

Outside Convent Walls

Many years later, Mother Teresa would tell an interviewer that leaving the convent was the hardest thing she had ever done, even more wrenching than leaving home when she was young. When she left her family, she had put herself in the hands of the church to pursue her calling, as thousands of young women had done before her. She had entered an orderly world where all decisions were made for her by her religious superiors, and her only job was to obey

Saris

The traditional Hindu garment for women, called a sari or saree, has been worn for thousands of years. It consists of a rectangular strip of unstitched cloth, 42–49 in (106–124 cm) wide and 5–9 yards (94.6–8.2 m) long, which is draped around the body in a variety of styles, usually around the waist and over one shoulder, sometimes also over the top of the head. Most women wear a petticoat and a *choli*, or short blouse, underneath. Woven of silk or cotton, saris often have patterned edges, and some are elaborately embroidered.



with a cheerful heart. Now, she was taking a giant leap into the unknown, armed only with her conviction that God had chosen this path for

“We young ones . . . couldn’t fathom her leaving.”

—Sister Marie Thérèse

her. It must have taken tremendous courage and discipline.

The Loreto Sisters at Entally were stunned to find out that Mother Teresa was leaving them. One sister named Mother Cenacle cried uncontrollably, and the mother superior was so overcome with emotion that she took to her bed for a week. The nuns were a close-knit community, and they had taken it for granted that they would live and work together for the rest of their lives. They were also concerned for Mother Teresa’s safety if she followed her plan to go live in the slums, and also for her fragile health. Many of the sisters could not understand why she would abandon the convent where she’d seemed so happy. “We young ones essentially couldn’t fathom her leaving,” Sister Marie Thérèse later recalled. But nothing could change Mother Teresa’s determination. A notice was posted on the blackboard with words of advice for the Loreto Sisters: “Do not criticize. Do not praise. Pray.”

In preparation for her new life, Mother Teresa went to a local bazaar and bought three simple white cotton saris, each with three blue stripes at the edge.

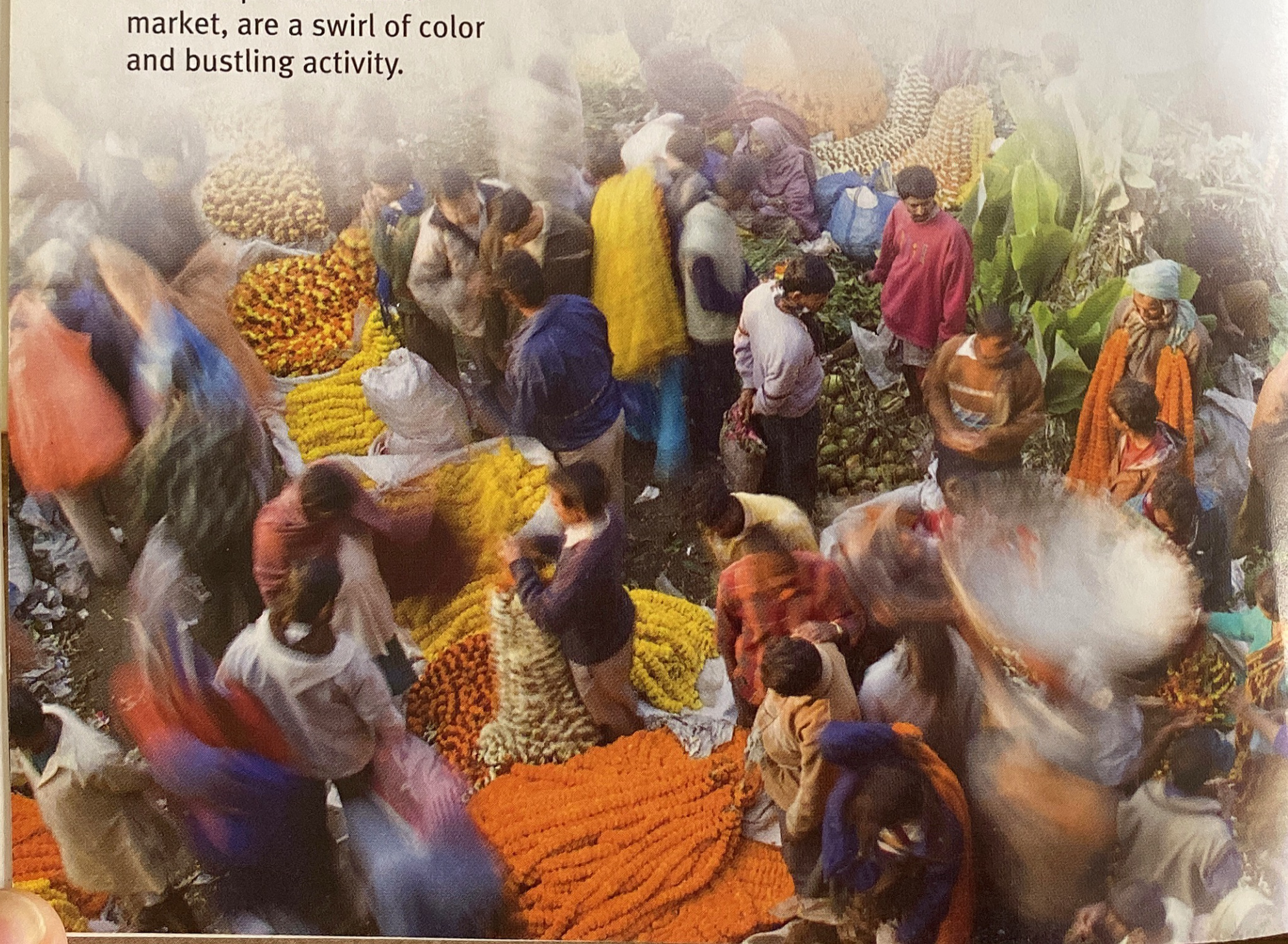
BAZAAR

A bazaar is a marketplace, often outdoors or under a simple roof, containing many small stalls or shops.



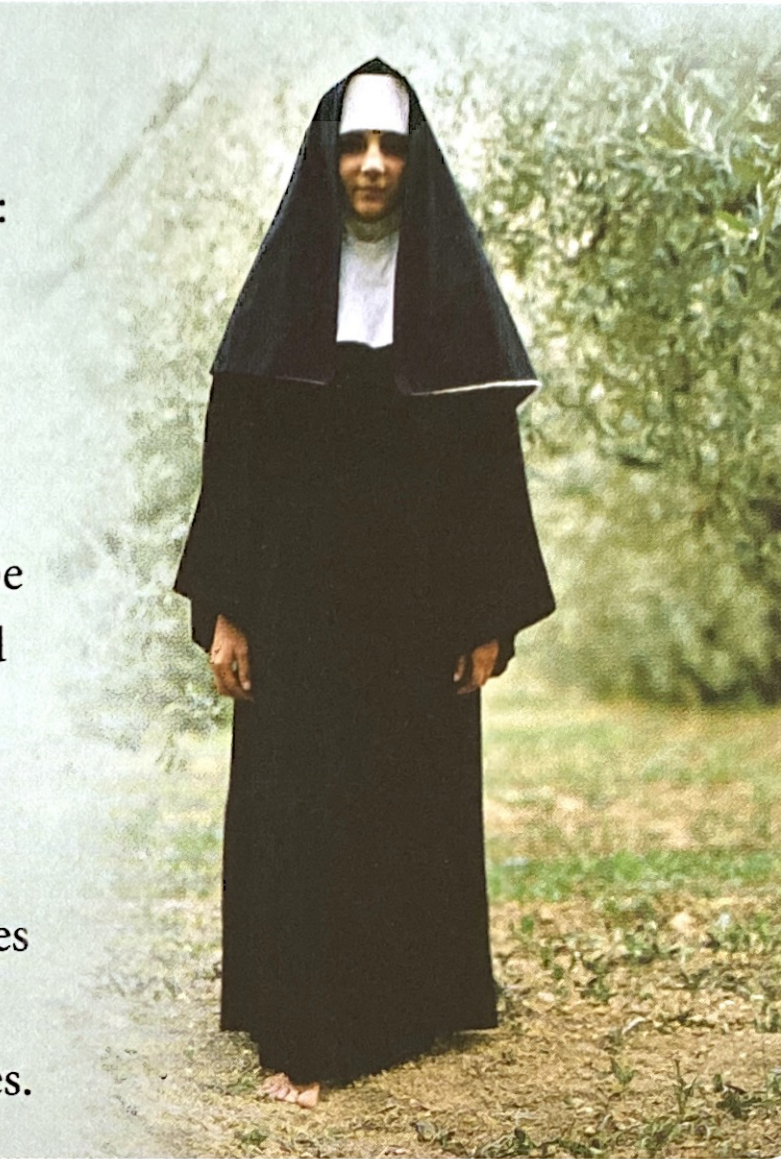
It is hard to imagine how strange the simple activity of going to a market to buy new clothes must have seemed to someone who had dressed for two decades in the simple black-and-white garments provided for her by her order. Imagine the sights, sounds, and smells of an open-air bazaar in an Indian city: Farmers place cloths on the ground, selling bright-colored peppers, eggplants, and okra, or live chickens in slatted cages. Vendors squat next to flat baskets heaped with fragrant spices, dried chickpeas, and lentils. Women in saris display shiny bangles and nose rings, and dark-eyed girls string wedding garlands of orange marigold blossoms. On a makeshift charcoal stove, someone fries flat breads stuffed with onions, and the pungent aromas of curry and smoke fill the air.

Indian bazaars, such as this open-air flower market, are a swirl of color and bustling activity.



Nuns' Habits

The loose, long garments traditionally worn by Catholic nuns are called habits. They can include several pieces: a tunic dress, a white coif around the face, and a veil and underveil over the head. Some orders add such pieces as a stiff white crown band around the forehead, a biblike wimple, a short cape called a capuche, or an overlayer called a scapular. These may be black, white, or other solid colors. Each order has a distinctive habit, and within the order, different colors may be worn by novices and nuns. Modern nuns often wear modified habits or simple street clothes.



The simple saris that Mother Teresa chose were the cheapest kind available, usually worn by peasant women who couldn't afford finer garments. The blue stripes appealed to her because blue is the color traditionally associated with the Virgin Mary. Father Van Exem performed a special blessing on her new garments, and added a small cross at the shoulder and rosary beads. This uniform has been worn by Missionaries of Charity ever since, in all climates and continents, sometimes with the addition of a cardigan sweater or simple cloth coat in cold weather. The standard footwear is a simple pair of sandals.

RUPEE

The rupee coin is the standard monetary unit of India. It was formerly divided into 16 annas, and is now worth 100 paise.

On August 16, 1948, Mother Teresa went to her room in the convent for the last time and removed the long black habit and veil she had worn for so many years.

In its place, she put on one of the white cotton saris, draping it over her head and around her body. Having lived in a convent for so long, she had few possessions apart from her two other saris, her notebook, and a pen. Although some of Mother Teresa's students hoped they would get to see their teacher dressed in a sari, she left very

quietly at night, bringing only a few rupees and a train ticket to Patna, an ancient city on the Ganges River.

The Ganges, considered by Hindus to be a sacred entity, is joined by three other rivers near Patna, where its waters are exceptionally wide. Patna is a pilgrimage site for Sikhs

and Buddhists as well as Hindus, and also a thriving business center and the capital of the state of Bihar.



A rosary is a string of beads with a crucifix attached, used by Roman Catholics for counting prayers.

Before Mother Teresa started her work in Calcutta, Father Van Exem had arranged for her to spend several months in Patna, training with the Medical Mission Sisters at the Holy Family Hospital. The sisters were mostly European and American women who had trained as doctors, midwives, and other medical professionals, and now taught nursing skills and nutrition basics to Indian women, including some former Loreto girls. At the hospital, Mother Teresa learned how to attend to patients dying of smallpox and cholera, how to give injections, make beds with hospital corners, and assist in delivering babies. At first, she was anxious about handling newborns, afraid she would damage their delicate bodies, but she soon came to love working with babies. She was also especially good at soothing small children who were scared of the hospital, and at comforting the dying. One of the medical sisters who served with her commented that Mother Teresa always managed to remain calm in a crisis.

She also learned about the importance of proper nutrition. She had originally planned for her order to live on a humble diet of nothing but rice and salt, as many poor



Trading her nun's habit for a white cotton sari and sandals was a groundbreaking choice for Mother Teresa.

“Father, I am here.”

—Mother Teresa

Indians did, but Mother Dengel, the founding mother of the Medical

Mission Sisters, convinced Mother Teresa that she and her followers would become too weak to carry out their work if they did not also include some protein, fruit, and vegetables in their simple meals, and make sure to get enough rest. Mother Dengel suggested that they conclude their day’s activities, household chores, and prayers by 9:00 PM and schedule one day of rest every week to maintain their strength. Their saris should be washed every day. Otherwise, the nuns would be likely to catch the same diseases they were trying to treat among their poor patients.

Although her days were full of prayer and hospital duties, Mother Teresa spent her evenings working on plans for her new order’s daily schedule and rules. In the Patna convent’s simple sleeping cubicles, divided from each other by a system of bamboo rods and cotton sheets, she took notes and made lists, growing impatient to start her new life. Within a few weeks, she had written to Father Van Exem, requesting that she be allowed to return to Calcutta immediately. She felt she had learned all she needed from the Holy Family Hospital; the rest, she would surely be able to learn as she worked among the poor. Both Father Van Exem and the archbishop were skeptical. They had expected Mother Teresa to stay in Patna for six months



to a year. Father Van Exem tried to impress upon her the importance of adequate medical training, but her letters kept coming, making the same request. At last, he agreed to come see her in Patna to discuss the matter further. When he arrived at the hospital, he did not recognize Mother Teresa among the sari-clad nurses until she said, "But Father, I am here." Eventually, the Medical Mission Sisters helped convince Father Van Exem that Mother Teresa had picked up the basics of nursing and was ready to start her work in the slums.

Not long after that, Mother Teresa was granted permission to move back to Calcutta, where she would go into the streets by herself and begin a new kind of mission.

The city of Patna, where Mother Teresa studied nursing, is home to the Patna Sahib Gurudwara, a sacred pilgrimage site for Sikhs.

