



Part Four
Yoga in the Transnational Imagination
18th–20th Century



GROU

The Bed of Nails: The Exotic Across Borders and Media

22A

“Diverses Pagodes et Penitences des Faquirs” (Various Temples and Penances of the Fakirs)

Bernard Picart (1673–1733)
1729

Copper-plate engraving on paper, 48 × 52.4 cm
From Jean-Frédéric Bernard and Bernard Picart, *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses des Peuples Idolâtres* (Ceremonies and Religious Customs of the Idolatrous Peoples), vol. 2 (Amsterdam: J. F. Bernard, 1728)
Robert J. Del Bontà collection, E442

22B

Images of Yogis

John Chapman (act. 1792–1823)
September 1, 1809

Copper-plate engraving on paper, 26.7 × 21.6 cm
From *Encyclopædia Londinensis or, Universal Dictionary of arts, sciences, and literature ...* vol. 10 (London: J. Adler, 1811)
Robert J. Del Bontà collection, E1232

22C

“Hindu Fakir on a Bed of Spikes, Calcutta”

James Ricalton (1844–1929)
ca. 1903

Stereoscopic photograph on paper, 8.9 × 17.8 cm
From James Ricalton, *India through the Stereoscope: A Journey through Hindustan* (New York and London: Underwood & Underwood, 1907)
Robert J. Del Bontà collection, SV49

22D

“Hindu Fakir: for thirteen years this old man has been trying ‘to find peace’ on this bed of spikes”

Young People’s Missionary Movement
New York, early 20th century
Postcard, 8.9 × 14 cm
Collection of Kenneth X. and Joyce Robbins

22E

“Fakir on Bed of Nails”

D. Macropolo & Co.
India, Calcutta, early 20th century
Postcard, 8.9 × 14 cm
Collection of Kenneth X. and Joyce Robbins

22F

“Hindu Fakir on Bed of Spikes, Benares”

Baptist Missionary Society
India, early 20th century
Postcard, 8.6 × 13.5 cm
Collection of Kenneth X. and Joyce Robbins

22G

“Fakir Sitting on Nails”

India, late 19th century
Painted clay, 11.4 × 20.3 cm
Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Given by the Indian High Commission, IS.196-1949

Note: In the listings above, historical titles are indicated by quotation marks.





Diverses PAGODES et PENITENCES des FAQUIRS.

1. *Un Faquir qui se tient dans une posture de femme pour se faire pardonner ses crimes.*
 2. *Un Faquir qui se tient dans une posture de femme pour se faire pardonner ses crimes.*
 3. *Un Faquir qui se tient dans une posture de femme pour se faire pardonner ses crimes.*

4. *Un Faquir qui se tient dans une posture de femme pour se faire pardonner ses crimes.*
 5. *Un Faquir qui se tient dans une posture de femme pour se faire pardonner ses crimes.*
 6. *Un Faquir qui se tient dans une posture de femme pour se faire pardonner ses crimes.*

7. *Un Faquir qui se tient dans une posture de femme pour se faire pardonner ses crimes.*
 8. *Un Faquir qui se tient dans une posture de femme pour se faire pardonner ses crimes.*
 9. *Un Faquir qui se tient dans une posture de femme pour se faire pardonner ses crimes.*
 10. *Un Faquir qui se tient dans une posture de femme pour se faire pardonner ses crimes.*



J. Chapman, Sc.
1. Purana Poori, an Oordhbahu Saniäfsy. 2. Purrum Soatuntre Perkasanund,
a Ser-seja Saniäfsy. 3. A Yogey.

London Published Sept. 1. 1809. by J. Wilkes.

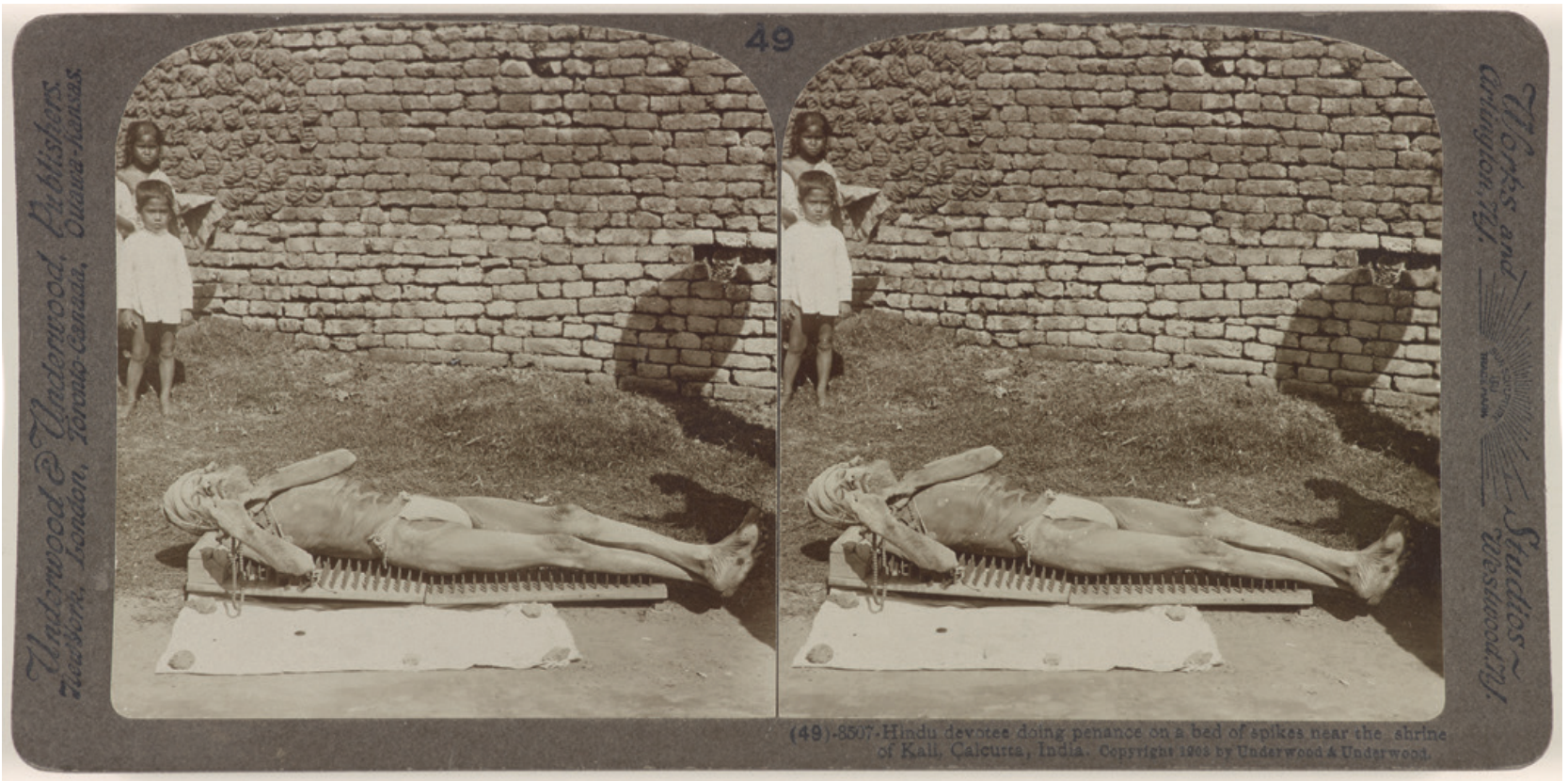
From the eighteenth to the twentieth century, the Indian ascetic lying supinely and unaffectedly on a bed of nails was repeated in prints, paintings, photographs, and clay. Often one of a group of ascetics engaged in various physical austerities or *tapas*,¹ he became particularly associated with the exotic, if not the charlatan.

Travelers to India had encountered itinerant holy men since antiquity; in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, however, reports of “yogis” and “fakirs,” as they were fluidly termed,² rapidly increased in the accounts of European merchants and missionaries. Aided by print, they gained a wide audience. The publisher Jean-Frédéric Bernard and the engraver Bernard Picart compiled such reports in their volumes on comparative religion, *Cérémonies et coutumes religieuses de tous les peuples du monde représentées* (Ceremonies and Religious Customs of the Various Nations of the Known World, 1723–37).³ They provided “copious Description[s]”⁴ of Indian ascetics in particular, as illustrated in one of Picart’s engravings (cat. 22a), based on the French gem merchant Jean-Baptiste Tavernier’s earlier account and print.⁵ It depicts a scene of temples, devotees, and ascetics in “fantastic Postures,” such as maintaining the “same attitude,” being surrounded by fires, or leaning “upon a cord” under a banyan tree.⁶ Throughout the text, these and other austerities are enumerated, including an ascetic who “walk’d in Wooden Shoes stuck full of Nails in the Inside,”⁷ an early European textual reference to the penance that became the bed of nails phenomenon. The authors interpreted these “severe Penances” as a means of controlling the body to gain powers, such as the transmigration of souls (metempsychosis); as a way to attract fame and therefore alms; and also, within a Christian framework, as penance for sins.⁸

European fascination, if not obsession, with documenting the novel

postures and painful practices of ascetics seen in Picart’s print continued over the next two centuries. Publications reveal awe mixed with fear, condescension, and distrust, especially related to the bed of nails. Jonathan Duncan’s “Account of Two Fakeers,” published in *Asiatic Researches* 5 (1799), includes one of the earliest printed portraits of a yogi on a bed of nails. In 1792, Duncan, the British East India Company resident at Benares (Varanasi), interviewed two renowned “fakeers,” Purana Poori (Puran Puri) and Perkasanund (Prakashanand), and employed an Indian artist to draw them “from the life.”⁹ Duncan was enthralled by Purana Poori’s description of his travels, his choice of penance (raised arms or *urdhvabahu*¹⁰), and his espionage for the Company. However, Duncan’s awe turned to disbelief when it came to Perkasanund, whom he interviewed “principally on account of the strange penance ... [of] fixing himself on his *ser-seja*, or bed of spikes.”¹¹ The ascetic on a bed of thorns or arrows has a long history in India,¹² but it is likely that Perkasanund popularized it in the colonial period perhaps through the repetition of his printed image. It was unknown to Duncan, who assumed it to be repentance for a crime. Perkasanund refuted the accusation by citing its antiquity, claiming its origin in ascetics who performed the *ser-seja* (*sara-sayya*) discipline, including the warrior Bhishma who lay on a bed of arrows in the *Mahabharata*.¹³ Perkasanund’s use of the term arrow-bed, *ser-seja*, rather than the more commonly used thorn-bed (*kantaka-sayya*), not only links him to Bhishma, it also indicates that the bed of nails might have been his particular adaptation.

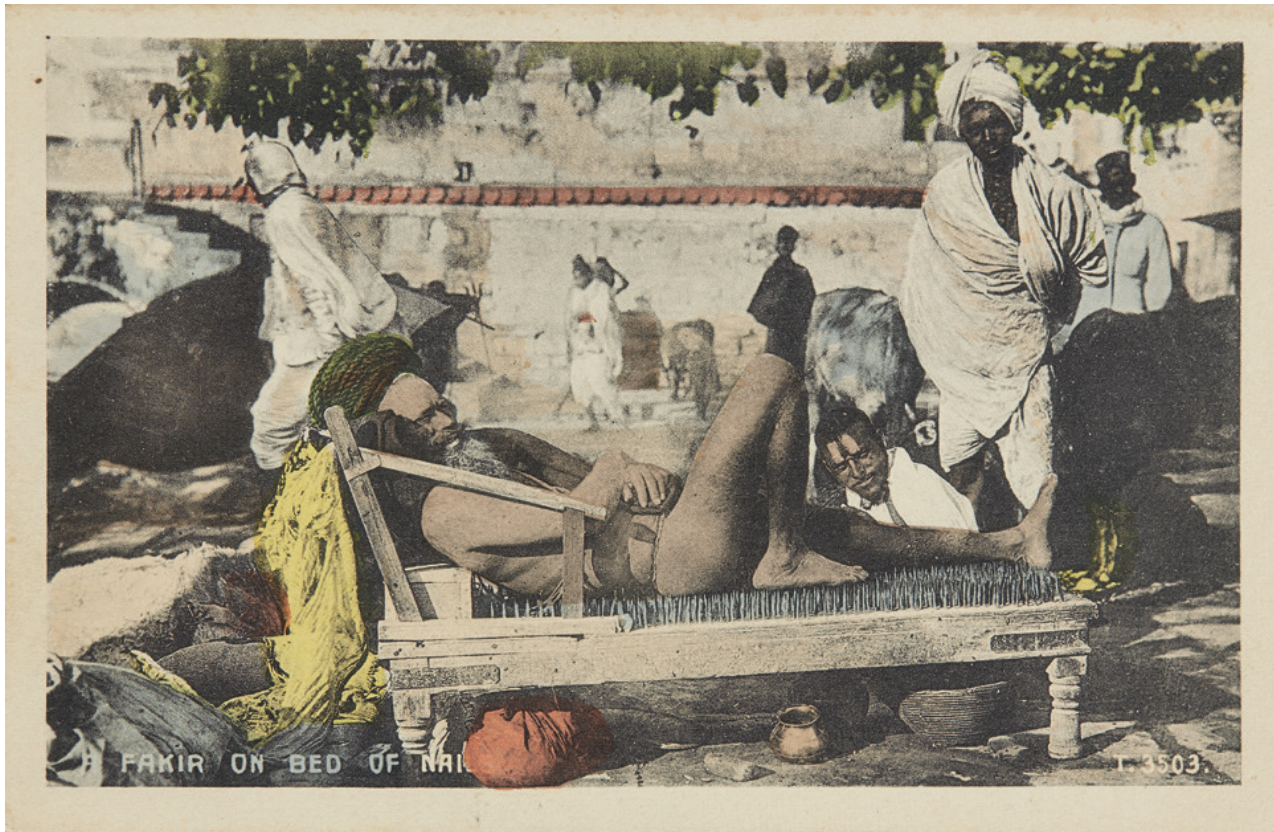
Perkasanund’s illustrated story circulated in multiple publications, each increasingly skeptical about the bed of nails.¹⁴ For example, the *Encyclopedia Londinensis* (1811) entry on “Fakeers, or Devotees” describes Perkasanund and his ilk as “wretched beings in the shape



22c "Hindu Fakir on a Bed of Spikes, Calcutta"



22d "Hindu Fakir: for thirteen years this old man has been trying 'to find peace' on this bed of spikes"



22e "Fakir on Bed of Nails"



22f "Hindu Fakir on Bed of Spikes, Benares"



22g "Fakir Sitting on Nails"

of man" who "disgrace the police of any country, by a life of total inutility, under the name of pious austerity" (cat. 22b).¹⁵ Portions of the text are excerpted from Duncan's article, but the *Londinensis* author elaborates on the bed of nails, portraying this type of "fakeer" as a free-loader living on the "generosity of the English government" and as a performer who is "carried about to all of the great festivals, sitting bare-breeched on a seat of iron-spikes, from the punctures of which they frequently contrive to let the blood flow."¹⁶

Western descriptors of Indian ascetics as militants, mendicants, layabouts, and showmen are intimately related to their changing social circumstance.¹⁷ In the early modern period, myriad types of ascetics gained their livelihoods by being mercenaries, rural priests, or participants in religious orders.¹⁸ In the late

eighteenth century, the British created an inhospitable atmosphere for ascetics, fearing their military might, which disrupted trade routes and diplomacy and led to skirmishes in Bengal, which became known as the Sanyasi and Fakir Rebellion. Wandering ascetics also congregated in public, performing fantastic feats for alms or simply begging. This change in status was related to the decreasing religious role that ascetics played from the sixteenth century onward, concurrent with an increase in *bhakti* (devotion to a personal god), and also to specific eighteenth-century British laws that identified ascetics within Company territories as criminals and beggars rather than religious figures.¹⁹

By the early twentieth century, the ascetic lying on a bed of nails in a public space had become a stock figure in Western photographs, postcards, and

books. In 1907, photographer James Ricalton published *India Through the Stereoscope* for the American firm Underwood and Underwood, which specialized in boxed sets of stereograph views of familiar and exotic locales.²⁰ In Ricalton's views of India, "Hindu Fakir on a Bed of Spikes, Calcutta" (cat. 22c) would have been viewed between "Horrid Goat Sacrifices to Hindu Goddess Kali" and a caged tiger labeled "Famous 'Man-Eater.'" Within the text, Ricalton dismisses the emaciated ascetic as a beggar practicing "a 'stunt' for alms," drawing attention to the "one big English penny deposited" on a white cloth.²¹ However, by including the photograph Ricalton enacts his own voyeuristic stunt, offering a view of the strange, awesome, and ferocious for Americans to condescend to and consume.²²

Postcards united spectacle, ethnography, and even missionary activities. At the turn of the century, missionary movements sought to educate young Americans for religious work. As part of the process they published postcards, such as cats. 22d–f. A postcard published by the Young People's Missionary Movement (cat. 22d), for instance, displays an ascetic fingering his rosary while seated with one knee up on a bed of nails. He is described as trying "to find peace," yet the empty bed of nails at his side and the hovering crowd implies the opposite. Is he "blameless and harmless," even a potential convert? Or is he "insincere" and "given to various modes of deception," as another Young People's publication, J. M. Thoburn's *The Christian Conquest of India* (1906), declared about devotees in India, including a "fakir on a bed of spikes."²³

The ascetic on a bed of nails reiterates as one of several hundred clay figurines amassed by C. G. Sanders, a fur merchant who lived in India (cat. 22g). Made by two Indian sculptors, the figurine is within an entire schema "of the many varied ethnic types of India and

Burma,"²⁴ a trend related to cataloguing Indian people by caste or trade to display in world exhibitions.²⁵ Rather than emaciated, its body appears muscular and toned, perhaps a nod to modern innovations that intertwined physical fitness and yoga.²⁶ Indeed, the small clay figure holds its own: it is jaunty, comfortable, and hints at the dual dependence of the fakir on Europeans for funds, and Europeans on the fakir for exoticism. HS

Fakirs, Fakers and Magic

23A

*Thurston the famous magician,
East Indian rope trick*

Otis Lithograph Company
United States, ca. 1927
Color lithograph, 104 x 35 cm
Prints and Photographs Division, Library of Congress,
POS-MAG-.T48 no.14 (C size)

23B

Koringa

W. E. Barry Ltd.
United Kingdom, Bradford, ca. 1938
Print, 74.4 x 50.9 cm
Victoria and Albert Museum, London, S.128-1994

23C

"Mystery girl: why can't she be killed?"

Look Magazine, September 28, 1937
Des Moines, Iowa, United States
34.1 x 26.6 cm
Private Collection

23D

Hindoo Fakir

Edison Manufacturing Company
United States, 1902
Film, transferred to DVD, 3 minutes
General Collections, Library of Congress,
NV-061-499

23E

"The Yogi Who Lost His Will Power"

Song clip from the film *You're the One* (1941)
Johnny Mercer (lyrics); Mercer-Mchugh; Jerry
Cohonna with Orrin Tucker and his Orchestra
Clip from YouTube, loop at 3:14:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ixwmfoZJHq8>
LC Recorded Sound 578945
Columbia 35866

Fakirs. The word evokes a bewildering range of associations in the Indian colonial context—from Sufi ascetics to ash-smeared *hatha yogis*; from magicians and tricksters to circus performers; from Gandhi to the Kumbh Mela.¹ An exotic foreign word, it came to stand for practices that were themselves variously perceived by European visitors to India as exotic and foreign, but also fascinating, confusing, and frightening since the seventeenth century.² The very word “fakir,” as it is used in India, rests on an etymological confusion, shifts in meaning over centuries pointing as much to changing colonial and transnational perceptions (or misperceptions) as to its continued hold on popular imaginations. Derived from the Arabic word for poor (from the noun *faqr*, poverty), fakir originally referred to Muslim Sufi wandering dervishes and then gradually expanded to include a range of Hindu yogis who defied easy categorization, even if they were increasingly (and mistakenly) glossed by colonial administrators under one umbrella: mendicant caste orders; militant warrior ascetics who disrupted East India Company trade routes; itinerant renouncers who wandered from shrine to shrine; and, most especially, magicians, contortionists, and yogis who engaged in spectacular self-mortification practices on the street and in other public spaces.³

Of all these groups, it is this last category—the performing fakir-yogis in public spaces—that attracted diametrically different responses inside and outside India in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In India, yoga’s scholarly revivalists dismissed contemporary fakir-yogis and their magical practices as the unworthy, degenerate heirs of a classical yoga tradition in need of urgent reform.⁴ By reverse logic, magic in the Indian context became intertwined in the popular European imagination with fakir-yogis, many of whom had been forced by colonial laws against militant asceticism to take on mendicant life-

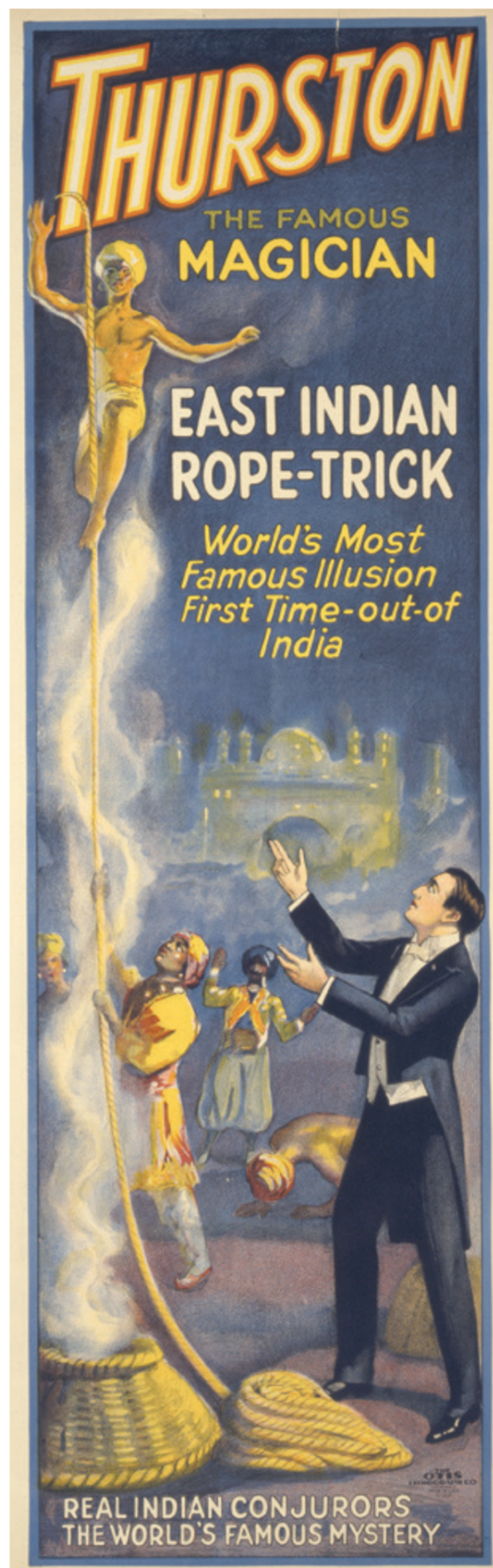
styles in temple complexes and street fairs.⁵ Meanwhile, outside of India, fakirs became objects of intense fascination for European and American occultists, who celebrated the magical powers these figures could acquire through yoga. Popular accounts of fakirs in the early twentieth-century Euro-American print and cinematic media reflect some of this ambivalence. While portrayals of yogis, real and imaginary, routinely relied on Orientalist stereotypes of India or the mystical East as the source of supernatural power, there were an equal number of attempts to debunk and expose specific fakirs and yogis as inauthentic fakers, charlatans, and frauds who were duping a gullible public. This essay briefly describes five fakir-yogis and performers who captured the world’s imagination in the early twentieth century, using examples drawn from the rich world of lithographic posters and early films, two based on real magicians, three on fictional composites.

The older of the two posters, *Thurston the famous magician, East Indian rope trick* (cat. 23a), features Howard Thurston, a stage magician from Columbus, Ohio. As a child, he ran away to join the circus and eventually became one of the most successful performers of his time. His traveling magic shows routinely drew on an undifferentiated India as the authoritative source of magical power. This vertical lithographic poster reflects and mimics his most popular act—the great Indian rope trick—which is announced in the typical hyperbole of the carnival busker: “World’s Most Famous Illusion. First Time-out-of-India.” On the right, Thurston stands below that legend and against a monument of indeterminate origin, the minarets being the only geographical clue that it is the “East.” Suavely dressed in coat and tails, the magician cuts a crisp contour against the misty nightscape, and his raised arm signals that he has just caused the rope to magically arise from the snake basket

on the lower left, rather like a conductor orchestrating a “native” performance. The young, bare-chested boy in turban and dhoti who climbs the freestanding rope is another visual nod to India and the East. Meanwhile, the Indian conjurers in attendance are represented with broad painted strokes and dramatic shadows, their yellow and gray tonalities rendering them as unsubstantial as the swirling smoke and distant mosque. Ironically, just a few years after this poster was printed, and when the popularity of the trick was at its peak, the Indian rope trick was roundly denounced in the *Chicago Tribune* and other media as the world’s greatest hoax of all time, even as some analysts later identified the *Tribune* itself as the perpetrator of the hoax in the first place.⁶

Koringa, a female magician or *magicienne* who performed in France, England, and the United States during the 1930s, invoked Indian referents through both performance and persona. Her photograph on a 1937 cover of *Look*, an American magazine (cat. 23c), the source for a 1938 English circus poster (cat. 23b), reveals how she creatively reimagined yogic attributes. Her unruly halo of hair recalls the wild tresses of medieval yogini goddesses (cats. 3a–c), her chic bathing suit is styled on the tiger-skin garment of a yogi, and the off-center dot on her forehead hovers between a *bindi* and a protective mark against the evil eye.⁷ Touted alternately as the world’s “only female fakir” and “only female yogi,” Koringa’s acts included hypnotism and defying death—practices historically identified with yogic *siddhis*’ supernatural powers—by wrestling crocodiles and being buried alive.⁸

Koringa’s stage identity represents a performative transformation of yoga in culture and in history. Her promotional materials state that she was born in Rajasthan, orphaned at the age of three, and raised by fakirs who taught her supernatural skills.⁹ In reality, she



23a Thurston the famous magician, East Indian rope trick

Bertram MILLS' CIRCUS

and MENAGERIE



"Koringa" THE ONLY FEMALE FAKIR
IN THE WORLD

AN ENTIRELY NEW PROGRAMME

LUTON · APRIL 16 TO 20

PARK STREET

Telephone No. - Luton 2386

Positively FOUR DAYS only

April 16th at 5 & 8 p.m. April 18th at 11 a.m., 5 & 8 p.m. April 19th at 5 & 8 p.m. April 20th at 3 & 6-30 p.m.

MENAGERIE OPEN DAILY from 11 a.m. (2 p.m. Easter-Monday) and after the Performances

5/- and 7/6 SEATS MAY BE BOOKED IN ADVANCE on the ground, or by telephone, from April 7th. UNRESERVED SEATS - 1/3, 2/6 and 3/9

OVER 3,000 UNRESERVED SEATS AT EACH PERFORMANCE

1939 1938

was born Renée Bernard in Bordeaux in southern France. It is likely that Bernard took the name Koringa and adopted an Indian identity because British and French audiences had been ardent fans of theatrical displays of Indian magic and Oriental pomp since the second half of the nineteenth century.¹⁰ In spite of its Orientalist overtones, Bernard's yogini-fakir identity parallels the practices of Indian magicians. For centuries, Indian magicians intentionally capitalized on the supernatural powers that were reputedly held by ascetics. Descriptions from nineteenth-century and more recent ethnographies note that magicians wore Shaivite sectarian ash marks and *rudraksha* beads; claimed their powers came from ascetic practice or were learned in the cremation grounds frequented by Tantric practitioners; and whispered incantations that sounded like sacred mantras, such as *yantru-mantru jadugili tantrum*.¹¹

If the Thurston and Koringa posters reference India as the source of magi-

cal authority for real fakirs, the film and sound clips described in this section touch on the authenticity and conversely, the *loss* of power, of fictional fakir-yogis. Almost from its inception, cinema developed a relationship with magic—first as a curiosity included in magic acts, and later as a device for creating new kinds of illusions. Film pioneers in the European context—like George Méliès,¹² who would go on to become one of the most famous “trick film” specialists in the world, as well as Dadasahib Phalke, director of India's first feature film *Raja Harischandra* (1913)—were magicians.¹³ Indeed, Phalke, can even be seen performing magic tricks in a short film, *Professor Kelpha's Magic* (1916). Early subjects in this “cinema of attractions”¹⁴ ranged from views of foreign lands to scenes from popular Broadway shows to “trick films” that mixed magic routines with special effects.

Meanwhile, in part because of increased cultural exchange due to the British Raj, audiences in the West

23b Koringa

23c “Mystery girl: why can't she be killed?”





23d Scenes from *Hindoo Fakir*

were fascinated by “exotic” India. Words like “yogi” and “fakir” were part of the pop-culture lexicon, and the figure of the fakir-yogi became an important presence in early filmic representations of India.

Indeed, the first-ever American film about India was a 1902 trick film produced by Thomas Edison’s Edison Manufacturing Company titled *Hindoo Fakir* (cat. 23d), which united these two developments in early cinema: the magical trick film and ethnographic representation.¹⁵ The magician in *Hindoo Fakir* is very likely A. N. Dutt, who sometimes performed using that name, and also toured the United States under the name Ram Bhuj. Hardly a fakir at all, he had been born into a middle-class Indian family and was sent to Edinburgh to study medicine. But, without telling his family, he embarked on a show-business career instead.¹⁶ Like other Indian magicians of the time, Dutt took illusions that can be traced back to Indian yogis and retooled them as magic acts on the European and American stage.¹⁷ The basket trick performed in the film, for instance, is a staple of Indian street magicians (*jaduwallahs*), who have performed it for centuries. Another trick, in which his assistant lies on the points of several upturned swords, has a visual echo in a medieval relief carving on a temple at Srisailam, which depicts a yogi sitting on sword-points.¹⁸

The wonders of ancient India meet the magic of the movies in a third trick that depends entirely on special cinematic effects. In it, the “fakir” puts some seeds into a pot, and thanks to the magic of superimposition, a giant flower grows before our eyes, which in turn becomes his assistant, hovering on huge butterfly wings. This is actually a variation on another *jaduwallah* standard, in which a mango tree appears to grow to full height in minutes, but here the illusion is created entirely by cinematic technology. Canny Indian magicians like Dutt made careers out of performing *jaduwallah* tricks while playing up their exotic origins

as fakir-yogis.¹⁹ If all films are documentaries in that they reflect the tastes and prejudices of their times, *Hindoo Fakir* fits the bill in a number of ways. It delights in showing off the new illusions cinema could create through editing and superimposition, and it documents popular magician-performers of the time.

By the late 1930s and early 1940s, mainstream American cinema was thoroughly familiar with the fakir-yogi as a media trope. The 1941 film *You’re the One*, for example, features a song with lyrics by the great Hollywood songwriter Johnny Mercer, “The Yogi Who Lost His Willpower,”²⁰ which was remarkable in at least two respects for the cultural work that it accomplished. First, the song humorously brings together at one stroke all the Orientalist stereotypes that might ever have been associated with yogis, potentates, and adventure tales from India—beds of nails, magic carpets, crystal balls, turbans and dhotis, levitation, rope tricks, maharajas—and weaves them into a single narrative. Second, the song domesticates and humanizes the fakir-yogi by making him fall in love but fail at it, by giving him the ability to predict the future but not his own emotional fate. While Mercer’s lyrics end on a painful note—“What became of the yogi? No one knows”—the fakir-yogi has the last theatrical word in the version popularized by Orrin Tucker and his orchestra (cat. 23e). After peering one last time into his crystal ball, the fakir-yogi gets ready for his ultimate act and his final goodbye. He throws off his cloak as a rope emerges from the floor and levitates its way upright. In the midst of a swirl of smoke, the yogi clammers up the rope, gives a final flourish, and ... disappears. Fakirs may well have lost their willpower in early twentieth century America, the scene seems to suggest, but they are not now nor ever in danger of losing their supernatural ones. Whether fakirs or fakers, their magic outlives them. SR and TV



The Yogi Who Lost His Willpower

Lyrics by Johnny Mercer

There was a yogi who lost his willpower
He met a dancing girl and fell in love.
He couldn't concentrate, or lie on broken glass
He could only sit and wait for her to pass

Unhappy yogi, he tried forgetting, but she was all that he was conscious of.
At night he stretched out on his bed of nails
He could only dream about her seven veils
His face grew flushed and florid every time he heard her name
And the ruby gleaming in her forehead set his oriental soul aflame.

This poor old yogi, he soon discovered
She was the Maharajah's turtle dove.
And she was satisfied, she had an emerald ring, an elephant to ride—and everything.
He was a passing whim. That's how the story goes.
And what became of the yogi, nobody knows ...



23e Scenes from *The Yogi Who Lost His Willpower*