

# Little Faith



FAWZAN HUSAIN

**A nine-year-old girl's induction as a Jain sadhvi kicks off a storm of legal wrangles over child rights with the court hearing beginning next week**

■ By Shefalee Vasudev in Pune

**H**uddled on the floor of the kitchen of a stark, unfurnished flat in a residential locality in Pune is a thin, dusky nine-year-old girl. She is a monk called Preetvarsha Shreeji. The corner where she sits has been cordoned off by a wooden stick—a sacrosanct space marked as a place to eat food. She is wearing white robes, her hair—covered with a white cotton veil—has started to grow again after it was plucked out by hand as part of the induction. She stares back with a wide-eyed, nervous look when she sees the camera. The matronly cacophony of older nuns relaxes her a bit but she refuses to utter a word.

**IN THE EYE OF THE STORM:** The initiation of Priyal, 9, has led to a debate on induction of children as monks. A sadhvi explains that the child cannot speak till she rinses her mouth as she has just eaten. According to Jain tenets, that is just one rule in a long unnerving list of dos and don'ts that will determine the child's choices for the rest of her life.

Till three months ago, Preetvarsha Shreeji was Priyal Bagericha, daughter of a Madhya Pradesh trader. Today, she is a revered person in her fraternity because she has renounced the material world to embrace a life of atonement and frugality. She has broken away from the world of dolls and chocolates, of mummy's cooking and papa's indulgences. Instead, she will pray for hours, repent if she has a bad dream, walk barefoot, eat sparsely, remain celibate and have her hair plucked out (*kesh loch*) twice a year. For others, she is the little sadhvi at the centre of a legal controversy which challenges the induction of children as monks.

**"Bal diksha takes away the fundamental rights of children."**

RAVINDRA PAREKH, LAWYER

Priyal's legal fate—the hearing begins next week—might determine the destiny of hundreds of other children who lead the austere lives of Jain monks. It is a complicated dispute because of an unusual petition filed by senior lawyer Ravindra Parekh, a Jain himself, in a family court, in which he has sought Priyal's custody. While *bal sanyas dikshas* (induction of children) have been taking place under different sects of Jainism for centuries, this is the first claim in an Indian court where a lawyer, instead of seeking reintegration of a child into her family, wants to be her guardian.

It all started on March 10 when Priyal was to be given *diksha* under the tenets of the Jain Murtipujak Shwetamber religion at Malad in Mumbai. Bal Prafula, a child welfare organisation, received a complaint that the child was running high fever and was being forcibly inducted. But according to project director Santosh Shinde, the Malad Police expressed helplessness when contacted, saying that *bal diksha* was not illegal. Shinde, with another organisation called Childline, then approached the Child Welfare Committee (cwc), a body constituted by the Maharashtra Government, which issued a notice to the Jain Sangh for violation of child rights under the amended Juvenile Justice Act of 2000.

While the knee-jerk defiant response of the Jain Sangh was to ask the organisations not to interfere, it issued a response last month declaring that all the claims of the cwc were misplaced. "According to the chapter of the JJ Act that the cwc quoted, none of the nine clauses that define 'a child in need of care and protection' applies to Priyal," says Prakash Jhaveri, a Sangh representative. "There is ample evidence that Priyal's parents haven't sold her, but have acceded to her yearning to become a sadhvi," says Jhaveri. Senior monks who spoke to INDIA TODAY at the Madhavbagh Jain Sangh, Mumbai, reiterate that every child who becomes a monk does it out of a spiritual inclination which is a result of her previous karmas. This must be formalised with the permission of parents. Only after the child has been an apprentice with a group of monks for a few years, has observed the rigours of the religion and has showed the capability to observe the severe vows is she given *diksha*. The Madhavbagh Jain temple is teeming with devotees who are parents of children with sacred inclinations.

Parekh rubbishes all these karmic claims. "I promise no *bal diksha* will take place from now on in this country," he says, insisting that he wants to raise Priyal with his grandchildren. "*Bal diksha* takes away the property rights of children, so I want to form a welfare trust for Priyal's financial protection," says Parekh, adding that he has made a claim to the donations given by followers at her *diksha*. The *diksha* ceremony, the last big material indulgence of the to-be monk who is dressed in bridal finery, is an extravagant ritual where rich families take out rath yatras, called *varghodas*, in which money, rice, utensils, clothes, even jewellery are thrown to the public. When Parekh is reminded that he may become the cause of the child's unhappiness if he brings her to his house, he says that the child is too young to take decisions regarding her welfare. The Jain Sangh terms this as "ridiculous" and Bal Prafula too disagrees with Parekh wanting to be her guardian. But the lawyer argues that there is a provision under the Guardian and Wards Act of the IPC under which the court can appoint a legal guardian for the care of a child if parents jeopardise the welfare of the child.

BHASKAR PAUL



**PICTURE OF SIMPLICITY:** Pratikraman, 10, monk

The child's welfare—the crux of this debate—finds no easy answers. Anybody who speaks for child rights may raise questions about whether a child should be allowed to embrace a life of limited nutrition, no extra-curricular activities, a life where she seeks food as alms, sleeps on the floor, never uses sanitary facilities, refuses all technological goods and submits to the torture of having her hair plucked out.

Spiritual education is guaranteed, but there is no access to other books or newspapers. Nor is there scope for mistakes. Accidentally sitting on an ant, touching a flower or a person of the opposite sex, even a day-old baby, is a grave sin. The morning starts with repentance during which the monks decide whether he or she will eat both meals, drink water or fast partially. The gurus say they are flexible with new disciples but the validation of the vows lies largely in denial of comforts. As in other religions, suffering for atonement is what makes a saint out of an ordinary mortal. "Greed, anger, desire and ambition are plucked out with each hair," says 15-year-old Vinamrasagar, a monk since he was ten.

Resonating voices of child monks steer this debate into

**"Our *kasht* (pain) atones for the sins of other people."**

VINAMRASAGAR, 15, MONK



THE ROAD LESS TRAVELLED

“Child monks are twice blessed”

I endorse the induction of child monks—spirituality has nothing to do with age,” says 35-year-old Jinpragna Sadhviji who regrets not having taken *diksha* in childhood. “The earlier you walk on the enlightened path, the brighter life becomes.” Jigna, as she was called before her *diksha*, is an enigmatic young woman from an affluent family from Pune. Fluent in Sanskrit, Prakrit, Hindi, English and Gujarati and a couple of foreign languages, and extremely articulate in conveying philosophic ideas, this former businesswoman with an MBA degree says she found her daily battles with her expectations difficult to handle. The lakhs she earned, the opulent house with porcelain English figurines rubbing shoulders with laughing Buddhas, the trips abroad and a hedonistic lifestyle led to inner tumult. When this talented girl who painted, played the flute and drove fast cars chose to become a monk, her family was stunned. But when Jigna persisted, her mother invited saints from Kashi and Kashmir to train her in Vedic studies. The day INDIA TODAY met Jigna at Pune was a special one in her and her family’s life because it was the first time after taking *diksha* two-and-a-half years earlier that Jigna had come home as part of a group of women monks to participate in a special puja. This time though, she had walked barefoot all the way from Ahmedabad and was sitting on the floor, not once partaking in the sattvik bhojan that was laid out for all who thronged to seek her blessings. All the richly-dressed people bowed before Jigna, seeking spiritual solace from the daughter of this wealthy household who gave it all up. “I feel sorry for them—for their material desires and possessions. We should only keep what we can take with us after death,” said Jigna, a radiant glow lighting up her face.



STARTING ANEW:  
Jinpragna, 35, monk

perplexing territory. “To win approval of parents or community—important needs at this age—a child may, at times, modify her wishes,” says Ila Hukku, director, development support, Child Relief and You (CRY), which has worked for child rights for 25 years. Some children speak as if they were brainwashed but most appear convinced. “This is all I want to do. I love this life,” says 10-year-old Pratikraman. In the female quarters, Gautami, a seven-year-old aspiring sadhvi in a pink frock, giggles as she says that this is the only way to limit her karma and refuses to go back home. Many child monks say they have been pulled to this life by a divine magnet. “I want to be a monk, but I haven’t given up worldly desires—I love listening to and playing music,” says 14-year-old Anand Shah. Even Priyal, who is now comfortable with the camera and laughs everytime she hears an English conversation, refuses to return home.

This world of monks has its own trappings. It curbs vehement self expression and yet it surfaces in hierarchical discrimination. There is a clear gender bias as well—women cannot give *diksha*. There exists within Jainism a school of thought which denies the possibility of salvation for women. Rights of the child? There is no such ideology.

In the modern world, with child rights increasingly

understood as inclusive of the wishes of the child, this issue will be a stormy one. “Every child has the right to good food, clothing, housing, education and respect within a loving family,” says Hukku. The senior Jain gurus, on the other hand, say that more child monks attain spiritual excellence than those ordained later in life. Very few regret their choice. The minimum age for ordainment is eight years but in exceptional cases, *diksha* has been given even at the age of four or six. There are approximately 600 child monks in different Jain sects in India. “Emotional and spiritual maturity have nothing to do with physical age,” says Hitruchi Vijayji who left a booming business as a diamond merchant to become a monk. But Parekh retorts: “No religious treatise supports *bal diksha*. Children are exploited in various ways in such cloisters.” He concedes that if not him then the court should appoint a suitable home or guardian for Priyal.

Four attempts since 1955 to get a legislative bill against *bal diksha* passed in Parliament have failed. Now whatever the court decides, it will write history. Jainism accepts *anekaantvaad* (different opinions), so Priyal’s spiritual gurus don’t resent the conflict. But the question is whether the legal decision will protect Priyal’s childhood or her freedom of choice. One might jeopardise the other. ■