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Conjuring images of India in nineteenth-century Britain

Ask the average man for what India is most celebrated, and chances are ten to one that he will ignore the glories of the Taj Mahal, the beneficence of British rule, even Mr Kipling, and will unhesitatingly reply in one word, 'Jugglers'. (*Strand Magazine*, 1899)¹

They may have been one of the dominant images of India in the mind of the 'average man' of late nineteenth-century Britain, but Indian jugglers have received very little attention from historians. Paradoxically, this lack of attention may be a result of the same ambiguity that made them so important to the Victorians. At one level, Indian jugglers were entertainers who, like European jugglers of the early modern period, performed not only feats of keeping objects in the air but also (what we would now call) magic tricks. In nineteenth-century Britain, this latter form of entertainment had come to be known as 'conjuring' (and its exponents as 'conjurers'), but the term 'juggler' continued to be used in reference to Indian performers. For the Victorians, then, an Indian juggler was a performer of not only skilful but also mysterious feats. And it was here, in this mystery, that the ambiguity lay, as many Victorians came to believe that there was more to the conjuring feats of 'Indian juggling' than sleight-of-hand and gimmicked props. It was their inability to explain how such feats were done, and their willingness to discuss attributions other than trickery, that led Victorians to regard 'jugglers' as one of the key images of India.

Much has been written about how the West came to construct an image of the East. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1977) described this image as one of the West's 'deepest and most recurring images of the Other', an Other that was 'mysterious, duplicitous and dark'.² While Said was concerned primarily with the Middle East, scholars have made similar points in relation to south Asia, describing how Orientalist scholars constructed India as a land of eternal essences, presenting Hindu philosophy and rituals as evidence of a land where imagination was privileged over reality, and of Indian thought as essentially irrational.³ Others have described

¹'Are Indian jugglers humbugs?', *Strand Magazine*, xviii, 83 (December 1899), 657–64.

²Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York, 1979), 1. See also Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1993).

³Ronald Inden, *Imagining India* (London, 1990); C. Breckenridge and P. van der Veer, *Orientalism and the Postcolonial Predicament: Perspectives on South*

Asia (Philadelphia, 1993); Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge* (Princeton, 1996); A. Chatterjee, *Representations of India, 1740–1840: The Creation of India in the Colonial Imagination* (London, 1998); Richard King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial Theory, India and the Mystic East* (London, 1999).

how darker aspects of Indian religious practice were regularly stressed by Orientalist scholars, and how reported cases of *thuggee*, *suttee* and human sacrifice changed over time and came to be represented as primitive and barbaric, and their prevalence exaggerated for a variety of reasons.⁴ While often inspired by domestic debates, there is no doubt that such representations contributed to the western perception of India as essentially irrational and, following Said's line, helped further justify British intervention abroad.

As Mackenzie has pointed out, however, Orientalism was always more than a monolithic, negative stereotype, and a variety of positive, romantic images of the Orient were simultaneously freely available to the Victorian public.⁵ Popular evocations of India were to be seen in the exhibition of panoramas depicting imperial scenes and battles – such as Seringapatnam (1799), the 'Mutiny' of 1857 and the battle for Khartoum. Panoramas sprang into popularity in the early nineteenth century and were displayed in venues such as the Regent's Park Colosseum in London and the Rotunda in Edinburgh on the Mound. Robert Ker Porter's 'Storming of Seringapatnam' was typical of the genre. Covering 2550 square feet, it toured nearly every major city in Britain, eventually reaching even Philadelphia in 1805.⁶ Then there were the presentations of Indian dancers and music, and operatic Oriental spectacles such as *The Grand Mogul*, seen at the Comedy Theatre in 1884, *The Nautch Girl* (Savoy Theatre, 1891) and H. A. Jones's *Carnac Sahib*, staged in 1899. Most spectacular of all was the Indian pageant performed at the 6000-seat Empress Theatre in 1895 as part of Imre Kiralfy's 'Empire of India' exhibition at Earl's Court, in which India was presented as 'a place of exoticism and elegance, and where the Indians appeared only as servants'.⁷ There were also presentations of the Far East, most notably the spectacularly successful operetta *The Mikado* (first staged in 1885) and Sidney Jones's *The Geisha, the Story of a Tea House*, which ran for over a thousand performances from 1896.⁸ In addition to the popular craze for Orientalia of all sorts of products, from carpets to cushions and teas to shampoo,⁹ such performances no doubt contributed to a general sense of wonder about the mysterious East.

⁴Chatterjee, *op. cit.*, 111–41; Martine van Woerkens, *The Strangled Traveler: Colonial Imaginings and the Thugs of India* (Berkeley, 2002); Andrea Major, *Pious Flames: European Encounters with Sati* (Delhi and Oxford, 2006); Crispin Bates, 'Human sacrifice in colonial central India: mythology, representation and resistance' in C. Bates (ed.), *Beyond Representation: Constructions of Identity in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (Delhi and Oxford, 2006), 19–54. The less serious practice of hook-swinging also fed this image: G. A. Oddie, *Popular Religion, Elites and Reforms: Hook-Swinging and its Prohibition in Colonial India 1800–1894* (New Delhi, 1995).

⁵John Mackenzie, *Orientalism* (Manchester, 1995).

⁶Ralph Hyde, *Panoramia! The Art and Entertainment of the 'All-Embracing View'* (London, 1988), 47, 65, 71. The first panorama – a view of the city of Edinburgh – was exhibited in London in 1789 by Robert Barker at the Panorama Leicester Square. Robert Ker Porter's panorama

of the Battle of Seringapatnam was preserved in a much smaller, familiar engraving by John Vendramini in 1802, which was presented to the king. The word diorama was coined to describe later, sometimes moving panoramas, with a variety of different lighting effects.

⁷Mackenzie, *op. cit.*, 191–6.

⁸*ibid.*, 195, and Brendon Gregory, 'Staging British India' in J. S. Bratton, R. A. Cave, B. Gregory and H. J. Holder, *Acts of Supremacy: The British Empire and the Stage, 1790–1930* (Manchester, 1991), 162. See also J. C. Trewin, *The Edwardian Theatre* (Oxford, 1976) and Penny Summerfield, 'Patriotism and Empire: music-hall entertainment, 1870–1914' in J. Mackenzie, *Imperialism and Popular Culture* (Manchester, 1986), 17–48.

⁹Mackenzie, *op. cit.* An account of the popularization of 'shampoo' is to be found in Michael H. Fisher, *The First Indian Author in English: Dean Mahomed (1759–1851) in India, Ireland and England* (Delhi and Oxford, 1996).

Historians of India have also described how aspects of Vedanta philosophy, such as the illusory nature of the world, were particularly stressed by European Orientalists, as part of the broader interpretation of the Indian mind as essentially mystical.¹⁰ Such interpretations, of course, also reflected western prejudices, and not only in the sense that the Orientalist discourse provided an Other by which the rational western Self could be compared favourably. There was more to western constructions of the Orient than those that served the colonial project, as intellectual and literary historians have been keen to point out, for example, in their studies of the influence of the exotic Orient on idealist philosophy and the Romantic literary imagination.¹¹ Concerning the notion of 'Oriental enchantment' in relation to Asia in general, Clarke has noted that 'much of the literature concerning the East has had, and continues to have, an exaggerated, inflated tendency, a sublimated quality which offers the European an image of magic and mystery.' He suggests that this romantic picture of the Orient, the image of magic and mystery that has been purveyed in both popular and more serious writings, might be seen as a reaction to the spiritual poverty of post-Enlightenment Christianity.¹²

Literary historians have similarly noted that 'when the [late nineteenth-century] British writers emphasized that India was the home of mystery, they were expressing not only a belief that the East and West were very different, but also that the British were at something of a disadvantage in that India possessed knowledge beyond that of the West' and that early twentieth-century writers continued to present such an image.¹³ It has even been suggested that the association between India and magic reflected in such literature was part of a broader sense of the 'illusion' of British colonial rule, power that rested on 'mutual make believe'.¹⁴

However, there was a more straightforward link between India and magic, and more direct reasons for the association. While scholarly discourse on Hinduism and literary references no doubt played their part in the construction of 'the mystic East', there were, as we shall see, more accessible images available to the Victorian public that provided evidence of mysterious and ostensibly magical feats being performed in India. These were associated with Indian jugglers and conjurers who, by the end of the century, came to be presented as 'one of the greatest sights of India... almost a trademark of Hindustan'. Even Orientalist scholars cited them as evidence that 'the air in India is full of marvels and mysteries' and that such wonder-workers embodied 'the very spirit of the East'.¹⁵ Such views were more than a Nietzschean

¹⁰Inden, *op. cit.*, 105–8; King, *op. cit.*, 118–42.

¹¹Raymond Schwab, *The Oriental Renaissance: Europe's Discovery of India and the East, 1680–1880* (New York, 1984); Wilhelm Halbfass, *India and Europe: An Essay in Understanding* (New York, 1988); Andrew Gerstle and Anthony Miller (eds), *Recovering the Orient: Artists, Scholars, Appropriations* (Chur, 1994); Julie F. Codell and Dianne Sachko Macleod (eds), *Orientalism Transposed: The Impact of the Colonies on British Culture* (Aldershot, 1998). This was not a point missed by Edward Said himself, who wrote the foreword for the first of these texts.

¹²J. Clarke, *Oriental Enlightenment: The Encounter between Asian and Western Thought* (London, 1997), 19, 57.

¹³Allen J. Greenberger, *The British Image of India: A Study in the Literature of Imperialism, 1880–*

1960 (London, 1969), 42. According to Greenberger, later writers such as Wren and Mundy presented India as a mysterious place 'where things would happen that would be thought impossible in the West' (113). On the influence of mystical India on western writers, see John Drew, *India and the Romantic Imagination* (Delhi, 1998).

¹⁴Lewis E. Wurgaft, *The Imperial Imagination: Magic and Myth in Kipling's India* (Middletown, 1983), 54 ff.

¹⁵Harry W. French, *Our Boys in India. The Wanderings of Two Americans in Hindustan* (New York, 1883), cited in David Meyer, 'Jugglers', *Journal of Magic History*, II, 3 (December 1980), 222–3; J. C. Oman, *The Mystics, Ascetics, and Saints of India* (1903), 6. Oman's *Indian Life: Religious and Social* (London, 1889) had begun with a lengthy

'mobile army of metaphors' but won credence through having been apparently witnessed by British spectators with their very own eyes. They thus remained potent throughout the twentieth century, from Lieutenant-Colonel Robert Elliot's *The Myth of the Mystic East* (1934), in which he made clear that it was Indian jugglers who were behind the 'widespread belief in this country that India is the home of mystery', to the guru-seekers of more recent decades.¹⁶

Indian juggling as a popular image of India and Indians, and as a major influence in shaping the public image of the mystic East, has been overlooked by historians.¹⁷ This article describes how, over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, ambivalent representations of Indian juggling emerged – providing evidence of Indian ignorance, on the one hand, and of special Indian knowledge, on the other – thus reflecting images of both the primitive and the mysterious. It argues that such representations, despite ostensibly being about India, formed part of the domestic debate about spiritualism, and that the latter image – of India as mysterious and mystical – was less a product of, than a precursor to, the emergence of the Theosophical Society, that most influential of occult organizations. It also describes the dialogic nature of this encounter and the ambivalent relationship between Indian jugglers and their western counterparts, stage conjurors, and how these themes were exploited in the later creation and maintenance of the popular legend of the Indian rope trick.

I

Indian jugglers began to attract attention in Britain from the 1810s: a troupe performing at Pall Mall were succeeded by 'The Four Surprising Indian Jugglers just arrived in this country from Seringapatnam'. The feats of this latter group were regarded as highly impressive, even among their British counterparts.¹⁸ Two of the jugglers, Ramo Samee and Kia Khan Khruse, continued to perform for the next thirty years in theatres around the country, achieving widespread recognition, the latter sharing billing with Charles Dickens in Hull in 1838.¹⁹ Indeed, their novel performances of the 'cups and balls', a conjuring trick that had been performed in Europe for centuries, was so well known that Dickens could later write of an amateur English conjuror 'practising Ramo Samee with three potatoes'.²⁰ Their success

discussion of yogis and mahatmas, including the reported miracles associated with the Theosophical Society.

¹⁶R. H. Elliot, *The Myth of the Mystic East* (Edinburgh, 1934). A more sympathetic (or, in Elliot's view, more gullible) contemporary view was presented by others, such as Paul Brunton, *The Search for Secret India* (London, 1934) and Edmond Demaitre, *The Yogis of India* (London, 1937). The ongoing attraction of miracle-working Indian gurus has been discussed in a variety of contexts: Gita Mehta, *Karma Cola* (London, 1980); Erlendur Haraldsson, 'Miracles are my Visiting Cards': *An Investigative Report on the Psychic Phenomena Associated with Sathya Sai Baba*

(London, 1987); Lee Seigel, *Net of Magic: Wonders and Deceptions in India* (Chicago, 1991); and David Tomory, *A Season in Heaven: True Tales from the Road to Katmandhu* (Melbourne, 1998), 196.

¹⁷Exceptions to this have been brief references to fakirs as perceived rogues (Chatterjee, *op. cit.*, 100) and perpetrators of superstition (Cohn, *op. cit.*, 79).

¹⁸Henry Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor* (London, 1968), vol. III, 106.

¹⁹Steven S. Tigner, 'Charles Dickens in and about Magic', *Journal of Magic History*, 1 (1980), 91.

²⁰Edwin A. Dawes, *The Great Illusionists* (Secaucus, 1979), 131.

attracted others, and troupes of Indian jugglers became a familiar sight in Britain over the following decades.²¹

The earliest performances of Indian juggling included not only conjuring effects but also several feats of dexterity – such as the juggling of four brass balls and balancing feats – and it was to manual dexterity that early nineteenth-century commentators drew attention. Without exception, in fact, descriptions of their performances at this time in Britain recognized a particular Indian proficiency in manual dexterity in conjuring, ‘superior to any I have seen in England’, ‘similar in their mode of deceptions of our own conjurers, and only remarkable for the superiority of their execution’.²² This was entirely consistent with other early nineteenth-century descriptions of Indian juggling in India. ‘The dexterity of the Hindoos’, according to several visitors, was ‘so much superior to that of Europeans’, while at home it could be assumed that such ‘proficiency is so common in India, that probably it excites no interest there’.²³ A seemingly natural superiority of the Indian over the European in matters of manual dexterity was also recognized by the essayist, William Hazlitt, who described the juggling of four brass balls as ‘the utmost stretch of human ingenuity . . . what none of us could do to save our lives, nor if we were to take our whole lives to do it’, and he praised the jugglers for their ability to perfect such mechanical feats and demonstrate the limits of human skill and industry.²⁴ All of this was, in turn, consistent with an increasing tendency among the British to attribute physical abilities, as well as characteristics, to the native Indian population.²⁵

There was, however, no mention of magic, by Hazlitt or any of the other early nineteenth-century commentators. Conventional conjuring tricks were praised wholly in terms of manual skill, while the swallowing of a sword – the most prominently advertised feat on Ramo Samee’s posters, and at that time a new and presumably startling effect to European audiences – was explained in terms of physiology, such that though it was described as a ‘wonderful exhibition’ there was ‘nothing at all improbable, much less impossible’ involved.²⁶ There was, in fact, no suggestion at this time that the feats of Indian jugglers were in any way beyond explanation. On the contrary, the explanation was explicitly presented as not only a manual proficiency, but also one that reflected the superiority of Indians in such matters (though, as Hazlitt noted, mechanical dexterity was hardly art, and others associated physical capabilities with lack of refinement and general depravity).²⁷ Over the following decades, however, the image of Indian juggling changed dramatically, as it came to be associated both with a wider range of feats being performed in India, many of which were attributed to forces other than manual dexterity, and with more general representations of India and Indians.

²¹In Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* (1868), a group of Indians disguise themselves as Indian jugglers to blend in with other ‘strolling Indians who infest the streets’ (177).

²²*Sporting Magazine*, XLV (1815), 263; K. S. Kirby, *Wonderful and Eccentric Museum, or Magazine of Remarkable Characters* (London, 1820), 337–42.

²³Anon, ‘Hindoo jugglers’ (London, n.d.), 165; I. Platts, *Book of Curiosities* (London, 1822), 897. See also: *The Oriental Annual, or Scenes in India; comprising twenty-five engravings from original drawings by William Daniell, RA, and a descriptive account by*

Revd Hobart Caunter (London, 1834), 25–7; ‘Indian jugglers’, *Chambers’ Edinburgh Journal*, 28 November 1835, 351; ‘Jugglers of India’, *Chambers’ Edinburgh Journal*, 16 March 1839, 69.

²⁴William Hazlitt, ‘The Indian jugglers’, *The Collected Works of William Hazlitt* (London, 1903), vol. 4, 77–89.

²⁵Crispin Bates, ‘Race, caste and tribe in central India: early origins of Indian anthropometry’ in P. Robb (ed.), *The Concept of Race in South Asia* (New Delhi, 1996).

²⁶Platts, *op. cit.*, 63.

²⁷Hazlitt, *op. cit.*, 82–3; Caunter, *op. cit.*, 23–4.

II

While travellers' tales of Indian magic date as far back as the earliest western visitors to Asia, they were not widely read in Britain until the nineteenth century, when new editions and translations were produced for an increasingly literate population. From the 1820s, there appeared English translations of earlier travellers' accounts containing a variety of magical feats performed by Indian jugglers.²⁸ The first English translation of Ibn Battuta's travels in fourteenth-century Asia appeared in 1829, in which he reported having seen a man levitate before his eyes at the Delhi court, and the same year saw the first English version of the *Memoirs* of Emperor Jehangir, who described many miraculous (and, in his view, supernatural) feats performed before him by Indian jugglers.²⁹ Several editions of Marco Polo's travels appeared throughout the century, all of them describing Kashmiri conjurers who 'bring on changes of weather and produce darkness, and do a number of things so extraordinary that no one without seeing them would believe them', and of Indian sorcerers who performed equally miraculous feats at the court of the Great Khan.³⁰ Such accounts were also disseminated more widely through extracts appearing in the periodical press.³¹

In addition to new editions of early travellers' accounts, contemporary accounts of mysterious feats being performed in India began to emerge at this time. In 1832, the first of several stories about a levitating Brahmin appeared in the *Saturday Magazine*. The article described how a performer in Madras called Sheshal had seemingly sat cross-legged in the air, his hand resting on a staff that touched the ground, though the writer of the article correctly deduced that the secret involved a metal support connected to the staff and worn under the clothes of the performer.³² Nevertheless, the effect seems to have provoked a great deal of mystery both in India and in Britain, with even the most sceptical of texts admitting that no satisfactory explanation was available.³³ 'For a while', wrote *The Leisure Hour* in 1853, 'there was nothing heard or talked of but this wonderful "man that sat in the air"'. Newspapers were full of him; private letters teemed about him.' The writer of this article described how the trick had been attributed by many to 'some wonderful discovery in magnetism', until finally

²⁸Bernier, for example, wrote of jugglers who could 'tell any person his thoughts, cause the branch of a tree to blossom and to bear fruit within an hour, hatch an egg in their bosom in less than five minutes, producing whatever bird may be demanded, and made to fly about the room; and execute many other prodigies that need not be enumerated'. See F. Bernier, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, translated from the French by Irving Brock (London, 1826), vol. II, 28.

²⁹Revd Samuel Lee, *The Travels of Ibn Battuta* (London, 1829); D. Price, *Memoirs of the Emperor Jahanguir, Written by Himself, and Translated from a Persian Manuscript, by Major David Price* (London, 1829).

³⁰Marco Polo's travels had been available in English since Frampton's translation of 1579 – N. M. Penzer, *The Most Noble and Famous Travels of Marco Polo, together with the Travels of Nicolo de*

Conti, Edited from the Elizabethan Translation of John Frampton (London, 1929) – but further editions only appeared in the nineteenth century: see H. Murray, *The Travels of Marco Polo* (Edinburgh, 1844); T. Wright, *The Travels of Marco Polo the Venetian* (London, 1854); Col. Henry Yule, *The Book of Ser Marco Polo* (London, 1873).

³¹'Relics of the past', *Illustrated London News*, 27 April 1861, 17; J. N. Maskelyne, 'Oriental jugglery', *The Leisure Hour*, xxvii (1878), 250.

³²'The Air Brahmin', *Saturday Magazine*, 28 July 1832, 28. Earlier accounts of Sheshal's suspension have been found, but this was the first popular British source. The suspension went on to be reported in many other publications, including the *People's Magazine* and *Scientific American*; see also R. Jay, *Jay's Journal of Anomalies*, iv (1999), 137–8.

³³[R. Davenport], *Sketches of Imposture, Deception and Credulity* (London, 1837), 287–9.

explained by a British resident of Madras, an explanation which 'made people wonder how they could ever have been so simple as not to guess at the truth long before'. Not only was this the same explanation that had been provided previously, but despite its exposure once again, this feat would continue to baffle Victorians, and continued to be presented by some writers as genuine levitation well into the twentieth century.³⁴

In 1834, the *Oriental Annual* included an account by the Revd Hobart Caunter of what became known as the Indian basket trick, in which a girl was placed in a basket, and the performer plunged a sword through the wicker until 'blood ran in streams from the basket'. After the girl was seen to have vanished from the basket and appeared nearby in perfect health, Caunter concluded that this was a 'deception'. However, the language he used – the sword was 'plunged with all the blind ferocity of an excited demon', 'my first impulse was to rush upon the monster and fell him to the earth', yet he was 'pale and paralysed with terror' – must have conjured up not only mysterious but also barbaric images for his readers.³⁵ Similarly colourful accounts of the trick appeared subsequently in popular periodicals without any clue as to how the trick was done, and some questioned whether it was a trick at all.³⁶ In one account from Madras, a guard had to be placed around the performance arena to prevent the audience of soldiers, who 'believed this to be no trick, but a piece of diabolical butchery, from leaping into the arena and tearing the man to pieces. . . . Even the officers, whose better education and experience made them less open to such feelings, grew pale with uneasiness.'³⁷ The press continued to present the mystery, the secret to which, 'no European that witnesses it can discover', while more sceptical periodicals felt a need to state that it was merely trickery, noting how 'hundreds of shrewd hard-headed unimaginative and scientific Englishmen . . . have seen it, thought about it, tried it – and been baffled'.³⁸

Equally mysterious seem to have been accounts of men being buried alive. In 1837, at the court of Runjeet Singh in Lahore, a 'fakir' reportedly survived being buried alive without food or water for a month. Witnesses to this feat included one Captain Osborne, who wrote a book about it,³⁹ and Sir Claude Martin Wade, who provided a narrative for James Braid, the pioneer of research into hypnotism. Braid subsequently provided his readers with several similar accounts, stating that the evidence 'must set the point at rest for ever as to the fact of the feats referred to having been genuine phenomena'.⁴⁰ In Braid's view, such phenomena were attributable to a form of self-hypnosis. More popular portrayals of the phenomena were less informative. While failing to provide any solution to the mystery they would claim simply that, on the one hand, 'it appears almost incredible that some artifice was not resorted to' yet, on the other, that 'all seems and is *bona fide*', and the feat was often linked to the occult.⁴¹

³⁴J. Michell and J. M. Rickard, *Phenomena: A Book of Wonders* (London, 1979), 96–7; D. Scott Rogo, *Miracles: A Scientific Exploration of Wondrous Phenomena* (London, 1991), 32–4.

³⁵Caunter, *op. cit.*, 23–7.

³⁶'Jugglers of India', *op. cit.*, 69; 'Indian juggling', *Once A Week*, iv (1861), 40–3; *Spiritual Magazine*, vi (1865), 120; Thomas Frost, *Lives of the Conjurers* (London, 1876), 114.

³⁷'Jugglers of India', *op. cit.*, 69.

³⁸'Juggling, wizarding, and similar phenomena', *Family Herald*, xiii (1855), 349–59; 'Mediums

under other names', *All The Year Round*, vii (1862), 130–7.

³⁹Captain Osborne, *Camp and Court of Runjeet Singh*, a very rare book, according to Henry S. Olcott, *People from the Other World* (London, 1875), 37.

⁴⁰James Braid, *Magic, Witchcraft, Animal Magnetism, Hypnotism and Electro-biology* (London, 1852), 9.

⁴¹'Indian impostors and jugglers', *Leisure Hour*, ii (1853), 791–4; 'Juggling, wizarding, and similar phenomena', *op. cit.*, 359. Others subsequently

The question of whether such a feat might be real, rather than a trick, would provoke the best-known British stage conjuror of the period to declare: 'Suspended animation is one of the sealed wonders of nature . . . yet we cannot accept the stories of self-induced coma in which Indian fakirs are said to be buried alive and taken from the earth again after a long period . . . [since] the Indian juggler is . . . quite at home in this burrowing style of conjuring, and introduces it into his basket-tricks with great success'.⁴² But whether a feat was trickery or else a genuine demonstration of suspended animation, it came to be associated with the 'well-known expertness of Indian jugglers'.⁴³ Meanwhile other puzzling feats, such as snake charming, were described in the popular press with little by way of explanation.⁴⁴

The early nineteenth century thus saw the appearance of a variety of past and contemporary accounts of extraordinary feats reportedly having taken place in India. Those who later attributed such feats to trickery drew, to some extent, on the reputation of Indian jugglers as possessing exceptional manual dexterity, but they also presented juggling in India as evidence of Indian characteristics that would benefit from British supervision. Not only was it assumed that the native population were more credulous than British observers, a view consistent with regular portrayals of superstitious Indians, but Indian juggling was also cited as an example of the deceptive nature of the Indian, as 'illustrating the subtle ingenuity of the Hindooes [sic], whose national character often exhibits an ability that only wants leading in the right direction to constitute them most useful members of society'.⁴⁵ It seems clear, however, that such feats were not always attributed to trickery, and that both British witnesses and the domestic press could be equally credulous, suggesting that the real secret lay in some mysterious form of mesmeric or occult force.⁴⁶ Ambivalent associations with psychic and supernatural forces were to be reinforced with the emergence of modern spiritualism and the growing debate about the cause of the phenomena associated with it.

III

Associations between Indian juggling and the reported events of the séance room were prominent in both the spiritualist and mainstream popular press, as part of a wider discourse that compared western stage conjuring to séance phenomena. Indian juggling, it was soon agreed, was as mysterious as either.⁴⁷ Wider discussion followed the arrival of the Davenport brothers in 1864, who employed the methods of Indian jugglers to produce an effect they

ruled out any form of deception, such as Olcott, *op. cit.*, 38.

⁴²Maskelyne, 'Oriental jugglery', *op. cit.*, 250–3 and 298–301.

⁴³'Suspended animation', *Chambers' Journal*, 11 March 1876, 159.

⁴⁴*Penny Magazine* (1833): cutting from the private collection of Peter Lane.

⁴⁵'Indian impostors and jugglers', *op. cit.*, 794. The veracity of the Hindus was regularly questioned in colonial documents, and accusations of fraud continued to be made towards jugglers, fakirs and yogis by Orientalist chroniclers of caste (see, for example, R. V. Russell, *Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*, vol. III (London,

1916), 253–4). Chatterjee, *op. cit.*, has noted the perceived deceitful nature of the fakirs, in particular, and of the Hindus generally (100). For one British biographer of the Maharaja of Baroda in 1911, the Hindus were 'naturally a suspicious race, their instinct is to mislead, and they have raised dissimulation to a fine art'. See Codell and Macleod, *op. cit.*, 24.

⁴⁶In addition to the above references, see 'Magic in India', *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal*, 2 October 1852, 217–19.

⁴⁷'Juggling, wizarding, and similar phenomena', *op. cit.*, 349; 'Mediums under other names', *op. cit.*, 133.

attributed to spirits. A Davenport séance involved the brothers being tied to chairs inside a 'spirit cabinet', ostensibly to prevent their involvement in the 'spirit manifestations' that followed – the playing of musical instruments and the movement of other objects – inside the closed cabinet. What led many spiritualists, and some non-spiritualists, to conclude that trickery was not involved was their conviction that the brothers were securely tied and thus prevented from assisting the spirits.

The inspiration for the performance by the Davenports was most probably the performances of Indian jugglers in early nineteenth-century Britain, including a rope-tying feat in which the performer was tied up, yet managed to release himself, an example of what would later become known as escapology. This methodological link was soon made public, as popular periodicals expressed the view that the spirit manifestations of the Davenports were nothing more than a modification of the Indian trick.⁴⁸ Furthermore, many western stage conjurors duplicated the feat in order to show that this was the case, and the performance came to be referred to as the Indian rope trick (prior to the more familiar legend of a rope that rises in the air, which will be discussed below).⁴⁹ The notion that the rope-tying feat might be attributed to spirits was even mocked by an Indian performer. According to a British witness of a performance of the trick in India, 'I told [the juggler] there were men in England who were bound in the same way, but had spirits to untie them, at which he laughed the laugh of the incredulous.'⁵⁰

Not surprisingly, spiritualists rejected the notion that the Davenport brothers' phenomena were explicable by the same methods as Indian jugglers. They cited the well-known traveller, Captain Burton, who was unable to explain the phenomena, despite having 'spent a great part of my life in Oriental lands, and have seen there many magicians'.⁵¹ Indeed, the spiritualist press began to claim that Indian juggling itself was more than mere deception, that 'these Orientals are mediums as well as conjurors', referring to the Davenport phenomena and Indian juggling as evidence of 'the occult powers of India'.⁵² Increasingly, spiritualists cited 'marvellous and incomprehensible' Indian phenomena, such as the basket trick, and presented various examples of 'fire ordeals' such as walking on hot irons and placing a red-hot iron on the tongue, as phenomena similar to those of the séance room.⁵³ While there was nothing new or particularly eastern about such 'fire ordeals' – they could be found anywhere from the Old Testament to Victorian street performances – they came to be presented as 'phenomena of the Eastern nations'.⁵⁴ It was at this time that the most famous of Victorian mediums, D. D. Home, began to demonstrate a resistance to hot coals, ostensibly the result of spirit influence, a feat that was reported well beyond the spiritualist press, and one that was presented by spiritualists as evidence of spiritual powers that had been known about in the East for thousands of years.⁵⁵ From this time, the spiritualist press began to show a more general

⁴⁸The accusation was made in both *The Lancet* and *The Field* (*Spiritual Magazine*, v (1864), 511). See also 'Indian rope feat' (n.d.) (Peter Lane collection).

⁴⁹A playbill for Astleys in 1864 advertised 'Nightly Performances of the Wonderful Indian Rope Trick' (private correspondence with Jonathan Reynolds, Dramatis Personae Booksellers).

⁵⁰*Spiritual Magazine*, vi (1865), 167.

⁵¹*Spiritual Magazine*, vi (1865), 89.

⁵²*Spiritual Magazine*, v (1864), 524; *Spiritual Magazine*, vi (1865), 120.

⁵³*Spiritual Magazine*, ii (1867), 72; *Spiritual Magazine*, iii (1868), 193.

⁵⁴*Spiritual Magazine*, iii (1868), 289–96.

⁵⁵Home's handling of red coals was reported in the *Glasgow Daily News* (*Human Nature*, iii (1869), 89). On the eastern roots of the phenomenon, see *Spiritual Magazine*, vi (1871), 466.

interest in India, with articles reporting on the progress of spiritualism in India and drawing comparisons with Indian magical phenomena.⁵⁶

The mainstream periodical press took a different line, of course, framing both Indian juggling and séance phenomena as the result of trickery and, in doing so, presenting the former as superior to the latter.⁵⁷ The importance of this argument can be seen most clearly in the case of D. D. Home's so-called 'Ashley House levitation'. Since, according to eyewitnesses, Home floated out of a third-storey window and back in the adjacent window, the case has become one of the most famous in the history of psychical research, with suggested explanations ranging from hypnotized witnesses to Home being able to jump between the window ledges.⁵⁸ The immediate response of the periodical press, however, was to make direct (and unfavourable) comparisons with earlier reports of levitating Indians. According to the (London) *Daily News*, similar levitations were performed by poor jugglers, and witnessed by everybody who had spent significant time in India. *The Examiner* claimed that 'the very poorest Hindoo juggler can beat the Spiritualists at their own tricks', while *The Observer* provided a grossly exaggerated description of the Indian juggling trick in order to conclude that Home's levitation was inferior to 'such simple performances'.⁵⁹

Whether exploited as a rhetorical device against the claims of spiritualists, or held up as evidence of occult knowledge that had been largely forgotten in the West, Indian juggling was increasingly being presented as both similar and superior to spiritualist phenomena. Similarities were further reinforced as the debate surrounding Indian juggling increasingly began to echo the existing debate about séance phenomena in high-brow periodicals, with the authenticity of Indian juggling being discussed in relation to belief in Biblical miracles and to the reliability of testimony.⁶⁰ But it was by no means restricted to such periodicals, and the idea that the feats of Indian jugglers were more mysterious than the events of the séance room, along with the additional mystery associated with distance and cultural difference, contributed to the growing view that India might be a place in which the magic no longer acceptable in a disenchanted West might yet still exist.

The dissemination of this growing image of India as the home of magic can be seen in contemporary literature as well as the periodical press.⁶¹ In Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868), for example, a group of Indian jugglers is presented not only as impressive conjurers – the narrator admits to having been fooled by their tricks, despite their having been nothing more than 'a very bad and clumsy imitation of Indian juggling' – but also as having links with the

⁵⁶*Spiritual Magazine*, vi (1865), 560; *Spiritual Magazine*, vii (1866), 476; *Spiritual Magazine*, iv (1869), 328; *Medium and Daybreak*, i (1870), 5; *Spiritual Magazine*, vi (1871), 179; *Human Nature*, v (1871), 324; *Spiritual Magazine*, ix (1874), 38–43, 90–1.

⁵⁷'Mediums under other names', *op. cit.*, 133; 'A capital conjuror', *Punch*, 3 June 1865, 220; 'Something like a conjuror', *All the Year Round*, 1 February 1865, 59.

⁵⁸*Contemporary Review*, xxvii (1876), 286; *Fraser's Magazine*, xv (1877), 135; Frank Podmore, *Modern Spiritualism* (London, 1902), vol. ii, 255 ff.; Trevor Hall, *The Enigma of Daniel Home* (Buffalo, 1984), 103–38.

⁵⁹The articles were cited in *Spiritual Magazine*, vi (1871), 59, 550–2.

⁶⁰'Spiritualism, as related to religion and science', *Fraser's Magazine*, lxxi (1865), 35–6; 'Magic', *British Quarterly Review*, xlii (1865), 88–9; 'Evidence: historical, religious and scientific', *Fraser's Magazine*, iv (1871), 515; 'Psychology of belief', *Contemporary Review*, xxii (1873), 123–45.

⁶¹According to Lewis Wurgaft, 'Anglo-Indian fiction [in the 1870s] displayed an explicit concern with the occult and the supernatural': Wurgaft, *op. cit.*, 57–8. See also G. A. Genty, *Rujab the Juggler* (London, 1893).

occult. Indeed, the only feat that is actually described is an apparent demonstration of clairvoyance performed by a small boy accompanying the jugglers, and achieved through looking into ink poured in his palm. The source for this story was E. W. Lane's *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians* which, as Rana Kabbani has pointed out, was preoccupied with magic and bizarre incidents.⁶² A generation later, however, the same feat is dismissed by Collins as 'a development of the romantic side of the Indian character'.⁶³ This Indianization of non-Indian magic was to continue with the foundation of the Theosophical Society, which drew upon the links between Indian juggling and the phenomena associated with spiritualism.

IV

The Theosophical Society would become not only a major source of late Victorian interest in the occult, but also an influential organization in India, with early links to the Arya Samaj, and whose most devout disciples included Annie Besant (a leader in the early Indian nationalist movement) and A. O. Hume – the founder of the Indian National Congress which, ironically, went on to sever the very ties between Britain and India that he hoped it would cement. The foundation of the Theosophical Society in 1875, however, followed Madame Blavatsky's limited success as a spiritualist medium. Furthermore, the society attracted members from the ranks of spiritualists, and broad theological similarities meant that many individuals could sympathize with both groups.⁶⁴ Nevertheless, there were two key ways in which theosophy differed from spiritualism: first, phenomena such as those reported in the séance room tended to be viewed as evidence of natural rather than supernatural forces; second, the strong association of theosophy with India. Theosophy as espoused by Blavatsky was a combination of aspects of Vedanta, Buddhist and ancient western philosophy, and though it had links with spiritualism and western occultism, it presented the East, particularly India, as the source of true wisdom. The society headquarters moved to Madras shortly after its foundation, and theosophists were possibly the first Europeans publicly to embrace Buddhism, introducing some of its fundamental concepts into the West. That this new Oriental direction was attractive to spiritualists can be seen from the review of H. P. Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled: a master-key to the mysteries of ancient and modern science and theology* (New York, 1877) written by Stainton Moses, a prominent spiritualist, who pointed out:

it is not in these western countries that we must seek for [spiritual answers]. The eastern lands have been and are the fields of these studies – studies which we, in England, have resuscitated only of late, amid angry persecution and supercilious contempt from Orthodox Science and Religion.⁶⁵

Though Blavatsky often played down the importance of magical phenomena, their central role in the wider spiritual message of theosophy was clear. Reports of clairvoyance and the materialization of objects were common and, perhaps most importantly, of materialized

⁶²Rana Kabbani, *Imperial Fictions: Europe's Myths of the Orient* (London, 1986), 38.

⁶³Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone* (London, 1868), 265.

⁶⁴Janet Oppenheim, *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychological Research in England, 1850-1914* (Cambridge, 1988), 162-74.

⁶⁵*Human Nature*, xi (1877), 425.

messages from her spiritual masters, the 'Mahatmas'. At the start of the society, Blavatsky stressed the importance of producing phenomena as 'vital proof' of the doctrines, and a decade later she reportedly stated that without such phenomena, nobody would have been attracted to the society.⁶⁶ Indeed, one prominent member admitted that all those joining the society when he was there, 'did so in the hope of mastering the secrets of magic'.⁶⁷ Theosophical writings were full of examples of occult phenomena, A. P. Sinnet's *The Occult World* giving the majority of its pages to reported phenomena.⁶⁸ It also remained the case that the spiritual foundation of the society, as well as Blavatsky's ongoing inspiration, purportedly came from messages sent through the ether from Tibet. To doubt the authenticity of such phenomena was to doubt the authority upon which theosophy rested.

The image of India as a land of magical phenomena is a prominent theme in Blavatsky's writings, and supported by many reports of Indian juggling, from the mango trick to Sheshal's suspension illusion, gleaned from a variety of popular sources.⁶⁹ Dismissing the notion that such feats might be the result of trickery, she cited the French authority, Louis Jaccoliot, who had 'not met, either in India or in Ceylon, a single European, even among the oldest residents, who has been able to indicate the means employed by those devotees for the production of these phenomena'.⁷⁰ Attributing such phenomena to natural though little understood forces, she presented Indian knowledge as superior to the West in such matters, and when an Indian correspondent questioned the importance of the phenomena to theosophical teachings, she replied that they served to demonstrate to the West the existence of powers already known in India.⁷¹

This image of India as the home of magic did not go uncontested, however, and those most concerned with the increasing mystery surrounding Indian jugglers were their western counterparts, stage conjurers. Their appropriation and subsequent attack on the growing image of the mystic East not only further illustrates how such an image reflected wider representations of India in the West, but also suggests that the role of the Theosophical Society in the creation of the image of the mystic East was secondary to that of Indian juggling.

V

The appropriation of various elements of Indian juggling by western conjurers took several forms in the middle of the nineteenth century. At first, their tricks were adapted into effects without any reference to their Indian roots. Robert-Houdin, the pioneering French conjuror, employed intricate mechanical methods to produce a version of the Indian mango trick, and modified Sheshal's suspension illusion to create 'Suspension etheree', in which the suspension of his son in mid-air was attributed by the performer to the mysterious properties of ether. Several others in turn adapted the illusion to create similar effects.⁷² Subsequent European performers, however, began to draw on the image of India itself. One of the most successful, Colonel Stodare, rose to fame with his show, 'Indian Magic', in which he presented

⁶⁶J. Symonds, *Madame Blavatsky: Medium and Magician* (London, 1969), 220; S. Cranston, *HPB: The Extraordinary Life and Influence of Helena Blavatsky, Founder of the Theosophical Movement* (New York, 1993), 223.

⁶⁷Oppenheim, *op. cit.*, 185.

⁶⁸A. P. Sinnet, *The Occult World* (London, 1881).

⁶⁹Blavatsky, *op. cit.*, vol. I, 115.

⁷⁰Blavatsky, *op. cit.*, vol. II, 104.

⁷¹Cranston, *op. cit.*, 223.

⁷²Jay, *op. cit.*, 139-40.

his 'Celebrated and Original Illusions of INDIAN or EASTERN MAGIC', including modified versions of classic Indian feats, such as the basket trick and the mango trick. While his methods were entirely different from those used by the Indian jugglers, he nevertheless claimed these were the authentic Indian feats, and both adverts and reviews described his performances as an opportunity to see them for the first time. After the show, Stodare also sold a pamphlet entitled 'Hindu Magic' that included descriptions of the mango and basket tricks, as performed by Indian jugglers, while the press praised such European exponents of Indian magic over 'their more simple-minded Indian congeners, who practise with bare arms'.⁷³ Playing the part of an officer and a gentleman, Stodare's version of Indian magic was presented as both authentic and better than the original.

Other representations emerged, however, which reflected quite different cultural constructs, as other performers decided upon a more visual image of India to enhance their magic, dressing up in Oriental costume to perform. The first British conjuror known to have performed as an Indian was, in fact, Charles Dickens. In 1849 Dickens, a keen amateur conjuror, blacked up his face and hands, dressed himself in exotic robes, and presented himself as 'The Unparalleled Necromancer Rhia Rhama Rhoos', the name presumably derived from the Indian jugglers, Ramo Samee and Kia Khan Khruse.⁷⁴ It was not long, however, until professional conjurors were presenting themselves as Indians, an Englishman advertising himself in 1854 as 'the Fakir of Ava, Chief of Staff of Conjurors to His Sublime Greatness the Nanka of Aristaphae! who will appear in his native costume, and will perform the most Astonishing Miracles of the East!!'.⁷⁵ Some years later, Alfred Sylvester obtained a second-hand version of Robert-Houdin's 'suspension ethereene', itself based on Sheshal's suspension, and returned the illusion to an Indian presentation by making it the main feature of a new show presented in the character of an 'Eastern Mystic', the Fakir of Oolu.⁷⁶ An illustration of the Fakir shows this levitation performed in turban and robe in an Oriental setting, reminiscent of earlier imaginative representations of the Orient.⁷⁷ Over the following years, growing numbers of fake fakirs exploited the increasingly mysterious image of India in the interests of box-office.⁷⁸ By the end of the century, the most famous of western conjurors were presenting their newest and greatest illusions as examples of Indian magic, and India itself as 'the land of magic'.⁷⁹

⁷³Edwin A. Dawes, *Stodare: The Enigma Variations* (Washington, 1998).

⁷⁴Tigner, *op. cit.*, 89.

⁷⁵*Abracadabra*, LV (1973), 42-4, 125-6; David Price, *Magic: A Pictorial History of Conjurors in the Theater* (New York, 1985), 142.

⁷⁶Dawes, *op. cit.*, 82.

⁷⁷Omai, a Tahitian dressed in Turban and robes, became 'a living example of the oriental "other"': Marcia Pointon, *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth Century England* (New Haven, 1993), 155.

⁷⁸Thomas Frost wrote that he was doubtful 'whether a juggler of the present day, who appears in a brown face and an Oriental garb, is an Asiatic': Frost, *op. cit.*, 221. They were followed by the Fakir of Vishnu, the Fakirs of Benares and the White Mahatma.

⁷⁹Jim Steinmeyer, *Hiding the Elephant: How Magicians Invented the Impossible and Learned to Disappear* (New York, 2003), 164-5; Mike Caveney and Bill Miesel, *Kellar's Wonders* (Pasadena, 2003), 374-5. Simon During in his *Modern Enchantments: the cultural power of secular magic* (Cambridge, 2002), 161, has claimed that Maskelyne's levitation, 'The Entranced Fakir', was based on that of D. D. Home, which he, in turn, had probably borrowed from Robert-Houdin (During, *op. cit.*, 161). If this were true, it would suggest a methodological link between Maskelyne and the earlier Indian juggling trick that had inspired Robert-Houdin, but it is not. The Sheshal illusion was a suspension relying upon a harness, Maskelyne's was a full levitation relying upon extensive stage apparatus, while Home's reported levitation, even if it actually

Of course, India was by no means the only source of inspiration for magicians. Victorian performers adopted various names and performed effects with titles referring to various parts of the world, but not to the same extent as India. China, for example, provided its share of visiting jugglers, and had both its native effects and costumes borrowed by western performers, yet they do not appear to have made as significant an impression. By the time the well-known Scottish conjuror, John Henry Anderson, brought over a Chinese troupe in 1854, there was, according to one historian of magic, 'practically no difference between Indian and Chinese jugglers', a point supported by advertisements for such performers as 'an Anglo-Chinese juggler à la Ramo Samee'.⁸⁰ Phillipe, a French performer, dressed for part of his show in a large Chinese-style robe to present 'A night in the palace of Pekin', but his reasons were primarily methodological – a great deal may be concealed beneath a large robe – and his effects were described as 'Indian and Chinese experiments'.⁸¹ The first prominent Chinese magician, Ching Ling Foo, did not appear until the end of the century, at which point he prompted a number of western imitators, but by then India was firmly established as the home of magic, so much so that the first conjuring periodical, when it appeared in 1895, was called *Mahatma*, and included an image of an Indian juggler on the masthead.

Like the late eighteenth-century portraits of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu in Turkish-style dress, the appropriation of Oriental costume might be seen 'as a sign of the colonial "right" to appropriate foreign bodies and foreign culture'.⁸² According to Simon During, on the other hand, Philippe's impersonation of a Chinese conjuror, given his capacity to perform in both western and Oriental modes, 'thereby established for European audiences the supremacy of western over Oriental magic'.⁸³ Yet it seems more likely that western conjurors' appropriation of the eastern image was an attempt to take advantage of the growing impression of quite the reverse, that Indian magic was more mysterious, and therefore superior to, western magic. For while such western impressions were always safely framed as trickery (by performers who publicly claimed that spiritualist mediums were nothing more than tricksters), it seems clear that Indian juggling itself was increasingly being viewed as something beyond mere legerdemain.

Indeed, the activities of western conjurors from the 1870s onwards suggest not only professional jealousy, but also a wider concern that the public was being convinced by pretensions to supernatural powers. It was in the aftermath of the founding of the Theosophical Society that western conjurors began to debunk Indian jugglers. In 1878, the most famous of mid-Victorian conjurors, J. N. Maskelyne, wrote an article for *The Leisure Hour* on 'Oriental Jugglery' in which he endeavoured to expose the methods of Indian jugglers to the public, his reasons being clearly similar to those that had provoked him and other conjurors to expose the methods used by fake mediums. Describing the East as the home of magic, 'not the innocent conjuring we give that name to in England... but the crafty and

took place, could not have been either. The choice of an Indian presentation, therefore, was based on the public's image of India rather than any acknowledgement of inspiration.

⁸⁰S. W. Clarke, *Annals of Conjuring* (New York, 1983), 285.

⁸¹Geoffrey Lamb, *Victorian Magic* (London, 1976), 31.

⁸²Pointon, *op. cit.*, 149. More recently, it has been argued that British Victorian and Edwardian women appropriated Turkish trousers as a challenge to existing domestic gender boundaries (see Dianne Sachko Macleod, 'Cross-cultural cross-dressing: class, gender and modernist sexual identity' in Codell and Macleod, *op. cit.*, 63–86).

⁸³During, *Modern Enchantments*, *op. cit.*, 112.

sometimes audacious imposture in which the magician pretends to possess supernatural powers', he complained of fakirs who 'have deluded innocent Englishmen into writing of their jugglery as though it had an element of the miraculous in it'. He then attributed Indian marvels to exaggeration 'tinged by the romance clinging to all things Oriental', and went on to explain the secrets behind Sheshal's levitation, the basket trick (as described by the Revd Hobart Caunter) and sword swallowing.⁸⁴ While such tricks had been attributed by some to trickery several decades earlier, explanations were now being provided as a deliberate response to a perceived attempt by Indian jugglers to claim genuine magical powers, as well as being part of a wider concern that such claims were being believed.

There is, however, little evidence that Indian performers were making claims to such powers beyond the usual theatrical patter. *The Times*, for example, had recently reported on an Indian juggler 'who pretended to possess some power which rendered his life proof against any attempt that might be made upon it with powder and ball'.⁸⁵ This was the so-called Gun Trick, which had been originally performed in Britain by Indian jugglers, and subsequently by British magicians, including John Henry Anderson, an avid denouncer of spiritualism. Had Anderson claimed to possess a similar power while performing the trick, and he almost certainly did, it is difficult to imagine anyone thinking that such a claim was intended to be taken seriously. It is quite possible that the claims of Indian performers were no more serious, but were taken to be so. In any case, it does seem clear that Indian magic as a whole was being taken seriously by some, and by too many for Maskelyne's liking. However, the fact that theosophy was not a target of Maskelyne's at this point – indeed it was not for several years – suggests that this image of India, while no doubt reinforced by the foundation of the Theosophical Society, was certainly not reliant upon it.⁸⁶

Maskelyne's example was followed by other western magicians who visited India, and who regularly presented Indian juggling not only as trickery but also as inferior trickery to that performed by western conjurors.⁸⁷ As one prominent writer on magic put it, 'more nonsense has been written about East India fakirs and jugglers than any other class of conjurors'.⁸⁸ The notion that such performances were inexplicable to western conjurors (perhaps even inexplicable by western science) led, over the following decades, to several books being published and made available to the general public in which British and American conjurors exposed the secrets of their Indian colleagues.⁸⁹ In addition to published texts, several articles

⁸⁴Maskelyne, *op. cit.*, 250–3, 298–301. The fact that Maskelyne got much of this wrong suggests his enthusiasm surpassed his expertise. The article also discussed the live burial, but no explanation was provided.

⁸⁵*The Times*, 18 April 1876, 10.

⁸⁶Maskelyne's original article made no reference to Theosophy while, in a later article, he explicitly declined to comment on the grounds that 'the occult portion of Theosophy has seen its best days': see L. Weatherley and J. N. Maskelyne, *The Supernatural?* (Bristol, 1891), 215. He had clearly changed his mind when, two decades later, he published *The fraud of modern theosophy exposed: a brief history of the greatest imposture ever perpetrated under the cloak of religion* (London, 1912).

⁸⁷Dr H. S. Lynn, *How It's Done, and Recollections of India* (London, 1882), 5–9; J. W. Holden, *A Wizard's Wanderings from China to Peru* (London, 1886), 38–42; H. J. Burlingame, *Around the World with a Magician and a Juggler* (Chicago, 1891), 57.

⁸⁸H. J. Burlingame, *Leaves from a Conjuror's Scrap Books; or Modern Magicians and their Works* (Chicago, 1891), 183.

⁸⁹Burlingame, *Around the World*, *op. cit.*, 89–97; Samri S. Baldwin, *The Secrets of Mahatma Land Explained* (New York, 1895); Charles Bertram, *A Magician in Many Lands* (London, 1911); Hereward Carrington, *Hindu Magic: An Exposé of the Tricks of the Yogis and Fakirs of India* (Kansas, 1913); Major L. H. Branson, *Indian Conjuring* (London, 1922); Elliot, *op. cit.*

appeared in a wide variety of popular periodicals at the time on the topic of Indian magic, and included exposures of the methods of Indian conjurors, often by conjurors who publicly exposed the tricks of spiritualist mediums.⁹⁰ Indian juggling, which in previous years had been used as a debunking tool against spiritualism, had now itself become a target for debunking. The effectiveness of such a strategy can only have been weakened, however, by the many other articles in the popular press that continued to describe feats of Indian juggling without providing any explanation as to their cause.⁹¹

VI

The question of whether Indian juggling might be the result of genuine magic was discussed more widely still with the emergence of the most popular of Indian legends, the Indian rope trick. While the legend provoked enormous public interest, was discussed at length not only by magicians but also by psychical researchers, Orientalists and scholars of religion generally, not to mention the considerable press coverage it attracted, it has failed to attract the attention of social historians.⁹² Yet its rise to fame drew on many of the themes identified above, and reflected widespread notions of what India meant to the western public. Contrary to the claims of amateur historians of magic, the legend is a modern construction, the roots of which can be found in a hoax story that first appeared in the *Chicago Daily Tribune* in 1890, and was subsequently copied by several American and European newspapers.⁹³ The original story exploited the reputation of Indian jugglers, along with details drawn from both the Theosophical Society and the exaggerated claims of western conjurors, and tapped into a contemporary discussion about the possibility that spiritualist phenomena might be the result of mass hypnosis.⁹⁴ The subsequent growth of the legend in the early twentieth century relied upon western conjurors' continued ambivalent position towards Indian magic – both exploiting the image of India as the home of magic, and publicly debunking the idea that such magic was real – and upon widely held views about the 'natural talents of Hindus for hypnosis'.⁹⁵ The weight given to the testimony of seemingly reliable western eyewitnesses was in stark contrast to assumptions about Indian credulity and untrustworthiness, though it now seems clear that European witnesses were equally credulous and untrustworthy.⁹⁶ The history of the legend that was subsequently constructed by amateur historians, which claimed that it was of ancient Indian origin, relied, much as Wilkie Collins and Madame Blavatsky had, upon

⁹⁰'Are Indian jugglers humbugs?', *op. cit.*, 657–64; 'Secrets of Indian jugglery', *New Penny Magazine*, 26 May 1900; 'Indian conjuring explained', *Chambers' Journal*, IV (1901), 757–61; 'Indian conjuring explained', *Living Age*, I March 1901.

⁹¹See, for example: 'An Indian juggler', *Routledge's Every Boy's Annual Magazine* (January 1879), 46–8; 'Indian magic', *Graphic*, 14 April 1888, 393–4; 'Indian jugglers', *Graphic*, 2 January 1892, 13; 'Indian jugglers', *The Boy's Own Paper*, XVI (1894), 741–2; 'Oriental magic' (c. 1899); 'Indian jugglers', *Blackwood's Magazine*, CLXVI (1899), 834–5; 'Hypnotism or trickery?', *Cassell's*, 15 July 1901.

⁹²Peter Lamont, *The Rise of the Indian Rope Trick: The Biography of a Legend* (London, 2004).

⁹³Peter Lamont and Richard Wiseman, 'The rise and fall of the Indian rope trick', *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, LXV (2001), 175–93.

⁹⁴'It is only hypnotism', *Chicago Daily Tribune*, 8 August 1890, 16; *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research*, IV (1889), 107.

⁹⁵Edmond Demaitre, *The Yogis of India* (London, 1937), 154.

⁹⁶*ibid.*, 119–21; D. H. Rawcliffe, *The Psychology of the Occult* (New York, 1959), 297–301; Richard Wiseman and Peter Lamont, 'Unravelling the rope trick', *Nature*, CCCLXXXIII (1996), 212–13.

older related stories from elsewhere being presented as essentially Indian.⁹⁷ What became the most famous myth of the East was, in every sense, a western myth about India and Indians, so much so that despite western conjurors being unable to find a native of India who had heard of it, they nevertheless concluded it was the product of 'the Oriental imagination'.⁹⁸

The image of India as a land of miracles and magic remains a familiar one today, and continues to attract sensational journalists, the alienated, or otherwise philosophically disenchanted westerners. The historical construction of that image, however, has attracted less attention. Popular depictions of Indian juggling were ostensibly tangible examples of a more exclusive debate among Orientalists, and fed the literary representations that were read more widely. As spiritualist claims provoked western conjurors to expose how the phenomena of the séance room could be obtained through trickery, so the claims of spiritualists and theosophists, rather than Indian jugglers themselves, provoked a similar response. While this sceptical response followed the foundation of the Theosophical Society, the form of that response suggests it was primarily an attempt to deal with the growing image of Indian juggling itself as something beyond the ken of western conjurors, whether it be superior trickery or genuine magic. The ambivalent representations that were provided, however, can only have provoked greater mystery.

As recent discussions of Orientalist discourse have pointed out, 'one cannot but problematize "India" at the same time as one dismantles "Europe"' since an imagined India was a crucial element in the construction of a systematic, theorized image of 'Europe' as the scene of the birth of the modern.⁹⁹ That meant not only the invocation of vague and pejorative images of eastern superstition and irrational belief, but also exotic images of the mysterious. By comparison with the domestic debate about the mysteries of the séance room, the reported miracles of Indian juggling could be imagined at what, for the domestic public at least, was a relatively safe distance. In a disenchanted West, it is perhaps understandable that for many in Victorian Britain this is what India came to exemplify.

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⁹⁷Lamont, *op. cit.*, 153–72.

⁹⁸Ottakar Fischer, *Illustrated Magic* (New York, 1931), 187.

⁹⁹Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (Princeton, 2000), 28–43.

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