

COVER STORY

How **BUSINESS BARONS** Are Being Drawn Towards **SPIRITUALITY**

They are dapper, dressed in designer labels from head to toe, are cut-throat and take over the boardroom negotiations like nobody's business. They leave no stone unturned to take their companies to dizzying heights of success. But there are some secrets about their personalities that are hitherto unknown. Take Anil Ambani for instance. Even as he scores high on business achievements, there's one aspect of his life he'd rather not discuss. It's an aspect that's intimate, personal and extremely guarded—and that's with regard to his spiritual leanings. But he's not the only one. More and more business barons are now being drawn into the world of Godliness and spiritualism. *Society* checks out this unique phenomenon

BY SUCHITRA IYER

That the rich and successful tend to lean more towards spiritual and metaphysical support for their existence has been observed time and again. And more often than not, their public persona and lofty lifestyles belie their spiritual inclinations. Hollywood superstar Richard Gere's deep affiliation towards His Holiness the Dalai Lama could seem improbable given the varied backgrounds they come from. But the Dalai Lama has been the star's spiritual teacher since 1982 and when he is not shooting, Gere is involved with all things relating to Tibet. We have more cases of the West looking towards the East in pursuit of spiritual fulfillment like the world famous bands Beatles and Rolling Stones finding solace and salvation at the ashram of Maharishi Mahesh Yogi of transcendental meditation fame at Rishikesh. Most, of course, are also aware of the pull that Bhagwan Rajneesh or Osho, as he came to be known as later, exercised on a host of celebrities.

One has read about film stars and politicians heading to holy places like Tirupati or Shirdi when faced with a tough situation in either personal or professional lives. But our very own CEOs, even with their flashy lifestyles and surrounded by many things superficial and materialistic, have a pious corner in their hearts. Even if it is not over-the-top and they may not like to reveal that aspect of their personality

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Anil Ambani •



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Sri Sri Ravi Shankar



Mukesh Ambani

"Sri Sri Ravi Shankar is the conscience of our times, the voice of sanity and the spirit of tolerance. He takes us beyond the transient and fleeting pleasures and introduces us to the realm of abiding and enduring happiness."
-Mukesh Ambani

naming it 'private', each one is a self-righteous believer. It could be a particular pilgrimage place, or the new age charming motivators—the spiritual gurus—the current set of ambitious and striving business barons do owe allegiance to that one supreme force that helps them unwind, attain some kind of salvation from the high work-related stress and gives them inner peace.

The Ambani family finds a guru in Ramesh Oza who is the founder of Sandipani Vidyaniketan and Ashram in Porbandar, Gujarat. During the ongoing feud between the brothers, the family guru is said to have tried to mediate and bring the brothers together. He regularly conducts discourses on the epics, Mahabharata and Ramayana, and has been close to the Ambanis since the time of Dhirubhai.

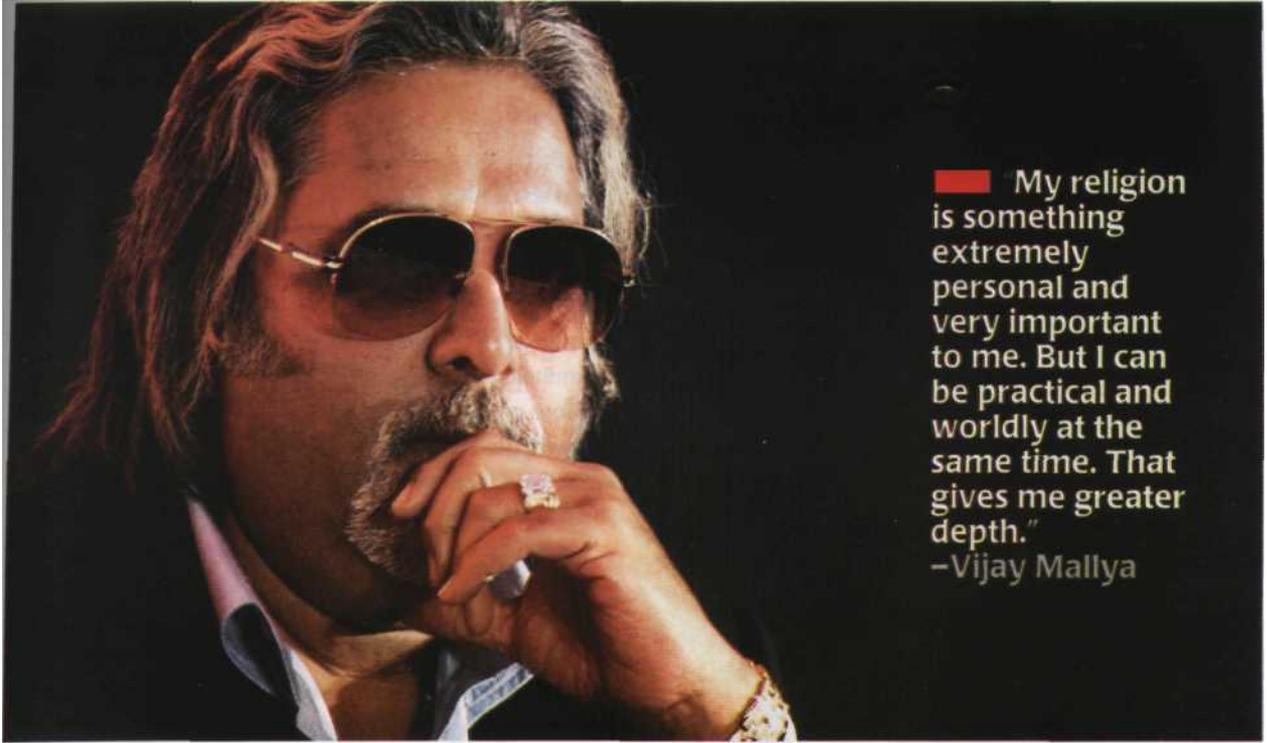
Sometime back, Anil Ambani was at an event where a book written by famous Gujarati author Dinkar Joshi

was being launched. He said he was there at the special request of Ramesh Oza. Anil's speech brought about a personality much beyond that of a corporate head. It stressed on the importance of spirituality and goodness of being while quoting the greats like Mahatma Gandhi, Shakespeare and even father Dhirubhai extensively. Gandhi's "Wealth without work, knowledge without character and business without morality are self-destructive" and Shakespeare's "There is no such thing as good and bad. It is the mind that decides what is good and what is bad" were the highlights of his thought provoking feelings. "I learnt

humility from him. I learnt the value of trust, faith, caring and sharing from him," said Anil of his father. "My own core principles are alignment and empowerment, trust, and trustworthiness. I believe in the development of a four dimensions of human personality—physical, mental, emotional and spiritual," he added philosophically to the gathering.

For a person who comes across as an aggressive businessman, Anil claims his ethics are defined by the Mahatma's simple words, "Wealth, only with work; Knowledge, only with character; Business, only with morality."

Anil is also known to take off on pilgrimages and visits to holy places on a regular basis. Soon after the end of the bitter battle with Mukesh, Anil took off to visit Kedarnath that is one of the 12 *vyotirlingas* in the country, only after he had paid obeisance at Amarnath, Vaishnodevi and Badrinath. Anil's jetting off to the Pashupatinath temple in Nepal with the Bachchans after he and Jaya Bachchan were elected to the Rajya Sabha was also perhaps a form of thanksgiving to the Almighty. On this religious trip, industrialist Adi Godrej and his glamorous wife Parmeshwar accompanied him. He said, "Over the last week, I have visited our holy and revered temples at Shreenathji and Tirupati Balaji, and



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 —Vijay Mallya

prayed for peace and tranquility for all of us, and for courage to preserve and enhance the glorious legacy of our beloved Dhirubhai Ambani."

A visit to a pilgrimage before venturing into a business probably augurs well for these aggressive and successful industrialists. How else **would** one explain the flamboyant Vijay Mallya taking off on the inaugural Kingfisher flight to the Tirupati temple to attain blessings for the Airbus? Aboard the flight he apparently fed the guests—who interestingly were travel agents—vegetarian food keeping in view the auspicious occasion and he himself had changed into simple clothes shedding his gold and diamond accessories and Armani attire while getting off at the shrine. He is also said to have donated the gold plated roof to the temple's inner chamber. That the kingpin has a spiritual side is further reiterated by the fact that he makes the annual trip to the sacred *Sabarimala* shrine. For anyone to undertake this pilgrimage calls for practising austerity—like being a vegetarian and giving up liquor and other materialistic pleasures for a period of 42 days. And the flashy liquor baron is said to piously follow the strict regimen leading up to the shrine. Mallya seems to be a perfect amalgamation of worldliness and spirituality. When questioned about this palpable dichotomy, he says, "My religion is something extremely personal and very

important to me. But I can be practical and worldly at the same time. That gives me greater depth."

While on gurus, besides his daily prayers and transformations into a religious pilgrim on certain occasions, Mallya is also an ardent follower of the latest phenomena in new age spirituality, Sri Sri Ravishankar of the Art of Living (AOL) fame. This smiling guru, with his cool and international appeal, has managed to bring into his fold, apart from film stars and cricketers, also the corporate clan in large numbers.

Recently, a conference organised by the AOL foundation saw a conglomeration of all the big names in the business world—Rahul Bajaj, Adi Godrej, Vijay Mallya, Sunil Bharti Mittal, Vinod Mittal, BK Modi, Yash Birla, Naresh Goyal and others. And it was certainly not to ink an important business deal! They are all sold on the concept of meditation taught by the guru that instills positive thinking and helps achieve an unparalleled equanimity. An ardent disciple, BK Modi has been quoted in an interview as saying, "It increases your spiritual quotient and can act as a self-development tool. It can also encourage corporate productivity if used judiciously by companies." That vindicates, to a large extent, the clout that the guru commands amongst the corporate bigwigs given their continuous need for more growth.



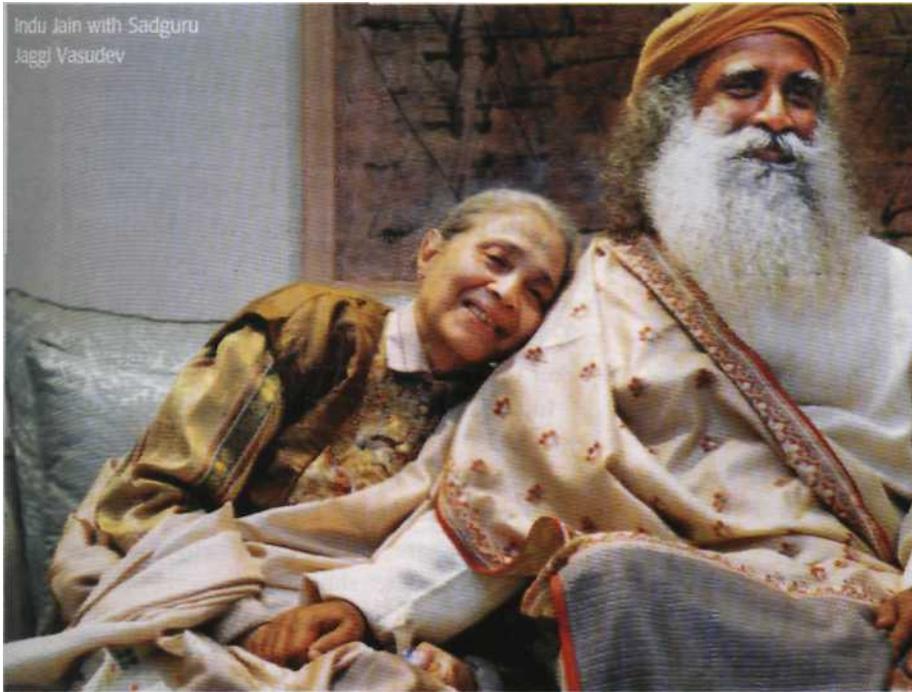
"I got into spirituality from a young age perhaps because of the good deeds committed in my past life. And that's how you get into spirituality and grow closer to God. It's your karma that brings you closer to God." -Yash Birla

The reticent and extremely private Mukesh Ambani is also a follower of Sri Sri Ravi Shankar. Some of his thoughts on the guru gives one a rare glimpse into the industrialist's spiritual allegiance and sums up his understanding of faith. As he puts it, "Saints and sages show us light in the midst of darkness and give us hope when the sky is overcast with despair. His Holiness Sri Sri Ravi Shankar belongs to that hoary tradition, radiating the message of joy for human beings torn by inner tensions and external conflicts... He is the conscience of our times, the voice of sanity and the spirit of tolerance. He takes us beyond the transient and fleeting pleasures and introduces us to the realm of abiding and enduring happiness. He inspires us to rise above the mundane and realise our true nature, which shapes a human being in the image of God... His teachings elevate us to lofty heights and gently remind us of our role in society."

Even the famous Mala Amritanandamayi, lovingly called Amma, hosting a cluster of rich and successful CEOs at the Worldwide CEO leadership Summit at her ashram in Kochi proves beyond doubt the attraction of the CEOs towards spirituality.

The suave and dashing young industrialist, Yash Birla, has been spiritually inclined right since his childhood. His deep understanding and knowledge of the spiritual is something that belies his dapper and stylish persona. He says, "Spirituality is something, which we shouldn't be talking about. It's intrinsic and has to be felt from within. You don't make a show of your visits to the meditation classes. I meditate and I visit the Himalayas at least once a year, as when you go to any pilgrimage spot or temple, you come back with positive energy, renewed vigour and feel uplifted." On his initiation into spirituality, he wisely adds, "I got into spirituality from a young age perhaps because of the good deeds committed in my past life. And that's how you get into spirituality and grow closer to God. It's your karma that brings you closer to God."

On the other hand, there are corporate doyens like Dr Vijaypat Singhania who stay away from any kind of spiritual practices but yet feel it helps in some way. "I



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don't practise any," he says but goes on to elaborate. "What you cannot explain scientifically, you can understand spiritually. I don't practise any form of spirituality but I believe it helps beat stress. In fact, any diversion is a means to beat stress. Meditation, yoga and practice of spirituality in its various forms and disciplines, all achieve the same objective."

The young and vibrant joint Managing Director of Kinetic Engineering, Sulajja Firodia Morwani, feels it is important to look for some kind of an escape. For her, it is all about following a strict fitness regime. "I am keen on marathons and also practise yoga twice a week. I find spiritual satisfaction from physical activities; I like to be one with nature, ideally at a beach. I don't follow any formal spiritual practice. Each one has to find his or her own escape," she explains.

Meanwhile, Indu Jain, Chairman, The Times of India Group, was recently in Coimbatore enjoying her month-long spiritual retreat at the Isha Yoga Centre. She is a

staunch follower of Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev whose rational approach to spirituality has seen him grow in popularity lately. As for Indu Jain, she says she can relate to the Sadhguru. "Though I've reached the peak of success, I felt something incomplete and insufficient; something was missing deep inside. I felt somewhere the roots were missing. Though various spiritual schools taught a lot of things, I didn't know how to handle emotions. I went to many gurus but there is a void in all the teaching and learning systems," she begins.

"Then I stumbled upon Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev in Mumbai where I attended one of his spiritual addresses. Though it was casual listening, it made a big impact. I felt that this man had a lot to give the world and me. So I met him again. He does not just talk (which people normally do) but also offers training programmes, which I have not seen elsewhere."

After a week, she did a programme and that began her association with the guru. What appealed to her the most was his remarkably scientific and logical approach. "He has a big charisma. He is not one of those who allow you to feel comfortable with your own innate mistakes. He pinpoints your shortcomings without mincing matters and helps you overcome them, which gives you an enriched life and spiritual path. I'm very grateful to him and I wish I had met him earlier," she says with awe in her eyes for the guru.

The media honcho admits that the spiritual practices initiated into her by the guru have helped her to excel in professional and all other aspects of life. "It has brought in time balance, mind balance and behaviour balance. The inner balance, which it has brought about, has resulted in a total overall outer balance. I realised that there may be physical limitations but my inner self is unlimited, which makes me deal with people. So there is just no question about stress," she says amazed at the results of the spiritual



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-Peter Punj

practice. "This perfection fascinates me. Sri Jaggi is a very energy-oriented personae and knows to help the seeker to connect with the energy within."

Indu Jain also wants to share her rich spiritual experiences with her employees in Mumbai. "I have planned a big hall in Mumbai and the HR department will sponsor meditative orientation courses for them. Isha practices are so easy and effective that stress virtually evaporates," she claims.

The corporate honchos surely seem to have found a new passion. "I strongly believe in one precious thing, which is 24 hours with me and that is my *Ek Mukhi* round Rudraksha from the Pashupatinath temple in Nepal. From the day I have worn it I haven't taken it off. I draw my inspiration from it and that makes me spiritual," says Delhi-based Peter Punj, Chairman of Lloyd Systems Pvt. Ltd. For this dashing businessman, spirituality is a path of self-actualisation and peace for he feels that people meditate and go on pilgrimages because they feel it will bring them peace. "Ultimately, a belief and faith in the Supreme helps you attain peace," he says and adds, "I have been baptized as a Christian and have also had a *mundan* ceremony. We often go to temples with the family but going to a temple does not mean that I am religious. Religion to me means taking time out to recognise your faith."

Punj is an avid believer in destiny and feels that a hint of spirituality in the corporate set-up is an attempt to increase the productivity as spirituality acts as a solution to the stressed mind. He, however, clarifies, "I don't suffer from stress. For me, spirituality is a personal thing and comes from within and instills energy."

Well, with more and more businessmen and industrialists placing their faith in God and other forms of spirituality, one wonders if spirituality would soon become the latest business in the corporate world. «

With inputs from CSS Latha and Rashi Bhatnagar