had welcomed another religious preacher from outside who played a major role in the making of a modern Gujarat. He is Sahajananda Swami, the founder of the Swami Narayana movement. Swami Narayana movement also emphasizes honesty and personal integrity in one's relationships. Self-development as purity in one's physical and financial relation in Swadhayya had its antecedent in Swaminarayana. As Williams writes in a recent study on Swaminarayan, "Adultery and sexual license were condemned. Likewise, marriage songs full of jokes and double entredes were replaced with songs composed to dignify the wedding ceremonies" (Williams 2001:26). Like Swadhayya's emphasis on active devotion (Kruti Bhakti) Sahajananda Swami had emphasized the need for undertaking manual labour on the part of his ascetic followers. It must be mentioned here that while there are renouncers in Swami Narayana there are no Sannyasis or renouncers in the conventional sense in Swadhayya. But Sahajananda Swami wanted the ascetics and renouncers to undertake manual labour. "In a departure from the recognized convention that ascetics were above doing manual labour, Sahajananda ordained that his ascetics would engage in manual work. He ordered them to dig wells and reservoirs for water and to repair old ones that were out of use" (Williams 2001:23). The ascetics of Swami Narayana movement such as Pramukh Swami of Akhara Purusottam Dham in Ahmedabad still now have a crop of ascetics, householders and volunteers to carry out socially constructive work as well as to provide emergency relief service.

Williams says that when Sahajananda Swami came to Gujarat in 1810s, the society was suffering from internal disturbance and conflict. Sahajananda Swami and his Swaminarayana movement were instrumental in bringing a sense of order. It also contributed to a new literary and social imagination. As Williams argues, "The literature of the movement coming up from Sahajananda and the poets, hymn writers and theologians who were his companions gave momentum to the standardization of the Gujarati language and slowly helped to form the various dialects into a distinct, unified language for the entire Gujarati population" (Williams 2001:31). Similarly Swadhayya has unleashed a creative wave in Gujarati society where its followers write and sing life-elevating songs and dramas.

Swadhayya tries to carve out a modern religious path relevant to the needs of the present. Unlike many such revival movements, Swadhayya is not opposed to science and technology. It also stresses that people should not have a blind faith in religion or God rather they should develop an intellectual love for God. It probably recognizes that religion in the modern world ought to be able to justify itself through modes of reasoning and justification should not be confined only to modernistic science. Love and labour are aids in

¹⁹ Surely one can find many Bhavageetas in Swadhayya depicting the same feeling. Another expelled Swadhayee once told me soon after my discussion with the Nasik Swadhayee: "We are responsible for this. We wrote Bhavgeets—emotional—songs about him."

such justifications. In this attempt to carve out a path of religious and spiritual engagement which is attentive to the needs of a modern living, Swadhyaya reminds one of the Radhasoami movement. Radhasoami movement is widespread in western India and has two important branches in Agra (Uttar Pradesh) and Beas (Punjab). Radhasoamis have built spiritual communities in these places with the combination of devotion (bhakti) and labour. One important practice that followers of Radhasoami engage is *Mitiseva* in which they carry loads of dirt on their head to clean the road (Juergensmeyer 1991).

Apart from participating in services of physical work and labor, Radhasoamis also believe in honesty in business relations. Like Swadhyaya, "The Radhasoami emphasis on fairness and honesty is especially noticeable in the area of business relations" (Juergensmeyer 1991: 34). What needs to be taken note of here is the Radhasoami effort to create "progressive spiritual society" (ibid: 48). "Both the centers were imbued with the vision of a new society and captivated by the task of creating in their midst a sort of spiritual socialism" (ibid: 48). "At Dayalbagh, one's salvation is thought to be affected by the quality of one's social relations (ibid: 160). This is in tune with the Swadhyaya emphasis on creating a relational revolution. Radhasoami also redefines renunciation in the direction of meaningful relationship with the self and the world. Anand Swarup, one of the pioneers of Radhasoami in the last century described the Radhasoami ideal of renunciation as "betterworldliness"--a purified, spiritualized form of worldliness that he depicted as superior to extreme forms of crass materialism and otherworldly renunciation" (ibid: 160).

The business people and the middle class are predominant in Radhasoami. But their participation in Radhasoami provides them an opportunity for self-expansion. "[.] the utilitarian aspects of individualism are softened by bhakti and blended with communalism"(ibid:224). There is the problem of caste in Radhasoami satsanga as well and in the course of this book we shall have several discussions about the participation or lack thereof of low caste people in Swadhyaya. But a discussion of this issue in Radhasoami can help us to see the significance of Swadhyaya and Radhasoami in enabling people to meet across caste boundaries. It can probably help us both the reader as well as the writer to resist quick judgment. In this case what Juergensmeyer writes about Radhasoami is relevant to Swadhyaya.

[.] One untouchable activist [.] characterized the Dera [the Radhasoami camping ground] as guest house for the rich where lower castes do the work. But Parsini [an untouchable woman follower of Radhasoami near Beas, Punjab] does not see it this way. She feels that there have been significant social as well as spiritual changes in her life as a result of her association with the Radhasoami fellowship. She has gained a position of influence among members of her own caste; she associates with people of upper castes on a level of equality when she works as a sevadar of the Dera; through satsang connections she has to come to know women of merchant – caste background at Ropar, and her son has developed a friendship with a Rajput woman (ibid : 211).

Radhasoamis also emphasize Bhakti but here Guru Bhakti, devotion to master as the living embodiment of God, is a way of going beyond the Saguna Bhakti and Nirguna Bhakti. But in Swadhyaya there is an overarching emphasis on kruti bhakti – active devotion.

Another issue that is of insight in Juergensmeyer's study of Radhasoami reality is his discussion of conflict of values in the Radhasoami path. In the words of Juergensmeyer: "[...] the individualism of Radhasoami's spiritual quest is tempered by the fellowship of *satsanga*; the value placed on religious technique is offset by the assertion that love is a yet

more efficacious path [..]. It would appear then that there are parallel sets of values within the Radhasoami tradition, one confirming the mores of its middle class constituency – its rational, equalitarian efficiency – and the other transforming those values to produce quite a different vision of the suprarational and social ideal. Both are at odds with traditional Hinduism, but they are also at odds with each other [..] (ibid: 194). This can suggest a new way looking at the values of efficiency and devotion (bhakti) in Swadhyaya as not completely synonymous with each other. Bhakti in Swadhyaya is not a traditional concept. It seeks to develop the *nipunata* or efficiency in each individual group but what seems different from the Radhasoami reality, at least theoretically, is Swadhyaya's suggestion that being efficient in whatever one does including being professionally meticulous in spiritual activities is a form of devotion, bhakti.

Swadhyaya is a movement of awakening from within Hindu tradition. Here it is helpful to keep in mind that the discursive field where Swadhyaya stands is also inhabited by Hindu fundamentalist movements such as Rastriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS), the ascendant Dalit movements and movements within Islam such as Tablighi Jamaat which encourages its practitioners to go out in pilgrimage to other houses and places.²⁰ In this context, Thomas B. Hansen, an insightful scholar of the Hindu fundamentalist movements writes: "In India, sedimented fears of the abstract and generalized 'Muslim' remain today the decisive ideological bedrock of the Hindu nationalist movement [...]." (Hansen 1999:12). The demonization of the Muslim other and now the Christian other has been accompanied by a monolithic construction of pure Hindu tradition or a semitization of Hinduism. This is discernible not only in RSS, the mother of contemporary Hindutva movements but also in Arya Samaj which was founded in 1875. For Hansen, "Like most cultural nationalist movements, the Arya "samaj was preoccupied with physical strength and youth. The ailing Hindu culture should be given new life through bodily purification [..]. In the network of Gurukul schools physical training, mountain climbing, cold water baths, and similar physical exercises were given high priority in order to strengthen the manliness and purity of the 'Arya nation' (ibid: 73). As we shall see in Swadhyaya educational institutions, there is also emphasis on physical training and cold water bath and on harnessing the energy of youth but this is stated to be for self- development and not directed against others.

Coming to RSS, while RSS wants to establish a Hindu Rastra (Hindu State) Swadhyaya is different at least in its vision. Despite its valorization of Vedic culture Swadhyaya urges Hindus to accept other religions as the Vedic Rishis did with their soul touching invocation: " *Ano Bhadra Rutaba Jantu Viswatha*: Let noble thoughts come to us from all quarters." Swadhyaya challenges Hindus to accept Jesus Christ as the 11th incarnation of God and prophet Mohammed as the 12th. Swadhyaya also challenges Hindus who criticize and attack Christian missionaries to learn from the devotion and hard work of the missionaries who go to remote areas and work with the down-trodden sections of society.

Sarva Dharma Swikara--acceptance of all religions--is the motto of Swadhyaya and Swadhyaya does not believe in *Sarva Dharma Samanyaya*--integration of religions. In

²⁰ There are interesting parallels between Tablighi Jamaat and Swadhyaya. Like Swadhyaya, Tablighi Jamaat stresses not on "book learning" but on "face-to-face, or 'heart to heart,' communication" (Metcalf 2004: 273). Travel is an important part of this movement. This movement takes Islamic teachings "away from the Madrasa [..] towards inviting lay Muslims, high and low, learned and illiterate, to share the obligation of enjoining others to faithful practice" (ibid: 272).

distantiating itself from totalitarian integration, Swadhyaya suggests new possibilities in religion, ethnicity and spirituality in our contemporary world.

However, while Swadhyaya is not opposed to any religious other it does not fight fundamentalist forces publicly when they destroy and kill the other. It neither condemns Islamic fundamentalism nor the barbaric violence unleashed by the Hindu fundamentalist forces. This silence is sometimes quite perplexing. But in local communities Swadhyaya provides a silent and reflective counter to Hindu fundamentalism's oppositional identitarian mobilization. During my fieldwork I met some young people from the Sabarkantha district of Gujarat who had taken part in Babri Masjid destruction in Ayodhya. But soon they got disillusioned with such a mobilization of hatred and joined Swadhyaya.

Swadhyaya has intensified its work among the low-caste, mainly the Harijans or the scheduled castes, in the last fifteen years. It does not consider either political mobilization or the constitutional measure to solve the problem of inequality and caste discrimination as adequate. It has rechristened the Harijans as Bhavalaxis--store houses of emotion. Swadhyayees argue that there should be greater interaction and intimacy between the high caste and the low caste people. In their work with Harijans, Swadhyayees sometimes find resistance from Dalit political activists but they seem not to retaliate. Swadhyaya appreciates, according to the Swadhyayee leaders working with the scheduled castes, the pathos, pangs, and vision of Baba Sahab Ambedkar. One Brahmin Swadhyayee leading the work of Swadhyaya work with the Harijans says: "Baba Saheb emphasized on education, mobilization and struggle. This is also what Swadhyaya wants."

Though Swadhyaya lacks the overt political struggle of liberation theology there are interesting parallels between the communities founded by both Swadhyaya as well as the Christian base communities of liberation theology in Latin America. Like liberation theology's public confessional of sin Swadhyaya public celebrations such as Manushya Gaurav Din (celebration of human dignity) generates public discussion on themes such as dignity (see Seth 1998). Swadhyaya has also generated social spaces such as Amrutalayam, Yogeswara Krishi and Sri Darshanam where people can come together and realize their potential of love, mutuality and dignity. But there is also a structural limit to this realization, for example limit to self-organizing collective action on the part of the poor which is similar to the situation even in an overtly political theology such as liberation theology. In Brazilian Christian base communities that Burdick (1993) has studied not only the poor but also the Blacks have less visibility and power. In case of the poor in Brazil even though there may not be any conspiracy against them they still get excluded from base communities. These communities put a premium on participation and since the poor do not have much free time and flexible work schedule they get left out in the process. Similar is also partly the story in Swadhyaya. Many poor people cannot afford time to take part in its activities. But what is a matter of great concern is that even those poor and low-caste who share their time and labor in Swadhyaya do not always make it into the leadership positions in the organization.²¹

In his study of base communities Burdick makes an important observation: "[.] liberation priests seem to believe that getting people to recite politically appropriate words

²¹ I had a discussion with a young Swadhyayee activist on this issue. He told that Dadaji has inspired everybody to be a leader. For him, a leader is not only one at the central level, one who leads fifty people in a neighborhood Swadhyaya Kendra is also a leader. But as we have seen in villages in Harijan neighborhoods Swadhyaya kendras are not taken by Harijan followers but by the high-caste. This activist also makes the point that a leader is one who leads through love and character. But all these seem not to address the core issue of lack of poor and low-caste people in the visible leadership positions of Swadhyaya.

and phrases has an automatic impact on their socio-political vision” and on the part of the people, “[...] the best strategy is simply to repeat whatever they hear, without worrying about its meaning” (Burdick 1993: 196). Swadhayaya has created many new words such as Bhavapheri, Bhaktipheri, etc. These new words have created a new meaning and aspiration of life as well as a new discursive climate akin to what Arjun Appadurai (2004) writes about significance of new words in the struggle for a new space and dignity among the slum dwellers of Mumbai.²² But many a time like all of us, Swadhayees use these words not always working on the social transformation that would contribute to a fuller realization of worlds aspired for in these words.

We can here take two Swadhayaya words *Sambhabana* and *Bhavalaxmi* as a case in point. *Sambhabana* which means potentiality or potential is a word given for the wage that an employer gives to the employee. *Sambhabana* is the name of the prayoga where Swadhayee employers are expected to go to the house of their laborers and present with grace this wage to her and her family. The spirit of the word is that one can not really pay the other for one’s labor since God is also a co-worker in one’s labor. Whatever one pays is just an acknowledgment of the potentiality of the contributor including potential for wealth and solidarity that this labor creates. This word also suggests that acknowledging potentiality in other is a great challenge of human development. But in my fieldwork I have not found many examples where Swadhayee employers follow this prayoga of *sambhabana*. Similar is also the case with another word, *Bhavalaxi* which stands for the new name given to Harijans or Scheduled Castes. Rechristening the downtrodden communities with invitational new names, names which embody a new aspiration, are only first steps. But realization of the potential of these words also calls for structural transformation of bases of caste, class and gender which produce caste deprivation. There is a limit to this in Swadhayaya as we have seen even the scheduled caste people undertaking Bhaktipheri in Swadhayaya rarely stay in the houses of the upper caste. Thus the new terms of recognition and self and collective

²² Appadurai writes: “[...] in these public and ceremonial moments, we can see another remarkable way in which the capacity is built by changing the terms of recognition. Time after time, in the speeches by the leaders of the Alliance at these events, I have seen the importance of the languages of hope, aspiration, trust, and desire come together in a variety of languages (English, Hindi, and Marathi especially, in speeches built around a core of terms such as *asha* (hope), *bharosa* (trust), *yojana* (plan), and *chahat* (desire), all deployed in speeches about the importance of building more housing for the poor, for increasing their freedom from harassment, and for expanding their spheres of self-governance. As politicians and bureaucrats join these events, in which much speech making is substantially spontaneous, they also find themselves drawn into the lexicon of plans, commitments, hopes, and trust. While it is possible to view these events as mere political charades, I would suggest that they are productive forms of political negotiation, in which poor communities are able to draw politicians into public commitments to expand the resources and recognition available to the poor. Not all these promises may be kept (or even meant), but they change the climate of negotiation, place certain commitments on public record, and produce a common terrain of aspiration in which the politics of the poor and the politics of politicians are brought into a common performative space. [...] Words, in such contexts, many not exactly be performatives, which guarantee material outcomes. But they are potent signals and occasions for building the capacity to aspire” (Appadurai 2004: 77-78). In Swadhayaya meetings and celebrations there is a similar work of life-elevating words and thoughts. But Swadhayaya public celebrations do not only use words they also involve works. For example, Swadhayees discuss life-elevating thoughts and animating words while digging ponds. However, Government officials present on such occasions are reluctant to make speeches, rather they say that they have come to learn from Swadhayaya.

aspiration are important in Swadhyaya but they need to be accompanied by much more transformative strivings.²³

Prayoga is another key word in Swadhyaya. *Prayoga* has the connotation of experiment suggesting not only the open-ended character of truth-seeking and world making but also the seeking and experimental character of self. The word *prayoga* suggests the work of an experimental subjectivity but Swadhyayees are not completely free to be experimental, they would have to do Swadhyaya in the prescribed way. After the recent leadership struggles those who do not belong to the present ruling camp are not allowed to practice Swadhyaya publicly or take the Kendras. Even before this the Swadhyaya word *prayoga* did not have the Gandhian connotation of experimentation with truth. As one Swadhyayee made clear to me long ago in 1995 during my fieldwork: “In Gandhian experiment you do not know what is going to be the result of your experiment. But in Swadhyaya you follow the initial steps as in a scientific experiment and you are sure of the result. For example, if you do Trikala Sandhya, it is bound to change your personality. If a villager does Yogeswara Krishi it is bound to bring prosperity to the village. In Swadhyaya experiment there is no groping in the dark.” But such a mode of certainty probably needs to be supplemented by a quest so that subjects also can think of their mode of engagement as an exploration rather than following a dictum.

But for Swadhyaya realization of the potential of words as well as the world is also a journey, Swadhyaya key word Bhaktiphari offering such a connotation. This is akin to “one of the most versatile terms in the liberationist lexicon: ‘Caminhada.’” “Literally, the term means a march or path. The caminhada carries the connotation of pilgrimage: a hardship carried out in the spirit of self-sacrifice and love. Thus the image of walking the path applies simultaneously to individual spiritual growth, the comunidade’s collective development toward greater love and solidarity, and the physical displacement of either in efforts to point out contradictions and ambiguities in progressive practice: for the church, it is said, is ‘still *caminhada*’ (Burdick 1993: 46).

The Calling of Transformations: Swadhyaya and Beyond

Kshatriya Milan [Meeting of the Kshatriyas traditionally considered as warrior castes] has been one of the recent mega events of Swadhyaya. In August 2005 this brought Kshatriyas from all different divisions together and there were meetings in Ahmedabad, Rajkot and Baroda. All together 30 lakh Kshatriyas had taken part in it. Kshatriya Milan manifests an urge to consolidate strength on the part of Swadhyaya. I asked a Swadhyayee leader if there is any move to also carry out a Bhavalaxi Milan, i.e. a mega meet of the Dalits. The leader said: “Working with untouchables is difficult as they have been touched by everybody.”

The consolidation of strength as it is evidenced by the mega events such as Kshatriya Milan with its own imagery of sword (taken together with the imagery of war in the Chicago

²³ In this context, dramatist and Nobel laureate Harold Pinters (1991: xi)’ suggestion not to be carried away by words is a helpful one:

If I were to state any moral precept it might be: Beware of the writer who puts forward his concern for you to embrace, who leaves you in doubt of his worthiness, his altruism, who declares that his heart is in the right place, and ensures that it can be seen in full view [...] This kind of writer clearly trusts words absolutely. I have mixed feelings about words myself.

youth meet which I had attended in February 2003) is accompanied by a new articulation of relationship between spirituality and aggressiveness. A Swadhyayee leader says: “It is a misconception to think that spirituality and aggression are opposed to each other. An engineer drawing a hole in the mountain is aggressive but here aggression is constructive. It is also usually taken for granted that all Bhaktas are mild. But we want Bhaktas who are strong.” One aspect of this renewed valor is to rewrite the history of Swadhyaya in such a way that the future generations do not know about the recent counterpoints, internal struggles and contestations. In the words of this leader: “We would have to wipe out this history.”

This will to wipe out tragically became literal with the murder of a critical Swadhyaya leader from the US in Ahmedabad on June 15, 2006. Pankaj Bhai Trivedi, the first martyr of Swadhyaya, had raised questions about the nature of functioning and use of funds in Swadhyaya. Several followers of the present leadership have been arrested in connection with his murder. This is a culmination of an aggressive approach which has been latent in Swadhyaya all along.²⁴ But at the same time, some other Swadhyayees strive for a different mode of spiritual striving. A follower of Swadhyaya who has been with it from the very inception and now expelled from it says: “If all these beatings had not started and if Dada had taken the senior Swadhyayees with him this work could have become international.” This follower of God and who is also a follower of Gandhi speaks with a smiling but painful heart. He had spent all his years in doing Bhaktiphari not only in Gujarat but also in other parts of the country. Now he devotes his time to writing books. He has written an introduction to Vedas in Gujarati and now he is completing another treatise on Gita. I asked him what are some of his approaches to the message of Gita. He said: “What strikes me in Gita is that there are not only main Yogas there are also sub-Yogas. For example to have Karma Yoga one has to have *buddhi* yoga (the yoga of intelligence) which is a sub-yoga: karma is not mere action; it requires intelligence. It implies knowledge, it also implies love. These are not tight compartments.”

This seeker’s engagement with Gita points to a new logic of yoga where *gyana*, *karma* and *bhakti*—knowledge, action and devotion—are mutually implicated with each other and one can not exist in isolation of the other; they exist in a spirit of autonomy and interpenetration. If this is the logic of autonomy and interpenetration then why should leadership be vested in a single person and why this person should be a sovereign? Is it not possible to think of a mode of co-ordination where the logic of singularity which produces violence and bare life is transformationally supplemented by a new logic of co-operative and creative multitude and sacred non-sovereignty? (cf. Agamben 1998; Dallmayr 2005; Hardt & Negri 2004).²⁵ Reflecting on his recent experience but without any personal rancor this

²⁴ As one of the Bhavgeets of Swadhyaya says (free translation): “We would show our strength to anybody challenging the great work of Pandurang.” What is to be noted that the conspiracy to kill was hatched in the Kshatriya Milan in Ahmedabad in fall 2005, a meeting to demonstrate the strength of Swadhyaya. Please see, “Sitting in Top Police Man’s Office, Murder He Wrote,” Front Page, *Ahmedabad Newslines*, July 11, 2006.

²⁵ Dallmayr develops the notion of sacred non-sovereignty from the life and teachings of Jesus which is relevant for transforming politics and spirituality everywhere:

[..] Jesus at no point aimed to establish a counter regime to the prevailing political regime, nor an alternative *suprema protestas* to the *protetas* of the provincial governor or imperial Rome. This does not mean that Jesus’ life and ministry did not represent a genuine alternative to prevailing politics, but the alternative was predicated neither on competition nor on negation or destruction,

seeker urges us to reflect: “This has been our bane. Anything which has the potential to be universal turns out to be a sect. It becomes a question of personality cult and collection of funds.²⁶ This has been our tragedy in India right from the caste system to medieval feudalism. In this the only beacon of hope have been the Sants²⁷—they have worked with people without any barrier and ego but there have been no follow up of their works.”

Such reflections point to criticism of Hinduism and Indian tradition that this reflective interlocutor makes. In another context, Beteille (2003) has argued that Hinduism now needs more internal critique “which seems to be drying up” and in the vision and practice of such seekers we see glimpses of a continued nurturance of a tradition of internal criticism, one which points in the direction of a creative border-crossing and embrace of a spiritual heritage of humanity.

but on transformation. [...] In political terms his ministry inaugurated neither a super-politics nor an anti-politics, but rather an “other” kind of politics—what might be called a politics of sacred or non-sovereignty [...]

One of the tragedies of Christianity is that Jesus’ teachings about non-sovereignty have fallen for so many centuries mostly on deaf ears. Even today, the hankering for sovereignty has not subsided—even among otherwise religious people (Dallmayr 2005: 203).

²⁶ The following comments of David Smith are helpful here: “The comparison with ‘secular monarchies’ is appropriate and significant: gurus do set up spiritual kingdoms. It is natural for Indian ascetics to aspire to domination [...] Many ascetics are motivated by a will to power either now or later” (Smith 2003: 169).

²⁷ Note here what T.N. Madan writes about the work of the Sants in Indian spiritual traditions: “Although socially involved, the Sants advocated an inner detachment from worldly ties. Seeking a true guru, keeping the company of like-minded seekers, and dedicating themselves to the incessant remembrance of God, they abandoned traditional rituals and rejected caste and religious barriers. Their creed of love embraced humanity as well as abstract supreme being. Rabindranath Tagore called this the religion of man” (Madan 2004: 400). Also notable are the following lines of Chitta Ranjan Das, an inspiring scholar of Sant traditions in India and around the world: “To go inside in the life of the spirit is also to expand oneself in terms of consciousness, to breakdown the separating wall between oneself and the all. Self-realization with the medieval saints of India was not a running away from the world to what is called to save one’s soul; it is being born egoless so that you are able to look at the world in a different eye. You become a rebel because you want the relationships and arrangements of society to be determined anew” (Das 1982: 80).

The limitation of Swadhyaya is not its sole creation; it is a human limitation²⁸ and also a limitation of a tradition, namely the Indian tradition of self-cultivation. In Indian traditions of self-development despite all sweet talks there is a fundamental inability of the self to understand the aspirations and pains of other on her own terms. Daya Krishna (1996: 58) suggests that Indian engagement with self fails to see “the other as a subject in her own right and capable of being affected by one’s actions.”²⁹ Bhakti is the foundation of Swadhyaya but in medieval India Bhakti probably had to work within the structural limits of caste and gender distinctions though in many places it transgressed these distinctions and created new spaces of meeting, mutuality and circles of reading (cf. Hawley 2005). But with the democratic transformation in India at work for the last many hundred years assisted by varieties of new movements in religion, politics, the freedom struggle, onset of our constitutional revolution, a modern day Bhakti movement has much more social resources to overcome these traditional distinctions and contribute more significantly to the realization of a radical democracy which emphasizes simultaneously democratic public participation and creative self-cultivation. Swadhyaya seems not to make the best of the available social resources for creating such a multi-dimensional Bhakti movement.

But some Swadhyayees still challenge us to deepen and broaden the vision and practice of development in terms of development of the quality of our heart. Though like all movements the practice of Swadhyaya does not always meet this vision of development as a development of heart with a more capacious love and sharing the vision and practice of Swadhyaya nonetheless is a significant challenge for us to deepen and broaden the meaning of development, explore new horizons of development and struggle for more dignity and love in manifold relationships of life and society.

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²⁸ Perhaps keeping this in mind Nietzsche (1997: 248) had written long ago: “A great man I wanted to appear, and persuaded many; but the lie hath been beyond my power. On it do I collapse.” Nietzsche further tells us:

The higher its type, always seldomer doth a thing succeed. Ye higher men here, have ye not all-been failures.

Be of good cheer: what doth it matter? How much is still possible! Learn to laugh at yourselves [...] What wonder that many a vessel shattereth! Learn to laugh at yourselves, as ye ought to laugh! Ye higher men, oh, how much is still possible (ibid: 282).

Nietzsche’s pointer to laughter and possibility can suggest us a way out in terms of looking at a social experiment such as Swadhyaya. Looking at changes in Swadhyaya since 2000, some critical intellectuals have begun to term it as a case of collective fraud. During a recent meeting with one such critical sociologist, I was told: “Oh Swadhyaya ek collective fraud nikla he—Swadhyaya turned out be a collective fraud.” But possibly the possibilities in this experiment have not yet been totally exhausted and we are still invited to understand the aspirations and struggles of millions who are still inspired by it going beyond the current power struggle and a literal politics of annihilation.

²⁹ For Daya Krishna (1996: 58), “Yajnavalkya’s *atman*-centric analysis of the human situation and his contention that everything is dear for the sake of the self would, then, seem to result from a one-sided analysis.”

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