

LHAMO Dhondrub's favourite game was to straddle a windowsill and pretend he was riding a horse to Lhasa. Following his arrival in Kumbum, the urge became so strong that the then three-year-old boy continually played alone at packing bags and setting off on a journey to the Holy City...Years later he wrote of his entry to Lhasa: "There was an unforgettable scent of wildflowers, and a song of freedom and happiness in the air."

— John F. Avedon, In Exile from the Land of Snows

THE description above applies specifically to a small Tibetan Buddhist peasant boy, who grew up to guide his beleaguered community as its temporal and spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama. It does, at the same time, offer some insight into the idealistic mindscape of a youngster determined to receive religious instruction for his order.

With a country pulsating with a *nouveau* economic boom, it is difficult for the teens-to-25 generation to ignore its blatantly materialistic spin-offs. And yet, within the colourful chaos of every high school and college campus, there is the occasional young person who stands apart.

Popular misconception dictates that religion is something remote, separate from the real world. That it must be associated with cloistered holy people shut away from commoners, immersed in an unending cycle of prayer and penance, myth and meditation.

"Actually, nothing could be more wrong. Basically, no faith amounts to much if you don't actively serve a local community first," stresses Murtaza Saifuddin Ghadiali, 16, studying for an intensive 11-year Islamic history and theology course at Al Jamea-Tus-Saifiyaah in Surat. Speaking of "the practicality of most religions", Ghadiali is grateful for the opportunity the institution provides for students to break from their regular curriculum (in addition to religious instruction, the 600-odd Bohra boys and girls may opt to finally sit for the prestigious International Baccalaureate Office examination) and visit nearby villagers. The latter share

wide-ranging worries with the students, who in turn try to give advice from their knowledge of skills as diverse as farming and co-operatives, business and banking. "You have to relate closely to ordinary people, your experience in isolation is so futile."

"Studying is so much fun!" is Ghadiali's cheerful verdict on the demanding, long-drawn-out regimen he follows. He hurriedly adds that there are several misconceptions about his, the fastest growing religion today. The status of women is an issue he brings up spontaneously. "At our school, there is no question of discrimination. Yes, girls live in another hostel, but are otherwise thorough equals in the learning process. If you

Faith in the time of modernity

Are there still young people who want to be, not VJs or computer programmers, but priests and nuns? What sets those who enter the priesthood apart from their peers? MEHER MARFATIA finds out

teach a woman you teach a family, you know," he stresses.

What drew Ghadiali to the vocation is his idea of "the ultimate satisfaction — the basic good feeling of looking at every aspect of life in a religious way". His mother Rashida, a clinical psychologist, wonders how Murtaza accepted his mission so readily. Though "always the most ideologically inspired" of her four children, he started off normally enough at Campion School in Bombay. A few classes later he wanted to enroll at Al Jamea, of which he had heard from his religiously inclined father. Now, on brief annual visits home, he finds he cannot easily conform to his earlier days. Says Rashida, "Recently, on asking an old friend for news of another mutual friend, the first boy retorted, 'Oh, we're not in touch with that gang any more.' Murtaza couldn't understand that dismissive casualness."

Similarly out of touch with what he refers to as a "wild and carefree" past, Brother Rajesh Matthew, 23, of the St Pius College for seminarians in Goregaon recalls certain turning points, which, in his new lexicon, turned out to be a "call" from a higher plane: "I can't exactly define it...it was what we know clearly now as God's plan. But it was, most importantly, part of the whole gradual process of my growth. My entire line of thinking changed dramatically."

Syrian Christian Keralites settled in Pune, his family firmly told him to focus on serious study at college when he admitted to being confused about the future. "Flippant and happy-go-lucky, I was the

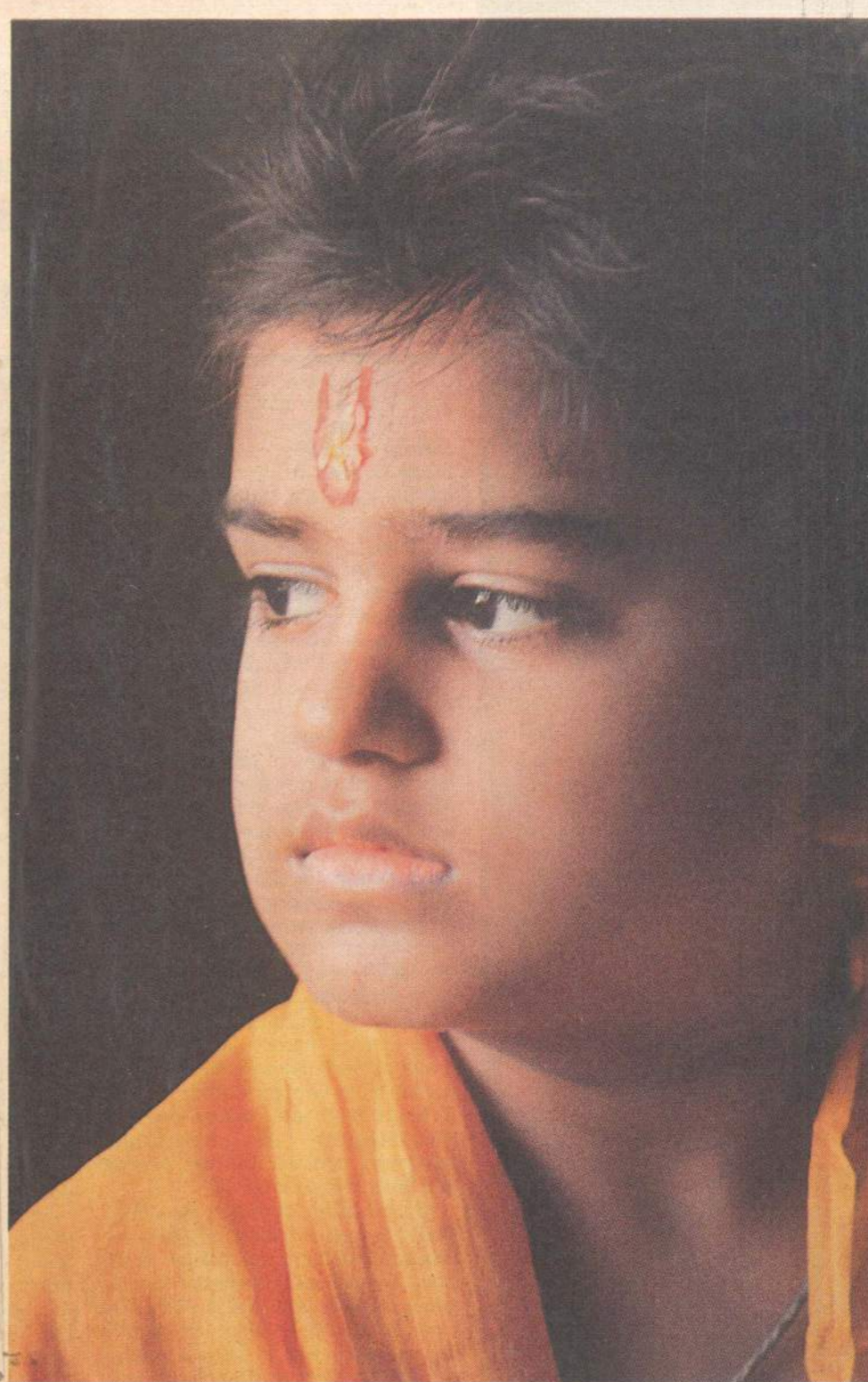
been to come to terms with the strict path of celibacy? "We are with the people and yet not with them, in a sense. We are one of them and not one of them. Yes, we're only human, there are definitely temptations, especially when one is so young. But again, as with any other issue, God helps. He gives the strength to resolve this conflict as well. The outcome depends on how you handle it."

Sharing precisely this kind of confidence in being granted the will to withstand worldly distractions, soft-spoken Anantya-sashriji, *shishya* of Guru Charupragnashri, became a nun in the Achalgach sect of the Kutchi Jain community when she was 20. At her initiation ceremony she swore to adhere to three irrevocable vows: celibacy, non-violence (*ahimsa*) and non-attachment (*aparigraha*). Jainism essentially believes that human beings would do well to liberate themselves from the cycle of

wants. *Aparigraha* ensures that. Comfort for the body is of no value, it is the spirit that needs nurturing." As if to prove the point, she quietly pulls out a couple of stray hairs showing from under the stark white veil shrouding an already shaven head — "There is really no pain felt," she smiles stoically, "as long as there is no slur on the soul."

If that appears excessively harsh, Anantya-sashriji confirms that the disciplining austerity in the faith is essentially difficult for most young people to be ruled by. "Yet, the peace you achieve because of renunciation is hard to explain," she counters. The youngest of six daughters, the rest of whom married predictably and had families in rapid succession, her parents were strangely encouraging of her unusual preference. Squatting on the floor of the simple temple in a Wadala bylane, she says, "I

How much of a struggle has it



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to become a priest in this city — he could not have earned much more back home in Thanjavur. "There is far more scope here than in Madras," which already has several of his ilk.

Studying at a local *paath-shala*, Iyer's elders forced him to leave for Bombay; after the required stints of *Vaidpath* and *dhyaan*, he could be in demand at various ceremonies in the homes of the affluent. "Unlike in the old days, there is scant respect for their useful presence at functions; people don't allow their daughters to marry priests. After all, what is the level of education among our boys who enter the faith? I feel sorry for them — a girl today would sooner marry a waiter than a priest!"

Could his bleak outlook be a sign of the times, then? Or will the optimistic fervour of the others prevail? How long will faith hold out in the face of commercialism?

am glad to see that this cheap TV and video culture has not swept everyone along with it. I have just heard of the case of a 25-year-old civil engineer who had a good job with a good salary. He is going to enter the faith knowing full well that it is hard to give up money for religion. It is a matter of great pride for our community."

At times it may seem an honour for the community, at times for the family. For Adil

Dadachanji, 25, currently at work in the shares and custodian services department of Deutsche Bank, Bombay, preparing to be a Parsi priest was a question of continuing the tradition of his ancestors. "It was inevitable that I fulfill my father's dream. I had the advantage of growing up with priests from both sides of the family, so it was only expected that I did likewise. It was with a tremendous feeling of achieve-

ment that I went ahead and sat for my *naavar* rites at 11," he observes.

Fired as he was with religious zeal, Dadachanji did not go on to become a full-fledged priest, "primarily on practical grounds. Unless you are a *panthaky* (head priest) it isn't possible to earn a reasonable living." An only child who lost his father at the age of five, Dadachanji was compelled to look for a job. All the same, he insists, "Our

community needs youngsters to serve it. Of course, there ought to be no pressure inflicted, but whoever comes forward voluntarily is bound to discover what a morally rewarding experience it is."

Sadly, less noble intentions can well motivate initiation into the priesthood. At least that is the opinion of Ganesha Shastriji, chief *purohit* of the Tamil Bhajanasamaj in Matunga, Bombay. The ornate interior of the temple is crowded with devotees deep in worship and a fair sprinkling of monks from Kanchipuram, Sringeri and Kumbakonam who are undergoing rigorous training. The youngest here, Ganapati Iyer, 21, hunches shyly as Ganesha Shastriji narrates his story, pointing out why he was forced