

The Emperor's New Clothes

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from? A synonym for 'cheat' is 'charlatan,' a word frequently used for fake holy men.

The common herd, lacking the wisdom and enlightenment to tell the genuine from the spurious article can easily fall for the latter and dub a truly spiritual person a charlatan: it is perfectly reasonable to suppose that the two men who call on the emperor have suffered such a fate in the story.

I can clearly envisage the scenario. Two holy men of the East – mendicant sadhus or *rishis* or *sanyasis* – wander into Europe. They hear rumours of the strange otherworldly behaviour of a certain emperor in one of the freezing northern countries. They intuit at once that here is a man who wields temporal authority but secretly craves spiritual power. They are not at all surprised, for back home they have seen many such cases of rulers with spiritual longings. It would be gratifying if they could help the emperor on his quest. Being used to icy Himalayan weather they are not daunted by stories of the severe

baulk at this point and demand to know how I have located their original home. Why can't it be, say, Bangalore or Braj? I will tell you why. It is not because – let me be absolutely clear on this point – my own ancestral home is by the no-longer-sparkling Sitallakhya river. No, when the holy men announce that they are from a village by the Sitallakhya river, they can make out from the blank faces around them that the Danes have never heard about it; so they also add that the region is famous for the Dacca muslin, whose mention elicits appreciative gasps. The reader will realize at once that herein lies the trigger to the European folk imagination that produced the canard about 'new clothes.'

In reality the two sadhus spend their time privately initiating the emperor in the ways of advancing towards *moksha* or liberation. The emperor is a quick and adventurous learner and chooses to become a Digambar sadhu – sky-clad, ie with nothing on but the wide sky spread over us.

The imperial crier announces that the emperor will reveal himself

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keeps walking, flanked by his preceptors, but all three are painfully aware that Europe has just missed a historic opportunity – comparable to Alexander's aborted encounter with gymnosophists – to integrate itself spiritually with Asia.

We are still suffering from the consequences of the chance missed. The woefully inadequate attempts made by Theosophists and New Age gurus to redress the situation only indicate what a sorry state we are in.

As for our emperor and the two sadhus, I imagine they beg and trek all the way to India, where they are warmly received by those of their ilk, who are numerous.

In the first two decades of my life Digambar Naga sadhus were an intriguing, awe-inspiring, disturbing, playful presence. Nanga Pagla, 'crazy, naked guy,' is my personal appellation for them, coined not without respect and affection. They are a colourful reminder of the narrowness of a petit-bourgeois artist/writer/intellectual's life, much as the Dadaists highlighted the narrowness of conventional art and letters.

But where are those outlandish, imperious presences now? In the independence war of 1971 the rampaging Occupation army would have shot at them or scared them off to the other side of the border. Ever since they are hardly to be seen, like a seriously endangered species. Making the land even more uncongenial for them, over the last few decades, as globalization has induced robust growth in GNP, *Homo Economicus* has become the dominant sub-species. As wealth and consumption grow our spiritual indigence deepens. *Homo Spiritualis* skulks in poky corners.

With such depressing thoughts I brought my revision of Anderson's tale to a close. My day's teaching was done. Then as I stepped on to the pavement I found myself face to face with a Nanga Pagla, a genuine Naga sadhu presenting dramatic *mudras* – mystic gestures. I was seized with a strange exaltation. I wanted to go up to him and ask for his blessings. Then I heard the jeering laughter and irreverent jibes of a few street brats behind me. Something was hurled, it struck me on my back and I pitched forward in awkward obeisance.

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northern climate and set off for Scandinavia. When they arrive at the emperor's capital – Elsinore, shall we say? – their outlandish appearance draws curious crowds. They tell them that they have been wandering for years but that their ancestral home is in Bengal, by the sparkling Sitallakhya river.

The reader who has followed me with good-humoured acquiescence so far may

in his true form in a procession. By now the populace have acquired some acquaintance with Oriental spirituality, thanks to the presence of the sadhus, and are almost ready to meet the exotic tradition halfway. But the egregious folk tale is spot on in one detail: a brat blurts out that the emperor's got nothing on. The masses, forgetting their nascent spirituality, giggle and titter and guffaw; gales of laughter spread throughout the continent. The emperor is a model of dignity as he