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EYEWITNESS

Holy Procession

Cold daunts no sadhu

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First in procession on Maha Sivaratri, March 25, came the Naga sadhus of the Juna Akhara, reputed to be the fiercest sadhus, naked except for a gray layer of ashes all over their bodies. The lead sadhus wielded large swords, dancing down the street like mighty demons. They were followed by scores and scores of more sedate Nagas, who filed slowly past, some two-by-two with fingers linked. They looked so cold and naked in the dismal weather blowing directly down from the freezing Himalayas.

I was astonished by the numbers of them. They just kept coming! Some with shaven heads, others with dreadlocks down to the ground, some stick-thin and others quite pudgy, young and old, dark and light. These men came from every corner of India and from every sort of background.

Once at the main ghat (steps to the river's edge), the sadhus waited respectfully for their particular gurus to enter the

sacred water. As soon as they saw his or her umbrella make the dip, the masses of them would follow, all splashing about like children on holiday. Once their turn was up and it was time for the next group, they ran back up the steps and skipped jubilantly back to their camps, dripping wet in the freezing cold, but obviously ecstatic, with their devotion keeping them warm.