

THE RISE AND FALL OF THE INDIAN ROPE TRICK¹

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Abstract

In the classic version of the Indian rope trick the performer first causes a rope to rise into the air. His boy assistant then scurries up the rope and promptly disappears. Next, the performer climbs the rope after the boy and also vanishes. Moments later, dismembered parts of the boy's body fall to the ground. The performer now descends the rope and places these parts into a basket. Finally, the boy jumps from the basket, fully restored to life. This legendary rope trick has generated over a hundred years of debate among scientists, psychical researchers, journalists, magicians and the public. This paper is an attempt to present a comprehensive solution to the legend. The paper describes how the legend of the trick became known in the West via a hoax article carried by an American newspaper in 1890. The paper then notes how the legend gained momentum when witnesses claimed to have actually seen the trick, and occasionally produced photographic and filmic evidence to support their claims. The paper presents a detailed critique of this evidence and concludes that it is less than convincing. The photographic and filmic evidence is either inauthentic or hoaxed, and the eyewitness accounts were unreliable. The paper then outlines how those who believed in the reality of the trick attempted to account for the illusion, and notes how writers variously argued that the trick was a genuine paranormal event, the result of mass hallucination or a magic trick. A final section of the paper considers why the legend of the trick has achieved worldwide popularity.

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Introduction

Some parapsychologists have investigated individuals claiming strong psychic ability and examined the possible existence of large scale extraordinary paranormal happenings (see Beloff, 1993 for an historical review of such work). This line of research is important for two main reasons. First, such investigations may uncover evidence of genuine paranormal phenomena. Indeed, Braude (1986) has argued that, like many other human abilities, such as creativity, psychic ability might best be studied in extremis, rather than in the 'normal' population. Second, even if such investigations uncover normal explanations for the phenomena under examination, they may yield valuable insight into the psychology of deception and self-deception.

Some of these investigations have involved Western scientists traveling to India to examine a wide variety of allegedly miraculous events (see Wiseman & Harraldson, 1995). However, very few researchers have examined the claims surrounding probably the most famous secular miracle of all time, namely, the legendary Indian Rope Trick.

The classic version of the rope trick is performed during the day, in the open and with the performer completely surrounded. The performer causes a rope to magically snake into the air and remain erect. His boy assistant then scurries up to the top of the rope and promptly disappears. The performer calls for the boy to come back, but he refuses to return. The performer becomes annoyed, climbs the rope after the boy and also vanishes. Moments later, dismembered parts of the boy's body fall to the ground. The performer, covered in blood, now descends the rope, and places the body parts into a basket. A few magical incantations later, the boy jumps from the basket, fully restored to life.

Many magicians have invented methods for performing versions of the trick but these methods have required use of a stage or darkness (e.g. 'Hewes', 1899; Devant, 1936/71; Ayling, 1981; Fisher, 1987). The classical form of the Indian rope trick is much more impressive in that it takes place during daylight and in the open air. Indeed, many experienced magicians believe that such conditions make the trick impossible to perform via standard conjuring techniques. For example, Will Goldston (1936), Founder and Past President of the Magicians' Club, once remarked:

“If it [the rope trick] does exist, it is worked by methods completely unknown to Western magic and science...I make this statement without qualification whatsoever, and back it with my lifetime's experience of magical invention and construction” (p. 287).

The rope trick has generated over a hundred years of debate among scientists, psychical researchers, journalists, magicians and the general public. This debate has centred on two main issues. First, did the rope trick actually exist and second, if it did exist, how was it performed? This paper is an attempt to present a comprehensive solution to this enduring mystery.

The rise

The Indian rope trick became, in the eyes of the West, the exemplar of Eastern miracles and the world's most famous illusion. Yet despite the amount of literature on the topic, the question of when and how the legend of the Indian rope trick began has never been properly answered. Ancient myths and centuries-old travellers' accounts have been presented as early versions of the trick (see, e.g. Clarke, 1928/1983; Eliade, 1956; Siegel, 1991) and thus the trick has come to be seen as an Eastern phenomenon of some antiquity. However, the fame of the trick rests on a modern legend that grew in the West. This legend is primarily a Western construction about the East, a construction that really began only a century ago.

The roots of this modern legend have been traced back many centuries to Buddhist mythology and Hindu philosophy (Cowell, 1901; Nikhilananda, 1936). But the myth is not unique to India as similar stories can be found in the folklore of several countries from Ireland (O'Grady, 1892) to China (Giles, 1880/1936), and in the mythology of several cultures (Eliade, 1956; Dingwall, 1974; Taylor, 1982). Furthermore, as the Indian references were not published in English until about a century ago, the Indian version of this myth was virtually unknown in the West until that time [Footnote 1]. Thus, while the myth clearly existed in India centuries before the modern legend spread, as far as the West was concerned, there was nothing particularly Indian about it yet.

The first eyewitness account of a trick similar to the Indian rope trick is that of Ibn Battuta from the 14th century. This was published in French in 1858 (Siegel, 1991) and, along with accounts of similar tricks, appeared in a footnote of a popular text published in English in 1872 (Yule, 1872/75), which may well have been the first time the English-reading public had access to such a story. However, there is no evidence that this footnote attracted much attention [Footnote 2]. After all, the main text of the same book told of floating goblets of wine at the court of the Kublai Khan, and there is no reason to believe that a trick with a ball of twine would be considered more noteworthy than a floating goblet. In addition, since Ibn Battuta's account was from China, there was no association between it and India [Footnote 3]. At this point, the only known connection between a vaguely similar trick and India was from the memoirs of Emperor Jahangir, which had been translated in 1829 (Siegel, 1991), and had included an account of a

trick with a rising chain. However this trick was only one of several impressive feats, and the description differs significantly from the Indian rope trick. By the mid-19th century, then, there were medieval and early modern eyewitness accounts available in English that described tricks with rising cords and objects vanishing at the top. But so far as the West was concerned, there was no particular connection between these accounts and India and there is little evidence of them attracting much attention. It was not until this century, after the spread of the modern legend of the Indian rope trick, that these references came to be viewed as early versions of the trick [e.g. Clarke, 1928/1983; Eliade, 1956; Siegel, 1991].

While little-known precursors to the modern Indian rope trick may have existed, the trick became legendary as the result of a modern legend that grew in the West. There has been some confusion, however, as to when and why this modern legend spread. Most writers have presented the trick as internationally famous around the mid-19th century, though with no evidence to support the claim [Footnote 4]. In fact, the rope trick seems to have been unheard of in the West until the last decade of the 19th century [Footnote 5]. Before that time, contemporary texts that discuss Indian magic fail to mention the trick at all (e.g. Frost, 1876; Giles, 1880/1936; Jacolliot, 1884/1919; Weatherley & Maskelyne, 1891; Baldwin, 1895). For example, Giles describes a Chinese legend strikingly similar to the rope trick, and refers to Ibn Battuta's experience in India, yet makes no mention of an Indian rope trick. John Nevil Maskelyne, author of the section on 'Oriental Jugglery' in Weatherley & Maskelyne, refers to the chain trick described in the memoirs of Jehangir but with no reference to a rope trick, and describes the basket trick and the mango trick as "the two great tricks which are mentioned by nearly every writer". He wrote this in 1891, and it seems inconceivable that he would not have made some reference to the rope trick if the trick had been discussed outside India before that time. By 1899, however, substantial rewards were being offered to anyone able to perform the trick, and one magician had interviewed over a hundred Indian magicians in his search for it (Bertram, 1911; Branson, 1922). In 1907, Britain's top magician, David Devant, was performing a version of the Indian rope trick on stage in London (Clarke, 1928/1983). In 1912, Maskelyne not only devoted a section of his next book to an attempted debunk of the trick, but announced this fact in the sub-title, and included an illustration of the trick on the front cover (Maskelyne, 1912). Clearly, by this time, the rope trick had arrived on the international stage.

The rapid rise of the rope trick's fame seems to have been primarily the result of a newspaper story that appeared in *The Chicago Daily Tribune* (Ellmore, 1890). The story described how an American visitor to India had witnessed an Indian juggler performing, among other things, a trick in which a rope rose into the air, a boy vanished at the top, his limbs fell to the ground, and

was restored to life. While it is possible that this part of the story had been influenced by one of the myths or accounts mentioned above, the story claimed that the tricks were the product of mass hypnosis. Four months later, the editor of the newspaper admitted that the story had been a hoax (The Chicago Daily Tribune, 6th December, 1890; 'Photographing Indian conjurers', 1891). The retraction, however, did not prevent the international press picking up on the story [Footnote 6] and, while making no reference to the rope trick itself, Maskelyne remarked how the newspaper story was "now going the round of the Continental Press, and has been translated into well-nigh every European language" within a few months of its being published (Weatherley & Maskelyne, 1891) [Footnote 7]. The fact that Maskelyne was familiar with the story but did not mention the rope trick itself further demonstrates that there was no recognised Indian rope trick at this time. A few years later, however, the trick was internationally famous, and the Chicago newspaper appears to have been responsible for a description of the rope trick becoming known to a large audience outside India for the first time. The hoax story that started the legend of the Indian rope trick was subsequently published in various forms and has been offered not only as an explanation for the rope trick, but as evidence for the possibility of mass hypnosis and even for the existence of group telepathy (see, e.g., Von Urban, 1962; Puharich, 1974). Its original purpose, however, was merely to increase circulation of the newspaper.

Nevertheless, in spite of the fictitious origins of the myth, stories about people having seen the trick began to appear. An early eyewitness was S. T. Burchett, whose account was reported in the *Journal of the Society for Psychical Research* ('An account of the Indian rope-climbing trick', 1904-5):

"The rope was coiled on the ground. The conjurer took one end and raised it hand over hand; it appeared to ascend to a height of about 15 to 20 feet. The raised portion of the rope remained erect, while the other portion lay in a coil on the ground. The boy then began to climb the rope, hand over hand, with legs twisted round the rope in the ordinary way of climbing. When he got to the top the boy disappeared" (pp. 300-1).

Reports continued to appear and, by 1919, The Daily Mail was being "inundated with correspondence regarding this much-discussed Indian rope trick" ('The Indian Rope Trick', 1919). The rise of the rope trick was given a further catalyst when the first photograph of the trick was published in *The Strand Magazine* ('The great Indian rope-trick', 1919). The accompanying story told how the photographer, Lieutenant F. W. Holmes, had witnessed the trick and taken some snaps with his Kodak. This photograph appeared in several papers and provided the first visual evidence of the existence of the rope trick. Given the accumulating

evidence for the existence of the trick, and the fact that Western magicians did not know how it was done, it is not surprising that they began to search for the trick in India.

The vanish and re-appearance

The rope trick's rapid rise in fame had quickly attracted the attention of British magicians. Charles Bertram (1896) was in India only a few years after The Chicago Daily Tribune article and referred to:

"... illusions said to be performed by [Indian] jugglers, such as casting into the air a rope, the upper end of which remains there, whilst the performer climbs up it and vanishes from sight. These seem to be considerably exaggerated and hardly worthy of credence" (p. 20-1).

By 1899, however, he was offering £500 to see a performance of the trick, and interviewed 106 Indian magicians in his search (Bertram, 1911). Bertram also met Lord Lonsdale in India who, he tells us, was offering £10,000 to any juggler who could perform the trick. Several lesser rewards were subsequently offered by Western magicians in an attempt to find the rope trick, including J. N. Maskelyne, Nevil Maskelyne, Jasper Maskelyne, Dante, Felix Blei, Carter, Carl Hertz, Horace Goldin, Murray and John Booth (Maskelyne, 1912; Hertz, 1924; Blei, 1927; Murray, 1934; Maskelyne, 1936; Dexter, 1958; Sorcar, 1960; Siegel, 1991; Booth, 1996). None of the searches was successful, and none of the rewards managed to attract a performance.

While some found it difficult to explain this inability to find anyone capable of performing the trick, Lionel Branson, a magician and army officer in India, did not. In a book intended "to uphold the reputation of the Western conjurer against the spurious ascendancy of his Eastern confrere", and in which he described Indian conjurers as inferior in imagination, dedication, technical ability, and appearance, Branson (1922) explained:

"I maintain that the trick has never been performed out of doors. That is to say that a rope thrown up into the air has not remained suspended in mid-air, nor has any boy ever climbed up it. That when at the top he has not disappeared and that after his disappearance he did not come down in bits, covered with blood or otherwise" (p. 87).

In support of this position, he pointed out that he had been offering a substantial reward for 23 years and had never been approached. He dismissed explanations which had been put forward (involving mesmerism or trickery) as absurd. So far as the photographic evidence for the trick was concerned, Branson explained that Holmes' photo had been examined and seen to be of a

bamboo pole rather than of a rope. He also pointed out that the Holmes account which had accompanied the photograph was inaccurate since, at a lecture to the Magic Circle in 1918 (prior to the publication of the photograph), Holmes had stated that he had arrived late and only seen the rope erect.

However, not long after Branson's sceptical dismissal, the rope trick re-appeared. In 1926, a report by Lady Waghorn appeared in the press, describing how:

"... [a] fairly stout rope was thrown up eleven or twelve feet in the air, where it remained rigid. A boy of twelve climbed up and disappeared at the top" (cited in Elliot, 1934a, p. 97).

This was supported in the same year by an account in *The Civil and Military Gazette* which told how:

"A rope, about the length described by the lady was thrown up and a boy scaled up and disappeared after climbing four or five feet up the rope" (*The Magic Circular*, 1926, p.77).

In subsequent years, similar reports continued to appear in the national press (see, e.g., Woollcombe, 1932; Prowse, 1932). The accounts did not involve the decapitation and restoration of the boy, but the vanish and reappearance of a boy at the top of the rope in open air was enough to confound Western magicians.

On 30th April, 1934, the Occult Committee of the Magic Circle held a meeting, chaired by Lord Amptill, a former acting Viceroy, to consider the evidence for the trick so far. Several magicians considered the evidence and the verdict of the evening "relegated this ancient myth to the realm of the non-existent" (Donovan, 1934). As a public demonstration of confidence in their scepticism, the chairman of the committee, Lieut-Col R.H. Elliot announced that The Magic Circle would pay 500 guineas to anyone who could perform the trick. Ironically, the meeting led to a public debate in which newspapers published more accounts by individuals who claimed to have seen the trick (see *The Listener*, May 1934 to April 1935; *The Daily Telegraph* throughout May 1934), and the Holmes photograph was republished ('V.C. who 'snapped' Indian Rope Trick', 1934).

During this debate, a magician calling himself Karachi came forward claiming to be able to perform the trick and seeking the reward money offered by the Magic Circle. Karachi was not Indian, but was an Englishman from Plymouth called Arthur Derby. His performance of the Indian rope trick, which took place before journalists, academics, and magicians was a somewhat disappointing version of the trick that simply involved his son climbing up and down a stiffened

rope four foot rope (Price, 1935; Woodrooffe, 1936). The Magic Circle refused to pay the reward and this, in turn, prolonged the debate in the national press. In response to criticisms of the Magic Circle's refusal to pay Karachi, Elliot pointed out that Karachi's trick may have been a rope trick but it was not *the* rope trick, and added that the purpose of the Magic Circle Occult Committee was to debunk the notion that *the* rope trick was a supernatural phenomenon (Elliot, 1935a). Elliot also published several articles on the topic in which a range of sceptical explanations were offered amounting to the view that the rope trick had never existed (Elliot, 1934a, 1934b, 1934c, 1935b, 1936).

On the other hand, proponents of the rope trick continued to gather evidence suggesting that the trick had actually been performed. Some of this evidence could easily be dismissed. For example, Elliot correctly pointed out that one photograph purporting to show the trick being performed in Cheltenham had been hoaxed by a magician (Elliot, 1936). Also, the text accompanying 'The First Genuine Photographs of the Indian Rope Trick' published in *To-Day* (1938) revealed that the photographs were merely a 'filmic interpretation' of what eyewitnesses had reported. Another film allegedly showing a performance of the trick being witnessed by British soldiers was also exposed as hoax footage ('Indian rope trick filmed by British army!', 1938). But other evidence directly challenged Elliot's sceptical position. For example, the pages of *The Listener* included letters from him stating that the trick had never been performed alongside letters from people claiming to have seen it (Elliot, 1934d, 1935c). Nevertheless, in an article in *Nature*, Elliot (1936) confidently dismissed the eyewitness accounts as unreliable and urged readers to wait for science to provide a satisfactory explanation.

Meanwhile, the sceptical dismissal of the rope trick did not convince everyone. While the rope trick did not attract as much attention after the 1930's, individuals continued to write about the trick, many continued to believe in its existence, and some searched in India for it. In addition, as the sceptical arguments were not wholly convincing, a range of theories were offered to explain how the trick was done.

The main theories

While the sceptical view that the rope trick did not exist may not have convinced everyone, the failed searches and unclaimed rewards needed some explanation. It was argued that the searches failed because the trick was only performed in parts of India rarely explored by or inaccessible to Western travellers, and that the original performers had now died and not passed the secret on to younger fakirs. Explanations for the unclaimed rewards included the importance of guarding magical secrets from fellow professionals, that holy men who possessed real occult powers never

displayed them for money, and that the rewards had been advertised in English language newspapers, and thus would not have been read by many Indian fakirs (Gauld, 1943; Cramer, 1984). This latter argument was perhaps put most forcibly by Cramer (1984), who wrote: “It had never occurred to their [those offering the rewards] naive, ethnocentric minds that fakirs are not the sort of chaps who pass a quiet afternoon at the local gentleman's club reading English-language newspapers” (p. 53).

Attempts to explain the rope trick itself took a number of lines. Many of the stranger explanations were attempts by magicians to explain a trick which had been declared impossible by other magicians. Maskelyne (1912) offered an early method in a book designed to be a vicious attack on theosophist Madame Blavatsky. Maskelyne first reproduced Blavatsky's own eyewitness account of the full version of the trick, then stated that it “should be taken with several grains of salt”. However, he conceded that:

“... so many stories have been told about the trick that I felt sure there must be some foundation for them, possibly a very simple trick, of which travellers had given exaggerated accounts” (p. 21).

Maskelyne then went on to describe how he once met a gentleman who had been stationed in India and had seen the trick on several occasions. He believed that there was a two part solution to the trick. Apparently, the Indian magicians always performed the trick when the sun was strong so that the European audience would be forced to witness the trick from the balcony of a building, sheltered by an awning. Next, the rope itself was made-up of small pieces of interlocking bamboo pole, covered with cloth and made to look like a rope. These pieces of bamboo locked together to form a pole thirty foot long. A diminutive Indian boy, “not much larger than an Indian monkey”, then climbed the pole. Once he reached the top of the pole the audience leaned forward and were blinded by the sun. At this moment the boy slid down the pole and hid behind one of the performers. However, Hereward Carrington (1913) expressed considerable skepticism at Maskelyne's proposed method and, when later asked to stage the trick at an exhibition, Maskelyne declined on the grounds that the English sun was not strong enough to obscure vision (Sorcar, 1960).

A few years later, a variation on the 'jointed rope' method was put forward, allegedly obtained from an Indian magician, that outlined additional details concerning the construction and handling of the fake rope (Clarke, 1919). Interestingly, the same issue of *The Magic Circular* also contained a letter from The Great Alexander claiming to have used a similar method when performing the trick 'among the boys of the Fleet'. Branson (1922), however, was sceptical of the

joint rope method and simply stated “I make no comment on this explanation. It is not worthy of one.”

Nevertheless, many less sceptical magicians continued to propose the trick rope theory (e.g., Clarke, 1928/1983; Fischer, 1931; Price, 1935; Gauld, 1943; Goldston, 1936). One of the more colourful explanations was that of Harry Price who presented a version of the strong sun and jointed rope theory in a translation of a 1930 article written by the German magician and occultist, Erik Jan Hanussen (Price, 1935). Hanussen claimed to have seen the trick near Babylon. He stated that the spectators were placed into a small enclosure and were obliged to face the sun. Next, the performer introduced the 'rope', which Hanussen described as being a carefully constructed item made of sheeps' vertebrae covered with sailing cord. The magician twisted the rope as he threw it into the air, thus forming a solid pole. This pole was held by an assistant hidden underground and two assistants above ground. A small boy and performer then climbed up the rope and both vanished, after which the boy's bloodied limbs then fell to the ground. Hanussen claimed to have been amazed before realising that the performers “had surrounded themselves with 'clouds' by means of some smoke-producing preparation not known to us”. This smoke, together with the dazzling sun, had created the illusion of a disappearance. Hanussen stated that, in reality, the performer had concealed fake limbs under his cloak and merely exchanged them for the boy at the top of the rope. Elements of this somewhat implausible explanation would re-appear later.

Others felt that a trick rope could not support a human and proposed that a monkey was involved. Fischer (1931) claimed that an engineer named John Dittmar had seen the trick, and that the fakir had employed an 'ingeniously woven rope' that could become stiff enough for a monkey, though not a man, to climb up and down, and Gibson (1967) explained that the rope (which was made of sections that could be made rigid or released by interior cords) was controlled by a magician's assistant buried underground while a monkey ascended and descended the rope.

Another set of theories utilised a thin horizontal wire or thread to support the rope. West (1909) may have been the first to claim that the trick involved the use of a slender line and a smokescreen, but William Bankier, a performer with the Apollo Circus, claimed to have used such a method (Sorcar, 1960). Prior to the performance Bankier secretly suspended a thin wire between two buildings and placed small hooks on the end of a long piece of rope. At the start of the performance Bankier created a smoke screen that obscured the top floors of the buildings. He then repeatedly threw the rope into the air until it hooked onto the thin wire. Next, the rope was

pulled taught and a small child climbed the rope. Finally, under the cover of the smoke, the child released the rope, slid along the wire and climbed into a window of one of the buildings.

Sorcar (1960) believed that his explanation accounted for how the trick was performed hundreds of years ago, when “people were very much gullible”. He described how fakirs first secretly tied a very long thin thread, usually made from a combination of human hair and catgut, between two hills. During the performance the fakir threw up the rope and hooked it over this thin thread. A child then climbed the rope, closely followed by the fakir. Once at the top of the rope the fakir threw down 'freshly butchered meat' from a goat or monkey that he had concealed under his robes. Next, the boy hid under the fakir's robes and the two of them descended the rope. Once on the ground the fakir put the 'limbs' into a basket and, during the commotion, the boy secretly climbed into the basket and then jumped out 'restored'.

Finally, the self-promoting American journalist John Keel claimed that he was told the secret by sadhu Vadramakrishna during his travel in India, and described a method very similar to that suggested by Sorcar (Keel, 1958). He also mentioned a method performed in villages which involved the fakir burning fires near the performing area. The smoke prevented the audience from seeing a pole above the street around which the rope would attach itself, and the boy could climb up the rope and along the pole to effect the vanish. Keel, in fact, seems to have been convinced that the horizontal wire between two hills was a practical version, and attempted to perform the first part of the rope trick in front of the international press. The result, not surprisingly, was a disaster. After watching him struggle to get the rope to rise about four feet, the Western reporters, in Keel's own words, “threw me a contemptuous sneer and drove off”.

Given the sheer implausibility of some of these explanations, it is hardly surprising that the most common belief was probably that the trick involved some form of mass hallucination brought about by hypnosis. This, of course, was the theme of the original hoax article, but it continued to be discussed as an option throughout the following century. Branson (1922) was dismissive of mass hypnosis, arguing the case from a pragmatic perspective, noting:

“Supposing it could be done by mesmerism, why does the wonderful mesmerist, hypnotist or suggestionist limit his powers, marvelous as they are, to making people believe that they see a boy climb up a rope ...Why does he not make people see him as Dr Barnardo asking for funds for charities. His limitations are unbounded, yet he sticks to this absurd rope and the boy climbing up it” (p. 84).

Additional reasons for scepticism were presented by Elliot (1934a), who noted that in many cases the witnesses who had allegedly been hypnotised did not understand the language spoken by the fakir, and that hypnotised subjects forget afterwards what happened during the trance.

Several magicians and commentators argued that although it was possible to hypnotise one person, it was impossible to hypnotise an entire crowd (e.g., Maskelyne, 1912; Wilkins, 1934; Goldston, 1935; Gauld, 1943). Nevertheless, some magicians suggested mass hypnosis was the solution (e.g., Gibson, 1967), as did journalists (Benchley, 1931; Rooke, 1936; 'First Genuine Photographs', 1938) and several eyewitnesses (e.g., Woollcombe, 1932; Fairfax, 1934). Various claims have been made on the back of the mass hypnosis theory. One story became fairly well-known in relation to Earl Haig. According to one of Haig's staff, Sergeant Secrett, Earl Haig was once mesmerised by a fakir into seeing the beginning of the rope trick. However, it seems that the ironically-named Secrett exposed the performance at an early stage, and this provoked the angry fakir to later make an attempt on the sergeant's life (Secrett, 1929). Alas, when later asked, Haig's widow did not remember the Earl mentioning the incident (Elliot, 1934a).

As part of his investigation, Elliot published a letter in *The British Medical Journal* asking readers to come forward if they had any information about mass hypnosis in relation to the rope trick. Unfortunately, he only received one reply and the Editor did not consider it worthy of publication (Elliot, 1935b). This reply was from Dr Alexander Cannon, a psychiatrist from the London County Council Mental Hospital Service, and author of 'The Invisible Influence', a popular, but highly controversial, book on hypnotism. Cannon claimed that the secret of the trick lay in an unusual type of 'visual hallucination'. He also claimed that he could demonstrate this under appropriate conditions. In June 1934, Cannon met with Elliot and the other members of the Magic Circle's Occult Committee and claimed that it would be possible to recreate the trick if they were to fund him to bring fakirs and a shipload of sand from India, and recreate appropriate tropical temperatures and lighting in the Royal Albert Hall. Cannon also requested that the Committee place £50,000 with a bank, on the understanding that this would be handed over to him as soon as he had produced the phenomena. Cannon explained that his performers would "work to produce thought forms so clearly before their eyes that they could make others see what they saw" and noted that "[t]here would be no rope and no performers, but everyone would see projected before him the whole Rope Trick incident from start to finish" (Elliot, 1935b). The Occult Committee asked Cannon if he would give them a banker's guarantee to return the £50,000 and pay all expenses if he failed to perform the trick. Cannon refused to accept these conditions and Elliot (1935b) concluded that:

“... though he made astounding assertions, he was not confident enough to back his powers, even with the sum of a few shillings. The risks were to be ours, the credit was to be his. We felt it a waste of time to go any further” (p. 451).

The hallucination hypothesis took another form in which it was argued that the trick was less to do with hypnotism than with a drug-induced vision. The famous American stage illusionist Harry Kellar, who at one point stated his belief in Indian mystical powers, had been sceptical about (what was most likely) a version of the Ibn Battuta story. In what Hodgson (1894) pointed out was an inconsistent position, Kellar (1886) wrote that “[t]he writers who declare they have seen such impossible feats ... must have had their brains steeped in hasheesh”. In fact, Hodgson (1894) thought that Ibn Battuta might have been hypnotised, and it has been suggested more recently that a hallucinogenic potion might have been involved in this case (Siegel, 1991). However, the most influential source of the drug-induced hallucination theory was probably Lord Frederic Hamilton's autobiography (Hamilton, 1921). Hamilton related a story told to him by Colonel Bernard, one time Chief of Police in Calcutta. Bernard had gone to visit a fakir in Calcutta who was apparently able to perform the trick. Bernard arrived at the performer's house in the “native quarter” with a friend, and the two of them were ushered into a courtyard “thick with dense smoke arising from two braziers burning mysterious compounds”. Bernard then described witnessing a version of the trick that included the rising of the rope, a boy climbing to the top of the rope, the boy's disappearance and subsequent reappearance. Reminiscent of the Chicago Daily Tribune hoax, Bernard also claimed to have taken Kodak photographs of the trick at various points, but stated that when they were developed they revealed that neither the magician nor the boy had moved during the trick. Hamilton concluded that, “[p]ossibly the braziers contained cunning preparations of hemp or opium, unknown to European science, or may have been burning some more subtle brain-stealer; possibly the deep salaams of the juggler masked hypnotic passes, but somehow he had forced two Europeans to see what he wished them to see”. The story was widely circulated and reproduced verbatim in both *The Magic Circular* (Powell, 1922) and the *Journal for the Society for Psychological Research* (Feilding, 1932). Elliot (1934a), however, was critical of the story, noting that there would be little point in taking photographs within a courtyard filled with dense smoke, and suspected Bernard of hoaxing Hamilton.

A third line of argument has been that the rope trick was a genuine paranormal event performed by fakirs who had achieved a higher state of consciousness. That paranormal or supernatural agency was involved was suggested by Indians commentators. Pudumjee (cited in Varma, 1942) noted that;

“I myself have never witnessed the rope trick...but I would not be at all surprised if it proved to be a genuine miracle in the sense of its being what is popularly considered a supernatural phenomenon” (p. 86).

Likewise, Divan (cited in Varma, 1942) stated that “I feel it hardly necessary to state that the trick is nothing but the practice of yogic powers; in other words purely a psychic phenomenon”.

A variation of the original hoax story appeared in a book by Puharich (1974), who argued that the Indian rope trick demonstrates how telepathic hallucinations may be transmitted, and supports this with an experiment carried out by a scientist in which a fakir was filmed performing the trick and the audience reported having seen the full trick, but when the film was played back it showed the fakir sitting motionless throughout the 'performance'. The original source for this, however, may not be reliable.[Footnote 8]

Some Western magicians have also proposed a paranormal explanation. Kellar had stated his belief in Indian mystical powers (Hodgson, 1894), and magician and occultist Ormond McGill more recently offered a paranormal mechanism for the rope trick. In an explanation, somewhat reminiscent of the one proposed by Dr Cannon some years earlier, McGill (1977) explained:

“Maya is indeed a type of hypnotism, but of a unique oriental type that is produced through the use of suggestion combined with the visualised and projected concentrated thought of the magician to conjure up illusions within the mind(s) of the spectator(s)...In the production of this form of magic...the magician employs the power of 'concentrated visualisation' energised by what is called 'prana'. By directing his will the magician causes his mental images to project themselves as real to the vision of his audience ... Here, at last, is the real secret of the famous East Indian Rope Trick” (p. 34).

The fall

One of the earliest explanations for the rope trick was that the accounts were exaggerated (see, e.g., Bertram, 1896, Maskelyne, 1912, Clarke, 1928/1983 and Mulholland, 1958). However, it was only one of several sceptical explanations and remained unsupported until 1996, when the hypothesis was tested. The authors (Wiseman & Lamont, 1996) hypothesised that if eyewitnesses were exaggerating their accounts over time, one might expect there to be a positive correlation between the impressiveness of the account, and the length of time between performance and report. To test this notion the authors searched all of the English-language

books, pamphlets, newspaper reports and magazine articles discussing the rope trick in order to collect eyewitness accounts. In the analysis, we looked at the amount of time that had lapsed between witnesses seeing the trick and then reporting it. The lapse ranged from two to fifty years. We also coded how impressive the trick seemed to be. In some accounts, the rope simply went into the air and the boy climbed up and down the rope. Other accounts were more impressive, involving the vanish of the boy, and some described how the boy reappeared inside a basket which was in full view of the audience. When we measured the relationship between the amount of time between seeing and recalling the trick, and how impressive the trick sounded, the result was a significant positive correlation. This provides strong evidence that the witnesses had been exaggerating over time.

In addition to the analysis, there is some supporting evidence of exaggeration among eyewitnesses of the rope trick who gave two accounts of what they saw. In January 1902, S.T. Burchett gave an account of a performance of the rope trick to a friend who made contemporaneous notes of the interview. In March 1904, he was interviewed by the British Society for Psychological Research who were investigating the trick. The notes of the original interview were subsequently sent to the J.S.P.R. and both interviews were published ('An account of the Indian rope-climbing trick', 1904-5). In the first interview Burchett described having seen the rope magically rise into the air and a boy climb the rope. He then stated that the boy disappeared at the top of the rope, reappeared there and climbed back down to the ground. In his second interview Burchett again described the boy's disappearance, but said that he could not remember whether the boy had climbed back down the rope or reappeared outside of the crowd. Dexter (1958) also describes how an eyewitness of the trick told his account on two separate occasions. The first involved a boy vanishing at the top of the rope, then reappearing in the crowd. The second, several weeks later, altered a number of details and added the decapitation of the boy.

While the most likely explanation for accounts of the rope trick would seem to be that individuals exaggerated over time, this begs the question of what it was that these witnesses exaggerated from. Some of those who suggested exaggeration as one of the theories to explain the rope trick suggested two other tricks, the pole-balancing trick and the basket trick (Branson, 1922; Clarke, 1928/1983). These tricks have been part of the repertoire of Indian magicians for centuries, and have been frequently reported by Western travellers (Frost, 1876; Clarke, 1928/1983; Siegel, 1991).

The pole-balancing trick involves a child acrobat balancing on the end of a long (10-12ft)

bamboo pole held by the magician. Study of the Holmes' photographs shows that they contain several elements that closely resemble existing images of the pole balancing trick. For example, the posture of the acrobats at the top of both the 'rope' and pole are surprisingly similar, the lower end of both the 'rope' and pole are tucked into the performers' waistbands and the bending of the 'rope' and pole appear identical. Added to this is the claim that Holmes actually confessed that his photograph was of a pole (Elliot, 1934a). There have also been other eyewitness accounts of a trick resembling the rope trick but which is reported as using a pole rather than a rope. For example, an account from *The Times of India* describes how:

“... a boy was called, who held upright a long bamboo, up which the man climbed to the top, whereupon we suddenly lost sight of him, and the boy laid the bamboo on the ground. Then there fell on the ground before us the different members of a human body, all bloody, - first one hand, then another, a foot, and so on until complete. The boy then elevated the bamboo, and the principal performer, appearing on the top as suddenly as he had disappeared, came down” (Yule & Cordier, 1921, p. 318).

The basket trick involves the magician placing his boy assistant first into a net then into a basket, and thrusting swords through the basket before opening the basket to reveal that the boy is unharmed. Some versions of the basket trick involve a vanish and re-appearance of the boy. Several of the eyewitness accounts contain clear elements of the classic basket trick. For example, one witness noted that after the boy's disappearance at the top of the rope, the magician plunged a knife through the sides of a basket and the boy then reappeared in the basket enclosed in a net ('J', cited in Varma, 1934). Also, when Burchett was confronted with the discrepancies between his first and second interview he noted: “I have evidently got...somewhat mixed up with the basket trick, which I witnessed twice”. Other witnesses describe the basket trick being performed in the same act as the rope trick (e.g., 'Hubert S.' and 'Percy M.', cited in Varma, 1942).

Following the spread of the Indian rope trick story, witnesses began to describe having seen a trick which involved a boy climbing up a rope (rather than a pole), and often incorporating elements of the basket trick. Our analysis and supporting evidence from the eyewitness accounts strongly suggest that they can best be explained by exaggeration of a performance which included these two classic Indian tricks.

Discussion

This article has described how the legend of the Indian rope trick was constructed in the West,

primarily in Britain (by far the dominant Western influence in India), and came to present the rope trick as an Eastern phenomenon of some antiquity. However, the legend really began with a hoax a century ago, and was sustained by various types of evidence. Critical analysis shows that none of this evidence is particularly convincing. Visual evidence for the trick appears to be inauthentic, and eyewitness accounts can best be explained by exaggeration over time. Nevertheless, several attempts to offer explanations for the trick have emerged: some believed the trick to be a paranormal event; others thought it to be the result of mass hallucination; and several conjurors have put forward rather implausible methods for the trick. These various, though in hindsight unnecessary, explanations for the trick can only have assisted in the growth of the legend. In addition, the attempts by sceptics such as Elliot to dismiss the trick as a myth probably helped spread the myth, and his failure to offer a convincing explanation could only have made the myth seem more mysterious.

That appears to be *how* the trick gained international fame, but it is also worth considering *why*. There would seem to be a number of factors that made the trick particularly appealing, and that may help explain why the myth became so famous. One reason may be that, as Eliade (1956) has suggested, the trick has mythical significance. As noted above, similar stories can be found in the folklore of several countries and in the mythology of several cultures. Part of the appeal of the story of the rope trick may lie in its incorporation of two classic mythical themes - the astral cord connecting heaven and earth, and death and resurrection - which are so common among different cultures that they could be seen to represent fundamental themes in the human imagination. It is easy to understand why a modern myth involving such popular themes was appealing.

However, there are also more specific social and cultural reasons why the modern legend may have been of such interest in early 20th century Britain. What made the modern legend so intriguing was that it appeared to be of an actual event. Unlike earlier folk stories and myths, the modern accounts presented the rope trick not as a story but as a genuine phenomenon. As British magicians were unable to explain it, many people assumed a psychic or supernatural explanation for the trick. This was particularly relevant at a time when British political rule of India accompanied feelings of cultural and intellectual superiority over Indians. British intellectual authority rested in part on confidence in a scientific worldview which did not readily accommodate miracles outside the Bible (and increasingly questioned those within it). Any Eastern phenomenon that challenged the Western scientific worldview was of particular significance. While Indians were regularly viewed by Britons as superstitious and gullible, most of the witnesses that reported having seen the rope trick were British and included those in 'respectable' professions as well as some members of the aristocracy. The accounts, therefore,

could not simply be dismissed.

In addition, over the 19th century, the Western image of India as a land of miracles had grown, and the rope trick rapidly became the exemplar of Indian miracles. In an attempt to debunk the growing image of the ‘mystic East’, British magicians regularly stressed that Indian magic was simply trickery and not particularly good trickery at that (Bertram, 1911; Maskelyne, 1912; Branson, 1922; Elliot, 1934a). Bertram (1911) described Indian magic as “over-rated”, Maskelyne (1912) felt that, “judged by Occidental standards, [Indian tricks] cannot be dignified with the name of illusions’, and Branson (1922) dismissed Indian conjuring in a way that reflected imperial condescension when he wrote of tricks "that are so simple that no English conjurer would dare show them to his youngest child". Yet accounts of the rope trick were not so easily explained [Footnote 9], and this must have been particularly frustrating for British magicians who regarded themselves as superior in their profession. It is hardly surprising that they invested so much energy into trying to debunk the trick. However, their failure to provide an adequate explanation in the face of growing (and ‘reliable’) evidence could only have made the trick seem more mysterious.

There have been more recent performances of the rope trick in India that have been reported in the British press (e.g. Stock & Nair, 1999), but the trick has not attracted the same attention as it did earlier this century. This may be because these modern versions of the trick are not as impressive as the versions that appeared in the accounts of the past, involving only a rope rising and a boy climbing up it. It may be because exaggeration of eyewitnesses earlier this century was a result of the fact that they did not think they were watching the Indian rope trick at the time. But it is also, no doubt, partly a reflection of the importance of the social and cultural influences of the period in which it became famous. The Indian rope trick was probably as much a product of its historical context as it was of the individual minds in which it grew.

The legend of the Indian rope trick does remain something of an enigma. In the belief that Ibn Battuta’s account from China was the original reference to the rope trick, Elliot (1935b) stated that the “Great Indian Rope Trick ... is not Indian, that it is not a trick and that it certainly is not great. All then that remains is the rope, given enough of which it hangs itself”. In fact, it would seem that Elliot was wrong, and that the Indian rope trick is both Indian and a trick, but that it does not involve a rope.

Nevertheless, an understanding of the rise and fall of the rope trick does demonstrate ways in which unreliable evidence can create and maintain belief in a non-existent phenomenon. The

initial newspaper story about the trick was reported all around the world. In contrast, the newspaper's confession that the story was a hoax received little coverage. Once the story had gained momentum many individuals came forward claiming to have seen the trick. Many people believed these eyewitness accounts as the witnesses appeared credible and their testimony was often strikingly similar. The analysis presented in this paper suggests that these witnesses probably saw a very simple trick performed by street conjurers (such as the pole balancing trick and/or the basket trick) and elaborated over time. These results may have ramifications for the way in which one assesses the reliability of testimony for other alleged extraordinary events, and it may be that similar analyses can be applied to other collections of eyewitness accounts of such phenomena.

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Footnotes

1) The Buddhist Jatakas were compiled no later than the 5th century B.C.E. but were not published in English until 1901. The relevant myth can be found on page 204 of Cowell (1901). The Hindu philosopher Sankara makes an apparent reference to the trick in his commentary on the Mandukyo Upanisad which was first published in English in 1894 (Nikhilananda, 1936). This was cited as an early version of the rope trick in 1934, when it was pointed out by an Indian scholar that the comparison with the rope trick relied on an inaccurate translation of the original Sanskrit (Varma, 1942).

2) The following references may have been provoked by the Battuta account: Harry Kellar, an American magician who travelled in India in the 1870's, seems to have picked up the story in a form which included a pistol shot, rather than a decapitation, and mentions this in his biography (Kellar, 1886); and Hodgson (1894) states that the story is 'very old' and that he was told of a second-hand account by Colonel Olcott in India.

3) Prior to 1890, the only apparent reference to such a trick being Indian seems to be on the contents page of Blavatsky (1877), which includes a subheading 'The Indian tape-climbing trick an illusion'. This relates to a section of the main text which, borrowing heavily from Yule (1872/75), includes the Battuta and Jehangir accounts. There is no such reference in the main text, however, and it does not come from Yule (1872/75).

4) Gibson (1967), for example, suggested that the trick was invented by the British to encourage recruits to the army following the so-called Indian Mutiny of 1857, though he offers no evidence of this. Others have claimed that the fame of the trick was such that Lord Northbrook, the Viceroy, offered a huge reward to anyone who could perform the trick for the Prince of Wales on his visit to India in 1875-6 (Hertz, 1921; Fischer, 1931; Seigel, 1991; Haines, 1995). However, none of these writers gives a source for this claim. Against the claim is the fact that there is no reference to the trick either in the biographical account of Northbrook's period as Viceroy (Moulton, 1968), or in a contemporary account of the Prince's visit which includes a description of two performances of Indian magic (Russell, 1877). Given that the alleged reward would have amounted to a sixth of the proposed overall costs of the Prince's tour (£60,000 according to Russell, 1877), this omission is significant. It would seem more likely that magic historians have confused the sum with that referred to by Bertram (1911) and simply followed Hertz (1921) in misrepresenting Clarke's (1919) claim that George V had sought out the trick on his visit to India as Prince of Wales in 1902. The reliability of this claim is, in turn, questioned by the lack of supporting evidence and the fact that the Prince's visit actually took place in 1905-6.

5) There is an account in *The Times of India* in 1889 of a similar trick with a bamboo stick rather than a rope (Yule & Cordier, 1921). There is also a reference to Dugwar, an Indian magician in London about 1877-80 who, according to Sidney Oldridge, explained the method of the rope trick at this time. However, this claim was not made until 1919 (Clarke, 1919).

6) References to press interest are made in: *The Chicago Daily Tribune* (6th December, 1890), *J.S.P.R.* (1891), *Weatherly & Maskelyne* (1891).

7) The newspaper story does not appear to be the origin of the myth about a performance of Indian magic offering evidence for hallucination, as a story about the 'basket trick' being the result of hallucination existed previously (Barret & Myers, 1889).

8) The story is taken from Von Urban (1962) which does not give the source of the alleged experiment, and the authors could find no publications by the scientist named as experimenter.

9) Maskelyne (1912) offered an explanation but this did not fit with eyewitness accounts, and Branson (1922) regarded the explanation as unworthy of comment.