

The Naked Saints of India

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In some of the oldest scriptural texts of India, we find references to naked saints and sannyasins. In the Rig Veda of Vedic Aryan tradition reference is made to them but worded in such a way that shows the Brahmins did not properly understand them but were held in wonder by the spiritual and psychic powers some of them possessed.

These naked Sadhus belonged to the non-Vedic or pre-Aryan religion which flourished long before the Vedic religion was introduced into India. The scriptures of these people were known as Agamas and the same teachings were later written as Tantras. The earlier texts of the Agamas are mostly dialogues where the spiritual teaching is put into the mouth of the Lord Shiva as Guru teachings to Parvati the Mother Goddess as sishya. The same teachings found their way into the Vedic texts and were known as Upanishads. The Agamas tell us of naked sannyasins as revealing the highest expression of renunciation and suggests that he who wants nothing of the world does not want its rags either.

Another reference tends to be critical of one who claims to be a high initiate and yet hides the lingam (penis) which is the sacred symbol of Shiva. The sannyasins of the non- Vedic religion practiced tapas or austerity. It was the path between needless and foolish physical discomforts on one hand and sensual luxury-seeking on the other. It was the path of moderation which was later introduced into Buddhism as the Middle Way. These sadhus did not take any vow or make any promises.

Nakedness was accepted as part of their way of life, but there was nothing to prevent a sadhu from using clothes to protect himself from extreme cold or in time of sickness. There can now be little doubt that complete nakedness was the accepted pattern for the majority of sadhus and a pattern which still existed till the time of Gautama the Buddha and Mahavira the Jaina. Although the Buddha probably remained naked until the day he died, his followers introduced robes into the Buddhist order. Also among the Jain followers of Mahavira, there came a division into two separate sects – the Svetambaras, clad in white cloth and the Digambaras who sometimes wore clothes but were expected to end up naked at some future date. Nakedness was never practiced by laymen in the Jain community. Many foreign visitors have often rushed to see a Digambar Jain only to find he was a decorously dressed shopkeeper. Household Jains take their designation from the sect which they follow.

The feature of naked sadhus is still fairly common, even in modern India. Overseas visitors seldom see them because they seldom live or visit the tourist fleshpots and city terminals. When Allen Ginsberg, the American poet, visited India some years back, he expressed in letters which were printed in *City Lights* his sad disappointment at not

seeing even one naked sadhu. This could be surprising because in Benares, which he visited, it is doubtful if this great city of Shiva has ever been without naked sadhus and in considerable numbers.

Benares is still the one city in India where you can walk about naked and yet remain unnoticed. Even beggars display mutilated genitals to reveal a mental inclination to celibacy and a great sacrifice which would make physical delinquency impossible. In these days most naked sadhus wear a cloth in public or when traveling. They neither wish to draw needless attention to themselves or amuse the schoolboy population now sadly conditioned by modern education. Hindu Digambar sadhus have outnumbered, and still do, the naked Jains by thousands to one. Many city councils have introduced bylaws forbidding public nudity even among sadhus. A new sense of Western respectability has come to India just at a time when the West is abandoning its Puritanism.

Even today the great names and outstanding sadhus of Indian history and tradition have mostly been naked. In the years which followed the Muslim invasion of India it became obvious that there were many things which they did not like about Indian Paganism. They showed their aversion to images by smashing them and destroying temples. They loathed the sight of the naked sadhus, yet for some reason feared to interfere with them.

There is only one record where a man was executed by King Aurangzeb for public nudity. He was not actually a sadhu. Born in Persia as a Jew, he became a convert to Islam. As a Muslim he came to India selling embroidered garments in Delhi. There he changed again and became a devotee of Rama and wrote many beautiful songs. Even this might have been ignored but he began to dance around the streets in the nude. The Muslims would not recognize that a Muslim could possibly embrace another religion. He was executed by the king as a degenerate Muslim who exhibited himself naked. Indian

Paganism made its inroads into Islam and in India, unique among all other Muslim communities, we have records of numerous Muslim and Sufi saints who adopted nakedness. Some exist even today. It was the Muslims who seem to have first used the word Hindu and therefore it is a very recent addition to Indian words. It sprang from their own references to "people living on the other side of the Indus," who were the "Indus" and later refined to Hindu. Many Indians still find the word unacceptable although it enjoys common usage. It is not found in the Vedas, Upanishads or the Bhagavad Gita. Since there was a time when the religion of old India enjoyed a monopoly, a name was unnecessary. After the invasion of the Aryans, the non-Vedic people began to use the term *Sanatana Dharma*, the eternal wisdom or teachings. When the Vedic and non-Vedic religions merged, the term came to be generally accepted.

The Agamas of the original Indians have been ignored by Western scholars in favour of Vedic literature. This, in spite of the fact that it is the Agama teachings which have dominated Indian spiritual life for three to four thousand years.

They and not the Aryan Vedas form the basis of all that is taught in all the Puranas, the Upanishads, the Bhagavad Gita, the Uddhava Gita and other Gitas.

The Avadhut Gita and the Jivanmukti Gitas, generally studied only by sadhus, are regarded as teaching the highest principles of spiritual life and refute much of what is taught in the Aryan Vedas.

Historically the sannyasin goes back to primordial times. Some Indian scholars, free from Western conditioning, have speculated that they began in an age when nobody wore clothes and retained their naked status even after woven cloths and linens came into common usage. It is only an idea but the spiritual leaders of many religions do tend to preserve customs and forms long after the lay population has abandoned them.

Beyond this, we can consider that stronger than all other motives was the desire of the sadhu to remain a natural man in his natural environment. This separated him from the tendencies of worldly people to become more and more affluent and cling firmer to those delusions which he had abandoned.

All Upanishadic and Gita teachings lead to the one simple but inescapable truth that we are not bodies but immortal souls. So what does an immortal want to hide and should they try to look like worldly men? The word Digambar is taken from the Sanskrit *Dig-ambara*. Its literal meaning is wearing the sky or sky-clothed. Though often used as a synonym for naked, it has a much deeper meaning. A householder is separated from his environment by his clothes, and when he removes his clothes he is separated from his environment by his skin. He fails to understand or realize the oneness of all nature and life. This should not be so with the sadhu and when he is digambar he is one and absolute with everything.

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