

India **Abroad** magazine



Giving it all up

Sometimes the
spiritual path can offer
more than what
a mere career can



On many weekends at the historic Hare Krishna Temple in Manhattan, where the founder of the sect Sri Prabhupada began his ministry over four decades ago, Govind Prasad and wife Rekha cook for the congregation.

For the couple that lives in Jersey City, the weekend visit to the temple yields many things: they join the congregation in chanting and meditation, and on many occasions, they also meet with their only son, Gadadhara Pandit Dasa.

"During the last few years, I have seen a lot of spiritual growth in my parents," says Dasa, 33. "Initially, they were concerned about my decision to join the temple but when they realized how serious I was in my calling, they encouraged me on my path," he adds.

Like his parents, Dasa (whose *karmic* name is Pankaj Srivastava) also loves cooking satvic food. And he feels that one of his missions, as a brahmachari attached to the temple, is to educate people about vegetarian diet. At Columbia University, where he also has the Hare Krishna Ministry and where he is one of the dozen chaplains, Dasa conducts vegetarian cooking classes that draw routinely 180-200 students. He has been doing that for more than five years, along with conducting discussions about ethical living and eating.

"And then some students came to me and said, referring to my counseling, 'You are doing everything that a chaplain does, and you ought to get official recognition.'" He is reportedly the first and only Hindu chaplain at Columbia University.

Dasa, who dropped out of college to help his father whose import business had nose-dived about 10 years ago, never went back to school to complete his business degree. "The temple takes care of my minimal needs," he says, adding that none of his work, including being the chaplain or the cooking instructor, is paid for.

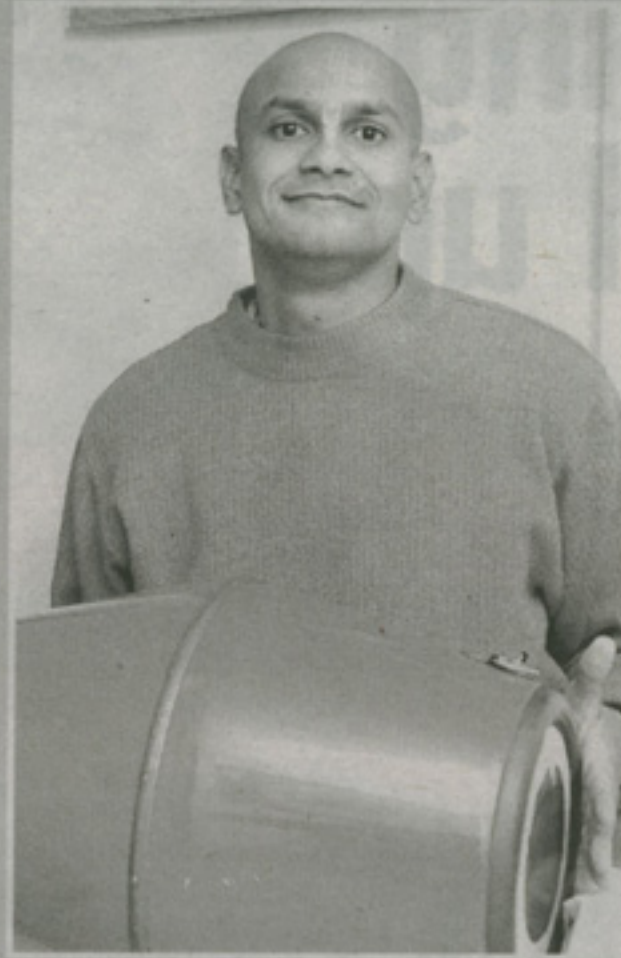
'One should never be in a hurry to be a monk'

Only someone certain it will be an enjoyable experience should do it, Gadadhara Pandit Dasa, a former businessman, tells **Arthur J Pais**

"I don't even have a bank account," he says with a chuckle. "I must have closed the last one I had several years ago."

Though he has not been ordained as a monk as yet, he shares with the monks the thought they have to depend on God. "And the more you depend on the God, and the more you expect God to take care of your needs, the stronger your faith becomes," he adds.

Looking back at his path as a sanyasi, Dasa says he is occasionally surprised how, having grown up almost like a white kid in Glendale in California and without an Indian friend or a Hindu temple nearby, he veered towards the faith of his parents. And how in Bulgaria his interest in



■ Gadadhara Pandit Dasa of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness

the Hare Krishna movement was quickened during a sojourn during which he was helping his father's fledgling import business in the Balkans.

Though outwardly he grew up as an American, deep inside him he had always been curious about Hinduism, he says.

"At home there were *pujas* and some discussion about Hinduism and its philosophy," he says. "So I guess there was this hunger inside me to learn more."

One thing leading to another, he was getting interested in books that explained Hinduism and he found none had the clarity and profundity as the works of Sri Prabhupada, and his translation of the Gita.

During his Bulgarian sojourn, he saw a woman reading one of Prabhupada's books. "I could recognize the book from its cover," he says, "but of course I did not know the language."

And even though he did not know Bulgarian, he began to attend the Hare Krishna temple in Plovdiv, one of the larger Bulgarian cities. He was back in America in 1995 with his family that had moved to New Jersey, and he continued to help his father. "Time to time some of the verses from the Gita pop into my head," he says. "I knew then more than ever that I should pursue my interest in reading the Hindu philosophy and time after time I returned to Swami Prabhupada's works."

About nine years ago, he began visiting the Brooklyn Hare Krishna Temple. "Slowly my lifestyle was changing," he says. "As I was chanting the mantras and meditating, I realized that the thrill and joy I was experiencing came nowhere near that of playing basketball or traveling."

One of the Krishnas he had befriended at the temple suggested to him that he should try to be more serious about his vocation. Soon Srivastava was in India to start his monastic training in Mumbai at the Radha Gopinath Temple and on the way to become Gadadhara Pandit Dasa. "I told myself I am 27, and I have been working with my father for about six years," he continues. "I was still in an exploring mood."

When he returned to America after spending nearly a year in India, he decided to live in the ashram, with the aspiration to be a monk.

"One should never be in a hurry to be a monk," he says. "One should test the waters seriously, and only when one enjoys the process and feels enlightened a bit should one continue taking the bigger steps." ■

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