



## Spike-lying: From an Ascetic Practice to a Showman's Stunt

Dr Ayusman Chakraborty\*

### Abstract

Focusing on the Hindu ascetic practice known as *śankuśī*, this paper reveals how the contemporary West has come to perceive this form of religious self-mortification as a type of showman's stunt. *Śankuśī*, better known in the West as spike-lying, is one of the many austerities or *tapas* recognized by Hindu traditions. It involves the practitioner lying or sitting on a bed or seat of nails with the aim of accruing religious merits or magical powers through self-mortification. This paper tries to trace the roots of this practice, in an attempt to show how the Hindus themselves have understood it. It then shows how Western colonial writers led a disinformation campaign against Hindu ascetic practices like this in order to defame the practitioners and their culture and religion. The paper reveals how they effectively desacralized this form of austerity and represented it as a type of stunt performed by religious mendicants to impress their patrons. Special attention is paid to the role of the media in spreading disinformation about *śankuśī*.

**Keywords:** Spike-lying, asceticism, hinduism, colonialism, desacralization, stunt, showmen

### Introduction

“The fakir on a bed of spikes possibly topped the list of interesting fakir sights,” writes Rianne Siebenga (445). This was not just true for the colonial period, about which she was writing. One finds that such images are still widely circulated outside South Asia to stereotype Indian ascetics, sometimes negatively. These appear everywhere – in fictions, travelogues, postcards, magic lantern slideshows, movies,

---

\* Asst Professor of English, S.B.S. Government College, Hili, South Dinajpur, West Bengal.

reality shows, sideshows, editorial cartoons and even in comic books for children and adolescents. But what does spike-lying ascetics as ubiquitous in South Asia as the wide circulation of such images abroad seem to indicate? The anthropologist Kirin Narayan reports that her father wrote to her from India in 1989, “I have not seen a bed of spikes ever since I was six years old, and that was at the Kumbha Mela [a massive gathering for ascetics] in Nasik. I think spike beds are out of fashion” (qtd. in Narayan 502). Writing almost a century earlier, E. Washburn Hopkins announces the same in a note, “the iron spiked-bed ... is now out of fashion” (370).<sup>1</sup> If we consider early Western representations of Indian ascetics, we will find that the ‘bed of spikes’ was not ‘in fashion’ even in the pre-colonial period. Marco Polo, who paid some attention to the Indian *chaugis* (*yogis*), does not mention the ‘bed of spikes’ (see 266 – 268). Neither did seventeenth century French travellers like Jean-Baptiste Tavernier and Francois Bernier, though both had elaborately described other types of severe austerities practiced by Hindu ascetics in India (for details see Tavernier, vol. II, 190 – 202; Bernier 234 -239). How could spike-lying ascetics escape the notice of observant travellers like Polo, Tavernier, and Bernier if they were a common sight in India? Why could Kirin and her father not find them in the post-Independence era? Spike-lying ascetics were never as numerous in India as their frequent representations in foreign visual and print media would suggest. What could then account for the wide circulation of their images abroad? This paper tries to suggest an answer.

To account for frequent appearances of spike-lying Indian ascetics in Western visual and print media, this paper delves into the history of Western encounters with this practice. It is necessary to point out at the very beginning that though spike-lying has come to be associated with the *fakirs* in common parlance, it is the Hindu ascetics, called *sadhus* or *sannyasins*, who practice this type of self-mortification. Fakirs, from Arabic *faqir* meaning “poor,” are essentially Muslim ascetics (Narayan 479). However, since the colonial era, the West has frequently used the word *fakir* as an umbrella term for all non-Christian ascetics from South Asia, irrespective of their religious affiliations. The paper begins by trying to trace the roots of this practice to show how the ascetics themselves as well as the ordinary Hindus understood it. In the process, it throws

some light on the Hindu idea of *tapas* which is conceptually different from the Christian idea of penance for sins. It then goes on to show how Western colonial writers led a disinformation campaign against Hindu self-mortifying practices like this. Their aim has been to defame the Hindu ascetics who were perceived as threats to colonial rule in India. Particularly, spike-lying, interpreted as an extreme form of self-mortification, became one of their main targets of attack. Attention is paid to the role played by Western media in spreading disinformation about this practice. The paper finally reveals how spike-lying is currently conceptualized outside India. To do this, it inspects a few popular works - both literary and non-literary. It emerges that the colonial disinformation campaign has so thoroughly desacralized the practice that it has come to acquire a completely different meaning today. What was once understood as a form of religious austerity is now conceptualized as a showman's stunt, particularly outside South Asia. In the process, spike-lying's association with Hinduism has been increasingly ignored abroad - if not entirely forgotten. Ironically, this has weakened the colonial disinformation campaign which sought to defame Hinduism and its followers through the depiction of spike-lying. The paper thus highlights how the understanding of spike-lying outside South Asia transformed through ages. It also reveals how disinformation hinders one's understanding of cultural practices different from one's own.

One may note that despite Western fascination with spike-lying Indian ascetics, no study has exclusively focused on this practice till now. To the colonial writers, it was just one of the many extreme forms of Hindu austerities which they detested. That is why they never made it an exclusive subject of study, though they did depict it time after time in their fiction and non-fictional works. Stranger, perhaps, is the contemporary indifference to this topic. To my knowledge, Kirin Narayan is the only contemporary scholar who pays some serious attention to spike-lying Hindu ascetics. However, her article examines American representations of Hindu holy men in general and does not devote itself solely to spike-lying. Also, the scope of her article prevents her from probing deeper into the origin and rationale of this form of self-mortification. The same must be said for Rianne Siebenga's article, which concentrates more on overall representation of Indian ascetics in the West than on any

specific ascetic practice. Moreover, both studies focus only on Western discourses. These pay very little attention to indigenous conceptualization of Hindu ascetic practices. It cannot be denied that this paper follows the same course in the long run, even though it does foreground the Hindu outlook in greater details. I have not yet discovered any work which studies spike-lying entirely from the Hindu perspective. This is an area which demands more attention in future.

### **Spike-lying: Historical Background**

In order to realize how the colonial disinformation campaign distorted Western comprehension of spike-lying, we first need to understand how the Hindus themselves make sense of this practice. One must note at the very beginning that ‘spike-lying’ is a name given by the British observers. The Hindu ascetics call this type of self-mortification by a different name. They call it either *sāṅkuṣī* or *kantaka sajya* (Walker 79; Oman 45). Some even describe it as *sarasajya*, obviously alluding to Bhishma’s bed of arrows in the *Mahabharata*. This is one among the multiple forms of austerities known as *tapas*. A brief introduction to *tapas* is in order here. As pointed out earlier, *tapas* is different from the Christian idea of penance for sin - though the word is often translated into English as ‘penance’ or ‘mortification’. The Sanskrit word *tapas* comes from the root *tap*, which denotes ‘heat’. As Kaelber points out, this heat is “frequently creative and life generating”. The Rig Veda describes it as “the force behind creation itself” (Kaelber 192). The Gods rely on this heat to create or alter reality (Kaelber 192; Narayan 480). However, Kaelber informs that in early Sanskrit texts *tapas* also signified ‘pain’ and ‘suffering’; particularly, undesirable pain generated through destructive bodily heat (198). He believes that with the passage of time these two different meanings of the word coalesced to form the notion of *tapas* as deliberate self-mortification undertaken to burn away impurities (200-211). In other words, the self-imposed pains endured by the performers of austerities generate spiritual heat that destroys evil and impurities inside them. Kaelber explains, “The human body because it is impure must be symbolically consumed through the heat of asceticism in order that a requisite purity – correlated with a divine state – may be attained”

(202-203). Therefore, *tapas* fundamentally differs from penance. Kaelber explains that penance is done for the atonement of one's specific wrongdoings or sins, whereas *tapas* is practiced to purify and elevate oneself above the general human condition (207). By getting rid of the impurities in him through *tapas*, a man is believed to reach a higher state of existence. He acquires spiritual merit, and, through it, attains a blissful existence in here and the afterlife. He is also believed to acquire spiritual or magic powers, sometimes huge enough to awe the Gods themselves. The practitioners of *tapas* are called *tapasvins* (Walker 79). *Tapas* can be both eye-catching and plain. Narayan rightly points out that it is the "spectacular *tapas*" that has "most engaged the Western imagination" (480).

The extreme forms of self-mortifications practiced by the Hindu ascetics have always baffled the foreigners. What they usually find incomprehensible is the fact that these often maim the practitioners. One may think of the austerity known as *ūrdhvabāhu*, the practitioners of which gradually lose the ability to use one or both arms by keeping these forever held aloft. Foreigners naturally find it difficult to understand why the Hindu ascetics inflict such self-harm, especially when Hindu ascetic traditions offer the practitioners many milder types of austerities to practice. There are several types of austerities which do not involve self-mutilation. Like the vow of perpetual silence observed by some Hindu ascetics (Walker 79). It is necessary to inspect Sanskrit sacred literature in order to comprehend why some Hindu ascetics prefer to injure themselves through their ascetic practices even when milder options are available. Sanskrit texts often depict characters performing severe austerities to gain their desired boon. For example, in the epic the *Ramayana*, sage Viswamitra performs severe austerities for eons to become a Brahmin. Likewise, the demon king Ravana practices severe self-mortifications to gain the boon of invulnerability from the Creator Lord Brahma. In the *Mahabharata* too, several characters undergo severe *tapas* to achieve the desired result (for detailed discussion, see Hopkins 367-374; also, Lanman 138 - 144). Hopkins writes, "the tales are many which show that the Munis [ascetics] either stood, or hung themselves upside down, ... the aim in doing so was attainment not only of power but of highest bliss" (369). These texts seem to give the impression that more the suffering endured, the greater is the

reward obtained. Naturally, such texts inspire some Hindu ascetics to practice extreme self-mortifications. It needs to be pointed out that there exist some sacred texts like the *Bhagavad Gita*, 17.5 and 17.6, which do condemn extreme austerities (*Gita* 638-639). Nevertheless, many are lured into self-mutilation by the prospect of attaining a heavenly life and/or gaining enormous powers which such extreme self-mortifications are believed to confer.<sup>2</sup>

*Sānkuṣī* or spike-lying is one of the more rigorous self-mortifications practiced by Hindu ascetics. Its origin remains shrouded in mystery till now. Hopkins describes it as “a later form of asceticism” (370). However, Lanman points out that Buddhist *Jataka* tales present ascetics who reclined on thorns (144). It seems that spike-lying has developed out of this practice. Some of the *Jataka* tales are very ancient, dating back to the second century BCE. Since these record a practice similar in essence to spike-lying, one may surmise that spike-lying must have had ancient roots. However, it could not have been very popular before the colonial era. As stated earlier, early European visitors did not describe it. Nor does it appear in the list of eighteen austerities provided by the eighteenth century *ūrdhvabāhu* ascetic Pran Puri<sup>3</sup> to the British administrator Jonathan Duncan (*The European Magazine* 263-264). On the other hand, the practitioners of *sānkuṣī* often claim a mythic origin for their practice. The spike-lying ascetic Prakashanand<sup>4</sup>, who became the other informant of Duncan, names three famous mythical predecessors who supposedly practiced this form of *tapas* in the past. They are the sage Agnibarna, the demon king Ravana and the warrior Bhishma (Duncan 51). But Prakashanand’s knowledge of myths was certainly not very accurate. The Agnibarna, whom he mentions, could not be traced despite the best of my efforts. The most famous character bearing this name was a lustful king of the Suryavamsha dynasty<sup>5</sup> and not a sage. The *Ramayana* does mention Ravana practicing various self-mortifications to gain power. Perhaps, Prakashanand chanced upon one of the many versions of the epic that described the demon king performing spike-lying. However, the ascetic is entirely wrong when he names Bhishma. In the *Mahabharata*, Bhishma was not performing any austerity when he was made to lay on the *sarasajya* or the bed of arrows. Rather, during the epic Kurukshetra war, Arjuna’s<sup>6</sup> arrows so thoroughly pierced Bhishma’s body that it did

not touch the ground. He appeared to lay on a bed of arrows or the *sarasajya* (*sara* = arrows, *sajya* = bed). Prakashanand was no doubt inspired by Bhishma, as he calls his practice *sarasajya* and not *sānkuśī*. But his mistaken understanding of Bhishma's *sarasajya* shows that he had not read the epic carefully.<sup>7</sup> Duncan himself felt that Prakashanand was not a very intelligent or learned man (46). He is, thus, unreliable as a source. To me, it appears that *sānkuśī* was never as popular among Hindu ascetics as some other kinds of severe austerities were. It was the European colonizers who came to represent it as the quintessential Hindu austerity.

### **Through the Eyes of European Colonizers: Spike-lying a Sign of Cultural and Religious Backwardness**

It was during the colonial era that the West first came to know about spike-lying. Kirin Narayan rightly points out that the “first known man on a bed of nails” was Prakashanand, whose portrait was published along with Duncan's article entitled “An Account of Two Fakeers with their Portraits” in the journal *Asiatick Researches* in 1799 (483).<sup>8</sup> She claims that while Duncan described the ascetic in a “spirit of non-judgemental interest”, later reproductions of Prakashanand's image served to illustrate “India's moral backwardness” (Narayan 483). Why did the West choose to denigrate ascetic practices like *sānkuśī*? To answer this question, one must consider the history of Western encounters with Hindu ascetics. It needs to be noted that Western prejudice against Hindu ascetics did not originate in the colonial era but dates back to pre-colonial times. Both Tavernier and Bernier abhorred Indian ascetics.<sup>9</sup> Though Tavernier expressed his wonderment at the suffering that these ascetics voluntarily underwent, he vilified them as fanatic irrational evil libertines (198 – 201). Bernier was even more harsh. He described Indian ascetics as “vegetative rather than rational beings” who are “destitute of piety” and full of “brutality and ignorance” (236). It has already been claimed that the animosity expressed by these early European travellers sprang from both religious prejudice and chauvinistic pride (Chakraborty 157 – 158). As the colonial era dawned in India, animosity towards these ascetics became even more intense. To British colonial authorities, the Indian ascetics were not simply undesirable representatives of rival faiths. Rather, they saw

both Hindu and Muslim ascetics as major threats to colonial rule. The British feared that the peripatetic ascetics from both religions could work as political spies for Indian rulers and spread disaffection against British rule. Also, some groups of Hindu and Muslim ascetics served as mercenary soldiers in the armies of Indian rulers. The colonizers apprehended that hostile Indian rulers could use them against the colonial government during wars. Shuja ud-Daula, the ruler of Avadh, did in fact deploy a troop of six thousand mercenary Hindu ascetics belonging to the Naga sect against the British during the Battle of Buxar in 1764. As William Dalrymple explains, they served as “Shuja’s most feared crack troops” (191). Moreover, both Hindu and Muslim ascetics rose in armed rebellion against the British during the early phase of colonial rule in Bengal (1763 – 1800). This was the so-called Fakir and Sannyasi Rebellion, which was crushed by the British after an intense struggle. The European colonizers in India thus had good reasons to despise the ascetics. Finally, both Hindu and Muslim ascetics were seen as obstacles in the path of eventual acculturation and Europeanization of the Indians, which was the stated goal of colonial rule in India (for more details see Chakraborty 159 – 160). This fear of the ascetics, coupled with pre-existing religious and cultural prejudices, made the colonial authorities launch a disinformation campaign against them. The aim was to attenuate the threat posed by Indian ascetics by creating a gulf between the ascetics and the acculturated Indians. It may be observed in passing that the colonizers were largely successful in this task. Oman observes that, “the alumni of the Indian schools and universities, inoculated with Western ideas, and anxious to do credit to their training, generally affect ...a supercilious unconcern about *sadhus* and *sadhuism*” (280). Coming from a colonial expert on the topic, this leaves little room for doubt.

As a part of their disinformation campaign against the Indian ascetics, the colonizers targeted their ascetic practices. While trying to explain the rationale behind their severe self-mortifications, the colonizing Europeans rarely paid any attention to the ascetics’ explanations. Instead, they boldly proposed their fanciful theories. It was the unequal power relationship between the colonizers and the colonized that allowed the Europeans to suppress the voices of the ascetics. This resulted in the desacralization of the ascetic practices

of Hindu ascetics. Ignoring the religious and spiritual sides of such practices, colonial discourse presented these as stunts performed to impress patrons. Naturally, greater attention was paid to the more severe and eye-catching austerities. What Siebenga observes regarding the magic lantern shows applies to the situation in general: “Why these ascetics have taken these vows, or how their lives are embedded within a religious culture and history is not of interest. The texts appeal solely to our senses ...” (456). It was not just the colonial authorities or casual European visitors who spread disinformation against the ascetics. Even professional European scholars had joined the fray. One may take Oman as an example. John Campbell Oman was a British professor of natural sciences. He was one of the first Western scholars to produce scholarly works on Hindu ascetic practices - what he termed as *sadhuism*. His book *The Mystics, Ascetics, and Saints of India* (1903) remains influential even today. But the problem with Oman is that he never consulted the ascetics themselves. Instead of directly asking them about their motivations for carrying out such severe self-mortifications, he chose to invent his own explanations. Oman felt that the lure of an indolent lifestyle and the desire for money and fame are the real factors that motivate Hindu ascetics to perform austerities. He dismisses many of the *tapas* performed by Hindu ascetics as “devoid of sincerity”, practiced merely as “a mere performance or show.” In his opinion, these merely serve “the very practical object of advertising the *sadhu* and attracting admirers and clients” (Oman 45, 49, 50). While he could not dismiss the severer forms of self-mutilations that easily, he suggests throughout the book that the Hindu ascetics are motivated more by greed and vanity than by religious devotion. Similar is the opinion of the American scholar Charles Rockwell Lanman. Though he recognizes that the “unnatural and far-fetched austerities” gained popularity because they promised the attainment of psychic powers, he also felt that the ascetics were really motivated by the desire of “gratified vanity or of reputation or of gifts” (Lanman 139 – 140). It is to be noted that these scholars did not reach such conclusions through any concrete and verifiable procedure. Instead, these are mere opinions presented as facts. Such a subterfuge would have drawn criticism in our age. However, no questions were raised at all by other scholars in the colonial period.

Western conceptualization of spike-lying was largely influenced by the colonial disinformation campaign against Hindu ascetics. Both Narayan and Siebenga point out that images of ascetics lying on spikes were used to convey India's "moral backwardness" (Narayan 483; Siebenga 456, 462). Such images thereby justified the necessity of prolonging British rule in India, the stated aim of which was to 'uplift' the natives by eliminating such 'backwardness'. Interestingly, spike-lying gradually came to acquire a more neutral connotation abroad with the passage of time. Narayan does recognize this when she writes about the application of this image in marketing advertisements in contemporary America (497). However, she does not try to trace how this change came about. I contend that from a sign of India's backwardness spike-lying has come to signify India's exoticness today. It still remains a marker of alterity, but stands for a different kind of alterity. It would be interesting to trace how spike-lying gradually shed off the negative connotations which were earlier associated with it. As Narayan shows, for a while Prakashanand remained the only spike-lying ascetic whose image was circulated abroad. His image, "redrawn to different proportions," was reproduced in Charles Gold's *Oriental Drawings* (1806), Reverend Tennant's *Indian Recreations* (1804), William Butler's *The Land of the Vedas* (1872) and in the journal *Missionary Herald* (1833). Narayan observes that "[I]n all these cases the image is used to illustrate India's moral backwardness" (483). We might add that these works tried to explain away Hindu self-mortifications as arising out of the ascetics' craving for either fame or of an indolent existence. For instance, Charles Gold seems to suggest in the letterpress accompanying the portrait of the Ramlingam-Pandaree that life of "a perfect idleness" often motivates the Hindus to take to asceticism (n.p.). William Butler echoes this opinion in his *The Land of the Vedas*. He further believes that the ascetics who perform extreme self-mortifications are motivated by a "hunger for fame": "[they] are willing to suffer that they may be respected and adored by those who witness in wonder the amazing self-tortures which they will endure" (Butler 196). Butler goes on to cite a poem by one Mr Cambridge satirising spike-lying ascetics. The poem describes an ascetic who is forced by bodily discomfort to give up spike-lying. But he soon begins to miss the attention that he used to receive earlier and resumes his austerity (cited in Butler 197). This poem indicates that Butler

looked upon spike-lying, and other severe austerities like it, as spectacles performed to impress the onlookers. As we shall see, this presentation of spike-lying as a spectacle shaped later understanding of this practice.

It needs to be understood here that the colonizing West's attitude towards spike-lying differed significantly from that of other types of self-mortifications. This is because, to the foreigners, practitioners of *sāṅkuṣī* appeared to exhibit an almost superhuman endurance. We now know that the practice is not as painful as it appears. Joe Nickell explains. "The secret of the bed-of-nails feat is 'simply to have the nails all the same length, and all close together'" (246). The nails do not harm because the weight of the body is evenly distributed, and the pressure does not fall on a single nail. However, the early Western observers did not understand this. Consequently, it appeared a superhuman feat to them. While describing Prakashanand's austerities, Charles Gold observes that the "extreme severity" of his practice appeared "far beyond what the fortitude of man can encounter, or his nervous frame endure." He acknowledges that such mortifications "excite our amazement" (n.p.). Further, as Chakraborty argues in a recent article, unlike other extreme forms of self-mortifications like *ūrdhva-bāhu*, *sāṅkuṣī* did not visibly maim the practitioners. As a result, it did not appear repulsive to Western eyes (Chakraborty 163 -165). The foreigners could enjoy it as a spectacle, without being disturbed by abhorrence. In Alice Perrin's short story "The Fakir's Island", the only Hindu ascetic who did not shock Mona Selwyn and Officer Kerr is the spike-lying ascetic. "How hard his back must be," Mona approvingly wonders. Though Kerr dehumanizes him by comparing his "hide" to that of a rhinoceros, he too implicitly acknowledges the suprahuman endurance of the ascetic through this comparison (Perrin 136). In contrast, the self-mortifications of other ascetics fill the couple with horror and disgust. This story effectively reveals how ordinary Europeans looked upon *sāṅkuṣī* during the colonial era. It was the only ascetic practice that they could contemplate without disgust.

What popularized spike-lying in the West was the invention of photography. Narayan explains, "with the introduction of photography in India in the 1840s, subjects and conventions already established by British artists were widely adopted for photographic

use, making the man on the bed of nails a popular subject for photographs or postcards, travel books, and stereoscopic cards” (483). Siebenga points out that postcards and magic lantern shows became “the most prominent of the new mass-produced visual media” which spread the images of Indian ascetics, including spike-lying ascetics, widely abroad (446 - 447). The Western newspapers and journals also circulated images of spike-lying ascetics. Writing in the early decades of the twentieth century, Robert Ripley mentions, “Sadhus who sit on beds of sharp spikes have been more or less featured in the Sunday supplements of our country” (cited in Nickell 246). Images of self-torturing Hindu ascetics, including spike-lying ascetics, appeared even in Romanian newspapers. For instance, in the 10 March 1937 issue of *Realitatea ilustrată*, one M. Ahmad wrote a feature on the *fakirs* with images accompanying it. Such representations in mass media usually made a spectacle of Hindu austerities. In the process, these austerities came to acquire a new connotation. Influenced by media representations of Hindu ascetic practices, the people in the West came to regard these as spectacular stunts performed only in India by ascetics. Nowhere else in the world did ascetics perform such stunts. These practices thereby became indicators of India’s strangeness. Thus, to the idea of backwardness was added the idea of exoticness. However, what finally drained spike-lying off all its association with *tapas* or religious austerities was its adaptation as a stunt by professional acrobats and stage magicians in the West. Joe Nickell informs that “The bed of nails was popularized in the United States during vaudeville and became a mainstay in circus and carnival shows” (246). Originally, Western stages advertised it as a penance performed by Indian ascetics. The aim was to attract spectators with a display of exotic tricks. Thus, the Danish performer Tanit Ikao, who performed a version of this feat, was publicized as ‘The Great Indian Woman Fakir’ in the USA (Narayan 487). Likewise, a 1940 performance in America was labelled ‘Torture of India’ (Nickell 246). But, very soon, all references to Hindu austerities drifted out of the picture altogether, as more and more Western performers began to display it on stage. Significantly, the association of spike-lying with moral backwardness became inconsequential once its link with Hindu asceticism was glossed over. Today, the West has desacralized spike-lying. Kirin Narayan informs, “In 20<sup>th</sup> century America’s culture of

consumption, Hindu practices of *tapas*, originally designed to foster restraint and detachment, have instead been infused with messages emphasizing the need for goods and good items” (500). She shows how the bed of nails is used by contemporary advertising agencies in America to sell their products, without alluding to the “alleged backwardness, cruelty, or spirituality of India” (Narayan 497). Spike-lying is thus drained of most of its religious and cultural connotations to stand only for exoticness.

### **The Contemporary View: Spike-lying as a Stage Performance**

To understand how spike-lying is conceptualized outside South Asia nowadays, one may examine its representations in contemporary literary and non-literary works. To this end, this paper analyses a few such works. These sources are chosen randomly, without considering differences in genre, medium or the times of composition. The only thing that made them worthy of inspection is that they are meant for ordinary people. I argue that it is to this type of works that we must turn to, since these reflect how ordinary men and women perceive spike-lying outside India and South Asia. In Hergé’s (Georges Prosper Remi) *The Blue Lotus* (1936), the young Belgian reporter Tintin meets the fakir Ramacharma in India. The Maharaja of Gaipajama calls upon the fakir to “demonstrate his remarkable powers” (Hergé 2). Ramacharma obliges by performing variations of the spike-lying trick. He dances on broken glasses, gyrates head-downwards on a long sharp nail, and finally foretells Tintin’s future while sitting on a stool of spikes. While the fakir does display extraordinary powers, he is just a performer when everything has been considered. Spike-lying, as Hergé presents it here, becomes simply a stunt performed to please the onlookers. It is not treated as a means to acquire bliss or magic powers, as the Hindu ascetics understood it. In his later work *The Valley of the Cobras* (1951), we come across the villainous fakir Rabindah who is also found seated on a stool of spikes (21). Outwardly, Rabindah behaves more like an ascetic – invoking the Gods time and again. However, Hergé shows that he is just a charlatan whose real interest lies in extorting donations from the believers. While this portrayal of Rabindah conforms to colonial vilifications of Indian ascetics, one may note that the author’s presentation of spike-lying in this work differs from

the colonial ones. It is neither presented as an austerity nor as a form of self-torture, but simply as a practice that distinguishes a 'fakir' from others. Spike-lying is further depleted of its original connotation in more recent works. In season 3 episode 9 of the animated television series *Jackie Chan Adventures* (2002-2003), the protagonists visit India in search of a magic snake. During a fight, one of the antagonists is thrown on a bed of spikes. If one looks closely, the bed of spikes is not occupied by any ascetic but by an ordinary Indian wearing a turban. By now, spike-lying has lost all its association with asceticism and has come to be seen only as an exotic trick. The popular reality show *Just for Laughs Gags* features spike-lying in one of its episodes, where an American actor wearing loin cloth and a fantastic cap reclines on a bed of nails. Aside the white loin cloth, there is nothing in the performance that relates it to Hindu ascetics and their performances.

### **Conclusion**

This study of Western representations of spike-lying thus reveals how Western understanding of this practice differs from South Asian. What South Asians understand as an ascetic practice is perceived abroad as a showman's stunt. Understood as a spectacle, spike-lying is given more media coverage abroad than in its region of origin. The paper also charts the course through which spike-lying came to acquire a different meaning in the West. It transpires that this semantic change was not smooth and continuous. As shown, the primary catalyst was the colonial disinformation campaign which sought to defame Indian ascetics in general. It presented spike-lying as a sign of the depravity of Hindu ascetics. Pretty soon, the practice came to represent the backwardness of the Indians in general. However, the representation of spike-lying as a stunt gradually introduced a further change in meaning. Conceptualized increasingly as a stage performance, spike-lying gradually lost its association with Hindu asceticism abroad. Today, foreigners see it only as an exotic trick which no longer carries any connotation of either depravity or backwardness. It is curious to see that while colonial discourse effectively desacralized spike-lying, it failed to stigmatize the practice in the end. Thus, the original intention of the colonizers

finally became frustrated. The paper thus reveals that signification is a complex process that often takes unexpected routes.

### **Acknowledgement**

The author is indebted to Dr Dana Radler, Lecturer at the Department of Modern Languages and Business Communication of the Bucharest University of Economic Studies (ASE), for the English translation of the Romanian newspaper referred to in this paper.

### **Works Cited**

- Ahmad, M. "Arta vrajitoareasca a fachirilor (The Magical Art of Fakirs)." *Realitatea ilustrată*, nr. 529, 10 March 1937, pp. 16 – 17.
- Bernier, Francois. *Travels in the Mogul Empire AD 1656 – 1668*, translated by Archibald Constable, revised by Vincent A. Smith, Atlantic Publishers and Distributors (P) LTD, 2021.
- Bhagavad Gita: with the Commentary of Sankaracarya*, translated by Swami Gambhirananda, Advaita Ashrama, 1984.
- Butler, William. *The Land of the Veda: Being Personal Reminiscences of India Its People, Castes, Thugs, and Fakirs*. Scholar Select, n.d.
- Chakraborty, Ayusman. "Awkward one-armed babas: Ūrdhvabāhu Hindu Ascetics in Western Imagination." *Essence and Critique: Journal of Literature and Drama Studies*, vol. 1, no. 1, June 2021, pp. 150 – 169.
- Dalrymple, William. *The Anarchy: the East India Company, Corporate Violence, and the Pillage of an Empire*. Bloomsbury Publishing, 2019.
- Duncan, Jonathan. "An Account of Two Fakeers, With Their Portraits." *Asiatic Researches; or, Transactions of the Society Instituted in Bengal, for Inquiring into the History and Antiquities, the Arts, Sciences and Literature of Asia*, vol. 5, 1799, pp. 37 – 52.
- Gold, Charles. *Oriental Drawings: Sketched between the years 1791 and 1798*. G. and W. Nicoll, 1806.
- Hergé. *The Blue Lotus*, translated by Lesile Lonsdale-Cooper and Michael Turner, Mammoth, 1990.

- . *The Valley of the Cobras*, translated by Lesile Lonsdale-Cooper and Michael Turner, Magnet, 1986.
- Hopkins, E. Washburn. "Yoga-technique in the Great Epic." *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 22, 1901, pp. 333 – 379. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/592436](http://www.jstor.org/stable/592436). Accessed 1 December 2023.
- "Jackie Chan Adventures | The Invisible Mom | Season 3 Ep. 9 | Throwback Toons." *YouTube*, Throwback Toons, 1 April 2023, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=giAmk5l8p08](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=giAmk5l8p08). Accessed 28 December 2023.
- Kaelber, Walter O. "Tapas and Purification in Early Hinduism." *Numen*, vol. 26, December 1979, pp. 192 – 214.
- Lanman, Charles Rockwell. "Hindu Ascetics and their Powers." *Transactions and the Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, vol. 48, 1917, pp. 133 – 151. *JSTOR*, [www.jstor.org/stable/282786](http://www.jstor.org/stable/282786). Accessed 18 January 2021.
- "Loch Ness Monster Attack | Best Just For Laughs Gags Compilation." *YouTube*, Just For Laughs Gags, 28 June 2022, [youtu.be/sku7RUcCuSM](http://youtu.be/sku7RUcCuSM). Accessed 25 February 2023.
- Narayan, Kirin. "Refractions of the Field at Home: American Representations of Hindu Holy Men in the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> Centuries." *Cultural Anthropology*, vol. 8, no. 4, 1993, pp. 476 - 509.
- Nickell, Joe. *Secrets of the Sideshows*. The University Press of Kentucky, 2005.
- Oman, John Campbell. *The Mystics, Ascetics, and Saints of India: A Study of Sadhuism, with an Account of the Yogis, Sanyasis, Bairagis, and Other Strange Hindu Sectarians*. T. F. Unwin, 1903.
- Perrin, Alice. "The Fakirs Island." *East of Suez*, edited by Melissa Edmundson Makala, Victorian Secrets Limited, 2011, pp. 133 – 140.
- Polo, Marco. *The Travels*, translated by N. Cliffs, Penguin Books, 2016.
- Siebenga, Rianne. "Colonial India's 'Fanatical Fakirs' and their Popular Representations." *History and Anthropology*, vol. 23, no. 4, 2012, pp. 445 – 466.
- Tavernier, Jean Baptiste. *Travels in India*, translated by V. Ball, vol. 2, Macmillan & Co., 1889.

- “Oriental Observations, No. X. The Travels of Pran-Puri, a Hindoo, who travelled over India, Persia, and Part of Russia. *Translated from his own Narrative, taken at Benares, in May, 1792.*” *The European Magazine*, vol. LVII, April. 1810, pp. 262 – 271.
- “Oriental Observations, No. XI. The Travels of Pran-Puri, a Hindoo, who travelled over India, Persia, and Part of Russia.” *Translated from his own Narrative, taken at Benares, in May, 1792.*” *The European Magazine*, vol. LVII, May. 1810, pp. 342 – 352.
- Walker, Benjamin. “Asceticism.” *Hindu World: An Encyclopedic Survey of Hinduism in Two Volumes*, vol. I A – L, Routledge, 2019, pp. 78 – 80.

### Endnotes

---

- <sup>1</sup> Hopkins mentions that he had seen only two beds of spikes, though both were probably unused by their owners (370).
- <sup>2</sup> Hopkins points out that the attainment of supernatural powers was not thought to be an end in itself. The epics presented this as merely a stage in the path of spiritual progress (Hopkins 337).
- <sup>3</sup> Spelt as ‘Praun Poory’ by Duncan.
- <sup>4</sup> Spelt both ‘Perkasanund’ and ‘Purkasanund’ by Duncan.
- <sup>5</sup> The famous solar dynasty to which Lord Rama belonged to. Being the descendant of Lord Rama, this Aginbarna was of course born much later. He could not have been the Agnibarna mentioned by Prakashanand, who was born before Lord Rama and Ravana.
- <sup>6</sup> Arjuna is one of the five Pandava brothers, who are the heroes of the *Mahabharata*. During the Kurukshetra war, the Pandavas had to fight their kinsmen including their ancestor, Bhishma. The Pandavas won in the end.
- <sup>7</sup> William Crookes believed that this practice may have indeed been influenced by the story of Bhishma (Oman 45). But this was just a speculation on his part.
- <sup>8</sup> Narayan mistakenly gives the date as 1798.
- <sup>9</sup> Here the words ‘Indian ascetics’ have been deliberately used instead of ‘Hindu ascetics.’ Though Tavernier and Bernier had mainly the Hindu ascetics in mind, early European visitors usually detested all non-Christian ascetics they encountered. The same was true for the British colonizers in India, though for a more complex reason as explained.