The Naked

MANOJ DAS

["Naked was the infinite sky above his head and naked the sea beside him. The Lord too was naked. How does he care any more ? Let the naked lot arrive. He will receive them without the slightest sign of shilly-shally, throwing his clothes to the wind."]

In the fifties Sapanpur-on-Sea hardly ever recorded the impact of the revolutionary events taking place in the rest of the world. The once prosperous port had been abandoned and the place deserted. Time had not come when the authorities would give it a facelift and bill it out as an ideal health-resort, dedicated to tourists.

Hence there was no sign of modern times (which had just dawned elsewhere in India) visiting the few old buildings left to the mercy of raging winds from the sea, a row of shops and kiosks always appearing to be in the red and the nearby hamlet of fisherfolk.

Even the summer palace of the Raja was fast decaying. At the approach of the zero hour for the British withdrawal from India, Raja Sahib had a premonition about the doomsday dawning on the native states. He had stopped renovating the mansion.

Raja Sahib was no more. His son did not come to visit even their erstwhile capital twenty miles away, what to speak of the summer palace at Sapanpur.

It was Bhanu Singh, the scion of the hereditory Senapatis, the generals of the Rajas, who looked after the summer palace. If the abolition of the feudal hierarchy had shocked him, his continuing to receiving a quarterly allowance from the Raja's dwindling bank balance had overwhelmed him. How he wished he could do something to save the state for his master — as his forefathers had done twirling their moustaches, flexing their muscles and swishing their swords — and repay this courtesy shown him by the Raj family !

No wonder a personal message from the widow of the last Raja, now known as the Rajmata, should delight him. Some kind of a conference was to take place in the summer palace. He was to receive a lorry-load of men and women who were to camp there for a full day. The conscientious Rajmata knew only too well how difficult it would be to provide the guests with the right kind of food at a place like Sapanpur. She was arranging to send the stuff from the city. All Bhanu Singh was required to do was to receive the visitors and to place himself at their disposal. The Rajmata had sent some money too, perhaps a little more than what he would require to spruce up the mansion and buy some provisions.

Bhanu Singh had resolved to discharge his duty in great earnestness. Half a dozen men and women were already at work inside the mansion, scrubbing the floors and dusting the walls. The Rajmata's costly letterhead carrying the insignia of her dynasty lay on the marble table of the spacious room that used to be the study of the princes when they came here for a holiday.

PARIJATA
UTSAV 1989
ORIYA SAMAJ, DEHRADUN.

"There !" Bhanu Singh pointed at the letter after greeting Majumdar, the headmaster of the Middle English School, the highest educational institution in the locality. "Read it and you will know why I summoned you so urgently."

The headmaster read and re-read the letter and appreciated the quality of the paper holding it against the skylight. Then he looked up at Bhanu Singh.

"They will number about fifty; right ? I'm hopeful of getting ready with fifty garlands of jasmine flowers. Do you think you can supply fifty boys and girls to garland them as soon as they alight from the lorry ? It would be wonderful if you could. The kids should look smart and clean. I will give you a phial of pure English talcum left here by the Rajmata some five years ago, to brighten up their faces."

Mujumdar's attention had gone over to the letter once again. "Seems to be a new party of those 'ists', or maybe a holy group," he mused.

"Headmaster, why don't you consult the dictionary ? I've not yet reflected on who they are." Bhanu Singh opened the heavy and tall teakwood bookcase and identified the bulky dictionary.

Majumdar put it on the table and poured over it. On locating the relevant word, he compared it with that in the message, pronouncing it aloud letter by letter. A stage came when he was left in no doubt about the import of the message. He looked at the curious Bhanu Singh in a way as if he had just been privately told by some doctors that his friend was not to last more than forty-eight hours.

"What is it ?" Bhanu Singh grew anxious.

"It is a knotty situation, Singh. 'Nudist' means one who goes naked ! Not a child, mind you ! In other words, you are required to receive a group of important men and women, all descending bare from the lorry." Majumdar's voice betrayed forebodings.

Bhanu Singh suddenly felt drained of all vitality. "You mean, fifty naked human beings will sit here for a conference ?" he besought a little more light from Majumdar.

"Is it for nothing that they chose this solitude ?" Majumdar sounded wise in accordance with his vocation. "Imagine throwing garlands around the necks of fifty men and women who do not have even a *langot* on them ! Is it ethical for a headmaster to oblige his innocent students to do such a thing ? Well, brother, I must take leave of you now." His gravity suggested that there was no scope for any compromise on his stand. He turned to go.

But Bhanu Singh grabbed him by the shoulder. "Take leave of me, eh ? As if we had never been friends ! Can you leave me in the lurch and thus walk out of me ? You must tell me what I should do !"

"What else is there for you to do except forget your clothes for a day and host the party ?"

"Do you mean to say that I too must go naked ?"

"Isn't that as clear as the sunlight or the roar of the sea ? How can a man of your maturity fail to see the incongruity in a host clad in *dhoti* and *kurta* shaking hands with bare-bodied guests ? Won't that amount to insulting them ? I'm sure, the Rajmata is expecting the descendant of the brave generals of her ancestors to prove brave enough for the occasion !"

Majumdar wriggled his shoulder out of Bhanu Singh's hold and making some irrelevant observations on the weather, slowly retreated towards the door and then slipped out.

Bhanu Singh sprawled on an old sofa. The Rajmata had been educated in Europe. She was known for her modernity. But Bhanu Singh had never foreseen a time when her modernity would

suddenly engulf the forsaken summer palace at Sapanpur and hurl him into such a whirlpool.

He mechanically shouted at the labourers to hurry up and went out. He walked towards Pratap Roy's house. In the golden age of the princes when Raja Sahib sat down for a few drinks with his pals and found fun in making some of his officials undress and dance before him to the rhythm of some gramophone music, Pratap Roy, the manager of the *taluk*, came handy for the purpose. In fact, Pratap Roy and his colleagues were threatened with death if they refused to obey or failed to dance with abandon. Pratap often came away with trophies.

Now Pratap Roy lived the life of a venerable citizen of Sapanpur. He gave a patient hearing to Bhanu Singh while enjoying a stroll in his garden.

"How can I help you ?" he asked courteously.

"I'm in a bit awkward situation. My daughter's son has taken ill. I must go to see him tomorrow. You must take my place and receive the august nudists. Well, Pratap, you're no stranger to the practice of occasionally shedding clothes before others ! In fact, you've done far more difficult things in that condition than merely shaking hands with some guests."

Pratap Roy laughed. "I don't mind receiving the visitors in a manner fit for the occasion. But Bhanu, you surely haven't forgotten how the Rajmata used to address me !"

The Rajmata never cared to call an official of the Raj by his own name. She had bestowed a special name on each of them and used to call them by those names in a most natural manner. They were expected to respond in the same manner.

"I remember. She called you Ravana."

"Right. Pray, why?"

"Pratap, are we to expect logic in the whims of the royalty ?"

"Bhanu, you should not evade my question. I was, in the eyes of the Rajmata, a debauch and a demon. Now, as I see it, there are ladies among the visitors. Will the Rajmata approve of my hobnobbing with them ? Why did she send the message to you ? She trusts the decently dressed Bhanu Singh as much as she trusts the naked Bhanu Singh. The same is not her attitude towards me."

Pratap Roy resumed strolling. Bhanu Singh did not tarry.

The seashore was without a soul but for a group of four or five young men and women bathing in the sea. The weakened edge of waves splashed on the tyres of their car parked beside a sand-dune. They had come from the town. The youths of the locality were not accustomed to such insufficient bathing costumes and men and women rarely mingled while bathing.

Those coming tomorrow will be only a little more modern than these bathers. These youths have a patch or two of linen on them; those to come will be without any. That was the only difference. And from a philosophical point of view, even this difference was nothing but an illusion, for all are equally naked beneath the thin garments.

Mingling with these people clad in so little may make it easier for him to mingle with those with no clothes at all. Bhanu Singh advanced towards their car. A man and a woman, emerging from the waters, greeted him with smiles. Bhanu Singh smiled back. He felt encouraged, for he was quite at ease amidst them. But the depression returned soon : Would he be equally at ease when he would shed his own clothes ? Surely not !

Suddenly his eyes fell on Kapil who stood on the other side of the car. Bhanu Singh knew that Kapil, a former servant in the Raj family, worked as a kind of guide for tourists, Indian and foreign, beginning to trickle into Sapanpur, and entertained them in various ways not all necessarily decent, and earned fairly well. (Note: At the time of writing this, thirty-four years after the event, Kapil is no

more, but the enterprise launched by him has proliferated into a huge hotel complex with bars attached and a premier travel agency). It was not possible to guess the lean, curly-haired Kapil's age. His humility was exemplary. Bhanu Singh became hopeful on seeing him.

"Kapil, my dear Kapil!" Bhanu Singh suddenly found his voice choking with love. He captured Kapil in his arm and led him away from his clients and whispered the situation to him. "Pratap Roy is right. The Rajmata would not approve of his taking my place, but she would no doubt be pleased if you did it. Besides, I'm sure, you can do it," he concluded, his voice craving Kapil's indulgence.

"You are wrong, Singh Sahib! Perhaps you have forgotten what the scoundrel of a bear did to me. Don't you remember the name by which the Rajmata used to call me?" asked Kapil remorsefully.

Bhanu Singh remembered. Kapil, in the Rajmata's nomenclature, was the Grand Neuter, a title earned by him after an unfortunate encounter he had had with a haughty bear in the forest, during one of the hunting expeditions of the Raja. The bear had attacked his lower limbs and had scooped out a chunk of them in such a horrid way that his survival was a miracle.

"You recollect, don't you? You'd then realise how ridiculous I'll look when I appear bare before those ladies and gentlemen. I won't be surprised if they get an impression that my presence was designed to mock them!" Kapil sighed. And, then, in a sudden inspiration of goodwill he added affably, "Of course I don't mind baring myself before you—privately."

Bhanu Singh returned to the palace with hurried steps. Never before had an evening on the sea appeared so desolate to him.

The labourers had finished a day's work. Bhanu Singh paid them and locked the gate and the main entrance as soon as they left. He then climbed to the terrace and sat down looking at the dark sea. He was in the process of assimilating the realisation that his fellow human beings had failed him at his moments of crisis.

Should he pray to any of the Gods? Which one? The great ones must be too busy to pay attention to his predicament however serious it might appear to his own puny self. To whom to bother then?

The nearest shrine was that of Vishaleswar, built by an ancestor of the Raj family. The deity, from all accounts, seemed to have been a powerful one in days gone by. But the bigger part of the shrine had collapsed for lack of maintenance and Sapanpur had lost its importance. The popularity of the deity had considerably declined though the essential rituals in the shrine had never been interrupted.

Bhanu Singh folded his hands and sent up his obeisance to the deity. He hoped that Vishaleswar had the leisure to pay attention to his peculiar predicament.

Surely, his prayer should be able to travel two miles to the east and infiltrate the stone walls and reach the deity's ears in toto, yet it would be much safer to submit it to the deity personally.

He set out along the seashore. Blasts of ice-cold wind planted blows on his back. He felt like weeping, for they only symbolised the blows he was receiving from the course of unexpected events, for no fault of his. His prayerful complaint to the deity grew more and more intense as the fierce wind drove him faster.

He wiped his eyes as he reached the foot of the small hillock bearing the shrine. A group of people were talking agitatedly. One of them focused his torchlight straight on Bhanu Singh's face. "Welcome, Singh Sahib, welcome! We did not know that the news would reach you so soon!"

The speaker turned his light on the other faces for Bhanu Singh to see them. They were respectable people of the locality.

"News ?" Bhanu Singh asked, a bit intrigued.

"Oh, so you are still ignorant of the fact that the deity has been robbed of all his belongings—his copper utensils, his brass bell as well as the pair of old silver coins kept before him for ages. The pity is, the robber has even snatched away the yard of yellow silk the Lord wore, leaving him naked !"

"The Lord left naked ?" demanded Bhanu Singh in a tone that sounded abominable. He raced up the hillock as fast as he could, followed by the others. Inside the pitch-dark sanctum sanctorum the priest moved his small earthen lamp several times from the foot to the crown of the deity to impress upon Bhanu Singh the pitiable condition in which the granite idol had been left.

Bhanu Singh said nothing. He descended the hillock as fast as he had gone up. The gentleman with the torchlight asked him something, but he did not bother to answer him and went beyond the range of his focus in no time.

He was now pushing against the wind. That was good; for the pressing wind helped him to keep bottled up in his heart his spasmodic sobs, the outcome of his intense empathy with the deity.

And he laughed aloud. It was a strange sensation, hitherto unknown to him He was in a sort of trance.

Naked was the infinite sky above his head and naked the sea beside him. The Lord too was naked. How does he care any more ? Let the naked lot arrive. He will receive them without the slightest sign of shilly-shally, throwing his clothes to the wind.

"Come, come ladies and gentleman ! No longer am I afraid of facing you !" he thundered in a kind of ecstasy, matching the roar of the waves.

Someone seemed to await his arrival in front of the summer palace.

"Singh Sahib ! So, you were outside ! Someone shouted a minute ago and I was almost paralysed with fear." The speaker held out a telegram. "Your family informed me that you were likely to be here."

Bhanu Singh crossed the gate and read the message under the light in the verandah. The proposed conference stands cancelled !

He re-read it, slowly beginning to shiver in an ecstasy.

"They were frightened !" he shouted with extraordinary gusto and he laughed like an explosion.

"What's the matter, sir ? To be frank, I feel paralysed again !" confessed the messenger.

"Never mind, friend, but tell me, which cloth-shop is likely to remain open at this hour ? Lord Vishaleswar stands naked. We must have two yards of colourful silk for him—right now !" Bhanu Singh's voice had grown normal.

But his eyes were filled with tears of gratitude. Who but the sky and the ocean would understand what the naked deity had meant to him !

□□

(Reprinted From THE DUSKY HORIZON AND OTHER STORIES just published by B.R. Publishing Corporation, 29/9, Nangia Park, Shakti Nagar, New Delhi-110007, by permission from the author)

C/o Sri Aurobindo International Centre of Education
Pondicherry—605002