

REPRESENTATIONS OF INDIAN ASCETICS: FROM JOHANN MARTIN HONIGBERGER'S MEMOIR TO EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY ROMANIAN NEWSPAPERS AND JOURNALS

Ayusman CHAKRABORTY

Assistant Professor of English (W.B.E.S), Taki Government College, West Bengal,
India

e-mail: hinduayusman@gmail.com

Dana RADLER

Bucharest University of Economic Studies, Faculty of International Business &
Economics, Department of Modern Languages & Business Communication

e-mail: daniela.radler@rei.ase.ro

Abstract: *In recent times, Indian ascetics have become pop icons due to the influence of visual entertainment media. Outside their country of origin, they are often negatively stereotyped to foster derogatory understandings of the Others and their cultures. In this paper, we will focus on representations of Indian ascetics. Starting with their early depictions in the memoir of the Transylvanian physician Dr Honigberger, we will examine their representations in Romanian newspapers and journals. In order to account for Romanian interest in ascetics from a faraway land, this paper will take into consideration the historical developments that led to the growth of European interest in them. Through a comparison between nineteenth century British (Osborne 1840) and East-European (Honigberger 1851, 1852) writings on Indian ascetics, we will try to understand whether conceptualization of Indian ascetics in Romanian-speaking territories differed in any way from that of the British colonizers in India. The paper will then move on to examine how the Romanian press conceptualized these ascetics. Evidences point to the fact that the Romanian press became interested in Indian ascetics, erroneously generalized as fakirs, from ca. 1900 to 1940. Analysing Romanian journal and magazine articles on Indian fakirs, which till now remain untranslated into English, this article will try to show how the Romanian press conceived of the ascetics of a faraway country. Our research methodology is based on text analysis, relying on a broader cultural perspective. For the purpose of this paper, we have selected a series of article samples, taking into consideration diversity in terms of regions (southern Romania and Transylvania), as well as the most relevant period (1906-1935). The interest in Indian sadhus and their doings basically emerged starting with the mid-nineteenth century. Yet over the following decades accounts have changed in terms of focus. While nineteenth century authors were primarily concerned with the physical*

aspects of their work, texts written in the first decades of the twentieth century suggest that journalists and writers generally looked at the more surprising and entertaining side of fakirs' actions. Finally, the paper suggests why Romanian press lost interest in Indian ascetics after the 1940s.

Keywords: Indian ascetics; East-European travellers; Johann Martin Honigberger; Romanian periodicals.

Introduction

To someone entirely unacquainted with Romania's rich history and culture, Dracula is among the first names that crosses one's mind while thinking of the country. We now know that Bram Stoker's creation bears little resemblance to the historical Vlad Țepeș, the Voivode of Wallachia (1456-1462). Even the practice of drinking human blood, wrongly attributed to the Voivode, was actually the feat of one Hungarian Countess named Elizabeth Bathory who lived a century later (1560-1614) (see Pop 2019: 140-141). Yet, print and media adaptations of Stoker's novel have ensured an undying notoriety to Vlad, and, subsequently his country. Interestingly, in this very novel Stoker implicitly compares the undead vampire Dracula and the Indian *fakirs*⁹. To convince the sceptic Dr Seward in the existence of the scientifically unexplainable, Dr Helsing reminds him about the *fakirs'* power of surviving underground burial for months. He asks:

“Can you tell me how the Indian fakir can make himself to die (sic) and have been buried, and his grave sealed and corn sowed on it, and the corn reaped and be cut and sown and reaped and cut again, and then the men come and take away the unbroken seal, and that there lie (sic) the Indian fakir, not dead, but that rise up and walk amongst them as before?” (Stoker, 1997: 172)¹⁰.

By drawing a parallel between a so called 'Romanian vampire' and Indian miracle workers, the author seems to hint at a sinister connection between these two groups of foreigners (to him) – the Romanians and the Indians. Given that many British readers in Stoker's times may have had followed him in imaginatively linking the two, it would be interesting to find out how

⁹ Also spelt as *faqeer* in the nineteenth century. This paper retains the contemporary spelling, except in citations.

¹⁰ Here Stoker obviously had in mind a particular Indian ascetic named Haridas. He survived several such interments; the most well documented one being in 1837, when he displayed his power before the Sikh ruler Maharaja Ranjit Singh and the British Resident Sir Claud M. Wade. It was also reported that, on another occasion, a crop of barley was sown on the earth under which he was entombed in a sealed box (Osborne, 1840: 126). As it will be shown, the Romanian press was also interested in Haridas and his death-defying feat.

one of these ‘outsiders’ (the Romanians) imagined the other (the Indian *fakirs*).

This paper focuses on Romanian representations of Indian ascetics from the early nineteenth century to the mid twentieth century. It particularly examines how the Romanian press conceptualized Indian *fakirs* starting with the late nineteenth century. Evidences indicate that the press became interested in Indian ascetics, wrongly generalized outside India as *fakirs*, from ca. 1900 to 1940¹¹. The paper tries to account for this sudden surge of interest in ascetics and miracle workers from a faraway land. There is something remarkable in Romanian fascination with Indian *fakirs* around this time. Unlike West European colonial powers like Britain, France, and others, Romania had little territorial stake in South Asia¹² in the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries. Consequently, this interest in Indian ascetics and miracle workers cannot, perhaps, be too readily related to Orientalism in the Saidian sense. Here we have in mind Edward Said’s famous definition of Orientalism as “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient” (Said, 2001: 3). Of course, it is important to recognize that ‘domination’ and ‘authority’ in the Saidian sense do not necessarily denote actual political authority or military domination. In fact, these are to be understood as being more discursive than real. We do recognize that, to some extent, Romanian Orientalism in the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century followed existing models of European Orientalism in exercising discursive control over a discursively constructed Orient. Nevertheless, we also contend that a relationship of power – and the concomitant idea of “the East as career” (5) - did not readily colour Romania’s relationship with Asian countries. Hence, we hypothesize that Romanian approach to Indian *fakirs* did differ in some extent from that of other West Europeans. This hypothesis will be tested against evidences as we proceed.

Our study focuses on eleven articles ranging from 1893 to 1942. In terms of publications, they appeared both in Romania (*Moftul român* [*Romanian Whim*], *Adevărul* [*Truth*], *Medicina populară* [*Popular Medicine*] and, as well as in Transylvania: *Ecoul* [*Echo*], *Realitatea ilustrată* [*Illustrated*

¹¹ While most of the reporting took place roughly in the span of these four decades, the greater number of articles on Indian ascetics appeared in the late twenties and the thirties of the twentieth century. We surmise that this was due to the steady increase of periodical publications over the country, as well as a shift from occult sciences/spiritualism towards the “fakir” seen as a mere performer or entertainer. The type of periodicals publishing articles in the twenties and the thirties of the twentieth century validate this hypothesis – they are less general newspapers and rather fit into popular magazines, often focusing on key events/celebrities/fashion and travel.

¹² Besides India, South Asia includes Afghanistan, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and Maldives. Moreover, India, as used in this paper, refers to the pre-partitioned undivided India which comprised of contemporary India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

Reality], *Tribuna* [Tribune], *Gazeta Transilvaniei* [Transylvania's Gazette]). In terms of selection criteria, we have considered not only diversity in terms of place and time, but a wider range of topics: most articles describe the acts performed by a *fakir* in the sense of a performer able to captivate the attention of a European audience, while others hint at *fakir* as a generic concept, closer to the idea of an ascetic. In one particular case, the meaning extended beyond its primary significance. This case refers to a prominent Romanian personality, Bogdan Petriceicu Hașdeu (*Truth*, 1935: 1) who adopted the word as his own nickname. The word *fakir* used as an alternate name comes up in the article "The fakir in Epi" (*Echo*, 1938: 5), where it connects to Mirzali Khan Wazir, a Pashtun local leader fighting for the independence of the Pashtunian state in the twenties, a remote area located between Afghanistan and Pakistan.

To explain why the Romanian press suddenly became interested in Indian *fakirs*, the historical developments that led to it are taken into consideration. In the process, we concentrate on the memoir of the nineteenth century Transylvanian writer and traveller Dr Honigberger. As one of the earliest travellers to visit India from this region, Honigberger catches one's eye. We compare his views on the *fakirs* with those of his colonizing British contemporaries. Finally, through close textual analysis, we point out how Romanian press conceptualized Indian *fakirs* in the early twentieth century. We also try to account for the gradual diminishing of the Press' curiosity in them by the 1940s.

Understandably, some background information is necessary to facilitate one's comprehension of this unfamiliar topic. Hence the next section will begin with a short presentation of Indian asceticism and European encounter with Indian ascetics and miracle workers, with a detailed emphasis on Honigberger's memoir. The paper will then move on to examine and analyse the representations of Indian *fakirs* in Romanian newspapers and journals.

Indian asceticism and ascetics in European eyes: from the earliest times to Johann Martin Honigberger

Any study of European representations of Indian ascetics must begin by demolishing a prevailing misconception. It is essential to understand that the word *fakir* or *faqir* specifically denotes a Muslim ascetic. The Hindu counterpart would be a *sadhu* or a *sannyasi*. Moreover, besides Hindu *sadhus* and Muslim *fakirs*, Buddhist, Jain, and Sikh ascetics can also be found in the subcontinent. But foreigners rarely differentiate among these ascetics from diverse faiths. Instead, it is more common in Europe and America to use the word *fakir* as an umbrella term for almost all South Asian religious ascetics. Perhaps James Gerein is right in suggesting that the word *fakir* calls to mind

the word *faker*, it being the latter's "aural fraternal twin". Maybe that is why colonizers readily used it to designate ascetics from all religions different from their own (Gerein, 1999: 7). It appears that these colonizing powers passed it on to the other Europeans, who derived their knowledge of India mostly through British and French colonizers. Interestingly, when Western authors write specifically of *Indian fakirs*, it is usually the Hindu *sadhus* whom they have in mind. Hindu ascetics have always astonished foreigners with their severe self-mortifying practices. Some of these like spike-lying or fire-walking are obviously amazing enough to appear almost preternatural. It is for this reason that *fakir* gradually became synonymous with miracle workers and magicians in the West, nineteenth century onwards.

A few words on the severe self-mortifying practices of Indian ascetics will not be out of place here. First, Hindu ascetics are not the only ones in India to practice severe self-mortifications. Among Muslim ascetics, some sects are known for their severe austerities like the self-mutilating Rāfā'i fakirs or the fire-walking Madari fakirs (for details see Zubrzycki, 2018: 133-137). To practice non-attachment, Jain ascetics of the Digambara sect do not wear any clothes. Jain ascetics also practice *sallekhana* or fasting unto death (see Shah 2007). However, of these Indian ascetics from diverse faiths, it is the Hindu *sadhus* who have drawn the most attention in the West. Perhaps this is due to the fact that the Hindus form the largest religious group in India, and the Hindu ascetics are consequently more numerous here than those of other faiths. There also seems to be an inadvertent conflation of India with Hinduism in Western perception, which is the religion of the majority in the country.¹³ In such a view, Hindu ascetics (mistakenly) come to stand for all Indian ascetics. Secondly, Indian practices of religious austerity differ in several respects from their Western counterparts. It is imperative to understand that the idea of Original Sin does not occur in many South Asian religions like Hinduism, Jainism and Buddhism. Consequently, the ascetic practices of the followers of these religions cannot be readily equated with the Christian idea of penance to atone for sins. Particularly, Hindu conceptualization of austerity or *tapasya* is often different from that in the West. In place of atonement, Benjamin Walker sees *tapasya* as an exercise to acquire merit or spiritual powers (2019: 79). Likewise, Aki Cederberg describes *tapasya*, somewhat impishly, as:

“... a form of spiritual machismo, wherein the *tapasvin* (the practitioner), after going through some form of extreme austerity ... [gains] a kind of divine power from the experience” (Cederberg, 2017: 57).

¹³ It must be pointed out that this differs from contemporary India's self-perception as a secular pluralist democracy.

He adds that “[T]he motivation for the austerities lies not in the realms of guilt, sin, or repentance, as they would in a Christian context” (57). We do not entirely agree to Walker and Cederberg, though they are right to a large extent. At times, atonement does motivate Hindu ascetics. One may take one of the legends of Valmiki as an example, which presents the epic poet of Ramayana as a robber who underwent *tapasya* to atone for his sins (Dalal, 2014: 1075-1077). Thus, it is not surprising to find European writers, including Romanian ones, often misunderstanding Hindu ascetics and their asceticism. For instance, in an article published in *Realitatea ilustrată* [Illustrated Reality] in 1928, the writer translates the word *yogi*¹⁴ as a “penitent sinner” (‘păcătosul pocăit’ in Romanian, *Realitatea ilustrată*, 1928: 8). But a *yogi* is simply an ascetic, particularly one who is a practitioner of *yoga* (Dalal, 2014: 1154)¹⁵. There is nothing in the Hindu tradition or scriptures to identify him as a sinner, even a ‘penitent’ one¹⁶. To the writer’s defence, we may say that such mistakes are natural for foreigners to make. However, such misconceptions are nevertheless to be avoided.

European curiosity in Indian ascetics and their difficult austerities dates back at least to the time of Alexander the Great. Alexander himself reportedly conversed with these ascetics, whom the Greeks called *gymnosophists* or naked philosophers (Zubrzycki, 2018: 24-25). It appears that their austerities impressed the ancient Greeks, who had their own tradition of stoic philosophy. While medieval Europe’s idea of India was hazy, one occasionally came across descriptions of Indian ascetics in works like Marco Polo’s (Polo, 2016: 266 – 268; also, Zubrzycki, 2018, 36-38). A deeper understanding of Indian ascetics began developing in the West only after the discovery of the sea-route to India in 1497-1498. This discovery brought India closer to Europe. A recent paper argues that the rekindling of European interest in Indian ascetics and their severe asceticism from sixteenth century onwards was a function of West European colonialism and global expansionism. Consequently, European representations of Indian ascetics, who were mistakenly generalized as *fakirs* by this time, were coloured by ideologies of imperialism and colonialism (Chakraborty, 2021: 156 – 160). While, unlike their West European counterparts, East European countries including Romania never had any direct territorial stake in South Asia, it is also true that East-European contact with India was facilitated by

¹⁴ The feminine form is *yogini* (Dalal, 2014: 1154).

¹⁵ *Yoga* (Sanskrit – union) is “one of the six classical systems of philosophy in India” (Dalal, 2014: 1150). Like *fakir*, the word *yogi* is often used abroad as a generic term for any and every Hindu ascetic.

¹⁶ The concept of the Original Sin being absent in Hinduism, it is theoretically possible to remain immaculate from birth.

British and French colonialism in the subcontinent. One may take the case of Johann Martin Honigberger (1795-1869) as an example¹⁷. He was a physician at the court of the Sikh ruler Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780-1839)¹⁸. It was through tales of French adventurers in Ranjit Singh's employ that he became interested in the promising career prospects at the latter's court. Incidentally, Ranjit Singh employed the French in his army to counter growing British supremacy in the subcontinent. Honigberger himself served as the "superintendent of the gunpowder-mill and gun-manufacturing" under Ranjit, besides his regular position of a physician (Honigberger, 1852: xviii). Probably the former appointment was given to him on account of his European origin, Europeans being valued as officers in armies of Indian rulers at that period¹⁹. Therefore, his employment at the Lahore court was indirectly the offshoot of British imperialism and colonialism in South Asia²⁰. It must have been similar for the few other Romanians who visited India during this period.

Since Honigberger was one of the few nineteenth century East-European visitors in India to document their experiences, it will be worthwhile to consider his depiction of Indian *fakirs* in some details. His memoir, *Thirty-five Years in the East: Adventures, Discoveries, Experiments, and Historical Sketches*, was published in two volumes in 1852 (Bordaş, 2005: 507-532). Though geographically Kronstadt was not a part of Romania at the moment Honigberger travelled to Lahore or when he published his memoirs, several decades later the interest in Indian yogis/fakirs emerged and spread out in newspapers and journals in either the Romanian Kingdom or Transylvanian media in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. A version of this book had appeared in German in 1851, being entitled *Fruchte aus dem Morgenlande (Fruits from the Orient)*. Significantly, the English version of Honigberger's German edition specifically addressed the British readers, as Honigberger writes, "to the English public, *in an English dress*" (1852: i; emphasis ours). This may account for some colonial prejudices appearing in

¹⁷ Honigberger was born in Kronstadt, nowadays Brasov in Romania. He travelled to Lahore, now in Pakistan, via Levant, Egypt, Arabia and Persia (Honigberger, 1852: i). It was at Baghdad that he came to know about Maharaja Ranjit Singh. He worked in the Lahore court from 1828-1832 and 1936-1949, see British Museum, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/term/BIOG195927>, accessed 22 September 2021.

¹⁸ Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the Lion of Punjab, was the last great Indian ruler to maintain an independent existence in the nineteenth century. He had his court at Lahore.

¹⁹ British and French military victories in the eighteenth century had raised their prestige in the eyes of Indian rulers. Consequently, they employed many Europeans in their services to train and officer their armies.

²⁰ It is not out of place to mention here that Honigberger received a pension from the British government in India, for which he thanked the Governor General and the Board of Administration in Punjab in his book (Honigberger, 1852: xxix).

it. Thus, one finds clichéd attacks on Hinduism as standing “in the way of every attempt at improvement” of the Hindus (Honigberger, 1852: iii). One also encounters condescension towards the “uncivilized natives of Asia, whose statements cannot always be relied on” (xxviii, iii). Likewise, there is a derision of indigenous systems of medicine (iii). Ironically, this comes at a time when British surgeons were appropriating techniques of rhinoplasty and plastic surgery from Indian medical practitioners (for detailed discussion see, Nichter et al., 1983: 635-647; also, Yalamanchili et. al., 2008: 6-9). Honigberger himself mentions meeting a patient whose nose was restored through the indigenous technique. He ‘confesses’ that “it could not have been better done in Europe” (Honigberger, 1852: 49). In view of these facts, his dismissal of indigenous medicine elsewhere in this work appears hollow. Perhaps, it typifies how knowledge exchanges in the colonial era were always affected by unequal power-relationships between the Indian colonized and the European colonizers.

It is only when Honigberger describes the marvels of Indian *fakirs* that one detects a subtle change in his tone. It needs to be pointed out beforehand, that like other Europeans of his times he used the word “*faqueer*” (*fakir*) very loosely. While he generally applied it to denote both Hindu and Muslim ascetics, at times he used it interchangeably with *hakim* (meaning, a physician). However, as physicians, *fakirs* only drew his derision. Nor was he interested in asceticism and religious doctrines. It was only as miracle workers that they interested him. Among the *fakirs* he describes in this work, there is the tale of a “Brahmin *faqueer*” (a Hindu *sadhu*) who was capable of withstanding bites of venomous reptiles (Honigberger, 1852: 138-141). Honigberger’s curiosity in him was purely from the viewpoint of a medical practitioner. He wanted to discover the cure for snake bites by tapping into indigenous knowledge. Honigberger did credit the ascetic’s belief that his habitual taking of arsenic had made him impervious to snake venom (141). Incidentally, arsenic and mercury containing pills were used in 18th century India to treat snake bites (Raman et al, 2014: 1759). Perhaps, the *sadhu* was merely reiterating a popular theory. However, Honigberger was genuinely amazed. This becomes evident when he admits that no European physician could be persuaded to agree that this was at all possible (Honigberger, 1852, 139). In tacitly accepting the limits of European medical knowledge, Honigberger seems to be unsettling the binary of a “scientifically advanced” West and a “backward” East. One finds this again when he describes the incredible feat of the Hindu *sadhu* Haridas, who survived interment for forty days at a stretch in 1837. Incidentally, this incident was widely reported in journals and newspapers across Europe. The first detailed report appeared in a medical journal from Calcutta (modern Kolkata) in 1838. Even the Romanian press displayed

interest in him. Haridas is mentioned in a feature by Dr. A.L. in *Medicina Populara*, as late as on 6 June 1906 (1906: 3). Though Honigberger reports this incident in details in his book, he was not present at the time of its occurrence. The fact that he still took hearsay so seriously indicates the extent to which it caught his fancy. Perhaps, a part of his reason was that it seemed to support his belief in animal magnetism. He writes in the “Introduction” to his memoir,

“...there are men of our day, who will not even admit the truth of *animal magnetism*; still less will they give credence to that remarkable power of suspending existence, as illustrated in the account of the *faqeer Haridas* ...” (Honigberger, 1852: xxv).

In the book, he describes the incident in great details (130-135). Very significantly, he refuses to believe that Haridas was an impostor despite knowing that some Englishmen took him to be one (132). While he does describe some of his practices²¹ as seemingly “ridiculous”, he almost immediately retracts to praise ascetics like him as *artists* who are “complete masters of their body and its organism” (134; emphasis ours). He not only collects detailed testimonies from those present at Haridas’s internment, but also gets “faithful” copies of the sadhu’s portrait to complement his memoir (201). Even if he was not personally present there, the physician provides a detailed account coming out of interviews with several witnesses among whom were Jean-Baptiste Ventura, the Italian mercenary in Ranjit Singh’s service, and Sir Claude Martin Wade, the British Resident. He then correlates their opinions with his own information on yogic practices about temporary life suspension, such as lingual frenectomy²². However, Honigberger does not attempt to discuss how such a successful experiment connects with works presenting meditation techniques or Indian philosophy, in general. Honigberger further narrates the local legend of a *yogi*, who reportedly had spent a hundred years in a state of suspended animation inside a tomb (134). Significantly, he remarks, “I cannot, nevertheless, avoid confessing freely, that I do not entirely reject all the details given respecting the circumstance” (135). One may argue that Honigberger’s fascination with Indian miracle

²¹ These include swallowing a piece of clean linen and extracting it out to rinse the stomach, and drawing a quantity of the water through the anus by a tube for the same purpose (Honigberger 1852: 133-134). It may be mentioned that these processes are called *dhauti* and *basti* respectively, and are employed by Hatha Yogis to cleanse bodily humours (*shodhana*). For details, see Mallinson (2011: 775).

²² In *hatha yogic* practice, the *khacarīmudrā* is the sealing of the uvula by curling the tip of the tongue back into the mouth. It is believed that this practice rejuvenates the body (for a description, see Mallinson, 2011: 774, 778). Lingual frenectomy is often used to enable the tongue to roll backwards.

workers did not really affect his overall estimation of India and in populace, which was in keeping with European Orientalist discourse of his times. Even then, in recognizing the limits of European medical knowledge, he also unsettled the stereotype of a ‘backward’ East. Perhaps, he did this quite unintentionally. But the end result is what actually counts.

To understand how Honigberger’s view on Indian *fakirs* is quite idiosyncratic, it is necessary to compare his writings with some of his contemporaries - particularly those directly involved with British colonialism in India. One finds that one of the earliest British colonial officers to document Haridas’ seemingly miraculous feat is W. G. Osborne, the military secretary to the Governor General Lord Auckland. His memoir *The Court and Camp of Runjeet Singh* was published in 1840, just twelve years before Honigberger’s 1852 memoir. From the very beginning, Osborne’s hostility towards Haridas becomes apparent. He describes him as a person “with a disagreeable and cunning expression of countenance” (Osborne, 1840: 128). The way Haridas prepared for his interment is summarily dismissed by him as “too disgusting to dilate upon” (125). Notably, Honigberger makes little attempt to pass judgment on these procedures and describes them in details. Osborne goes on to describe how Haridas refused to perform before him, since he did not agree to some of his conditions. He thereby concludes that the ascetic must have been an impostor (172-175). While Osborne’s attitude may appear more scientific than Honigberger’s, one must also note that he appears predisposed to distrust the ascetic. He dismissed Haridas’ performance as a “farce” even before it actually began (170). It is impossible to say at this date whether Haridas was really an impostor or not, though it is indeed difficult for us to believe in such ‘miracles’. But the real point is that, Osborne prejudices the ascetic to be an impostor even before he gives him a chance to prove himself. Honigberger, on the other hand, has no difficulty in giving him a benefit of doubt.

Our reading of Honigberger in conjunction with Osborne demonstrates that his attitude towards Indian *fakirs* did differ in some respects from that of his colonizing contemporary. While both writers were undoubtedly influenced by European Orientalist discourse of their age, Honigberger was not personally involved in European colonizing projects. We believe that this mollified his attitude towards the *fakirs* whom he did not readily perceive as fakers. We further argue that Honigberger typifies East European perception of Indian *fakirs*, at least in the late nineteenth and the early nineteenth centuries. To demonstrate this, the next section concentrates on depiction of *fakirs* in Romanian periodicals.

Indian *sadhus* and performers in Romanian periodicals (1893-1942)

While travelogues or memoirs stand as the main genre informing readership on this topic, the late 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century brought a substantial shift. Since more and more Europeans could travel to India, and as the print and economic exchanges intensified, reports on those with unusual abilities began populating the periodicals of all European countries. In order to examine reporting in Romanian periodicals, we address the following questions: in what way do such reports emerge in the Romanian media, what is the predominant perspective, if any? Secondly, what type of sources do journalists use and do they rely on the primary source mainly or add their own voice as well? From this point of view, we employ mixed criteria in our analysis such as time and point of view. The series, thus, takes into consideration, firstly, the chronological aspect, grouping more informative articles and, then, rather critical ones. The third category contains three examples illustrating the transfer of the concept of “fakir” into a wider cultural circuit.

A short text published in the Transylvanian *Tribuna* [*The Tribune*] in 1902 opens up the first category: it connects a description of India’s most familiar sites with ascetic practice. Though this reference is short, it indicates that this provided a description of the Ganga (Ganges’s) banks while coming closer to the goals set by ascetics themselves. The journalist thinks that the saint living there practically believed in reincarnation:

“There, in a cave would live a fakir, a disciple of the saint whose tomb he would guard. Often at night the tiger would come close to the fakir, would look at him and then would go away, without making any harm; the saint being thus convinced for this reason that a deity must have been incarnated in the animal so he wouldn’t ever disclosed to the hunters the place where the tiger would sleep during the day” (1902: 7)²³.

The final line casts a romanticized vision emerging from the article, the author connecting the practice of the devout with his respect for the living being, which he would not disclose to hunters visiting the area. In 1906, an article signed by a physician, A.L., in *Medicina populară* [*Popular Medicine*] published in Bucharest, presents briefly his view upon breathing practice as enabling “fakirs to raise above the ground without touching their hands or feet”. Although the article does not expand the topic, this author appears to have taken into consideration the results of such practices, since it lists them as follows: “one can take a more profound breadth of 307.152 seconds through the right nostril, followed at once by inhaling for 153.576 seconds. Finally, one breathes in for 76.788 seconds, suspends breathing for 397.152

²³ Dana Radler translated the fragments extracted from Romanian periodicals into English.

seconds and then breaths out through the right nostril for 153.5756 seconds” (A.L., 1906: 3). The respective practitioner expresses his view on the practice of Pratyahara, concluding, without detailing it: “one can take a more profound breadth of 307.152 seconds through the right nostril, followed at once by inhaling for 153.576 seconds. Finally, one breathes in for 76.788 seconds, suspends breathing for 397.152 seconds and then breaths out through the right nostril for 153.5756 seconds” (3). Then he points out: “Through the practice of breathing, fakirs can stand almost 40 days and 40 nights without any food, a kind of human hibernation” (4). This reference suggests that he was familiar with Honigberger’s works, as demonstrated by the final paragraph of his text: “An authentic case is that happened with the fakir Haridas in Ieselmere²⁴, who was buried alive and stayed thus for 40 days and 40 nights after which he was taken in the state of lethargy and returned back to life” (4). In 1942, at considerable distance from the previous example, *Unirea poporului* [*People’s Union*] covers a short piece of news. It focuses on a performer able to tame fleas:

“At the American customs office, customs officers came across, in the trunks of the fakir, over the fleas he would work with and earn his living on. At the beginning, poor officers did not know what to do with the fleas. Should they allow them to be taken into America or should they stop them at the border. In the end, they decided to let the fakir take them and let him go” (1942: 7).

The news is informative yet it renders a visible comical touch.

The second series, rather critical towards the acts of fakirs, starts with the article in *Gazeta Transilvaniei* [*Transylvania’s Gazette*], on 15 April 1912, where an unsigned journalist alerts readership on scams and frauds which “the best Europeans cannot imitate” (3). In his attempt to decode the act, the author declares that “the art of fakirs contains something else, a lot more than mere combinations of fast movements” (3). Since this article was published in the first decade of the last century, it reveals both an interest in the magic played upon by fakirs on their audience, as well less reliable type of information. For instance, the reporter refers to “N.W.J.”²⁵ as a source of information, but does not provide a dated source. To conclude his series of statements and alleged examples, he states that if “it is easy to understand all those wonders talked about fakirs and for us to see that there is nothing about

²⁴ Probably, a corruption of Jaisalmer – a city in the Indian state of Rajasthan in North Western India.

²⁵ Standing for *Neues Wiener Journal* which publishes news on fakirs, for instance “Ein Indischer Richter, Babu Prankumar Ghose” on 16 February (no.6579) and “Indische Fakire und Ihre Kunststücke”, April 1912 (no.6642).

supernatural powers, but those within our souls only” (3). A second article appears in 1926 in *Unirea poporului* [People’s Union], the narrative focusing on the works of Thawara Ray labelled by the sub-heading as the “«fakir» dancing on sharp spikes” (1926: 8). Active in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Thawara Ray²⁶ was a performer able to thrust nails in cheeks, stay buried in a deeply-set coffin or walk on broken glass. However, this account openly exposes his performance as that of a charlatan. The accusation came from an ordinary citizen in Satmar [Romanian ‘Satu Mare’] who proclaimed: “The yesterday’s fakir was a great charlatan. What he did, I can do as well. Bury me too and I’ll stay in the tomb as long as he did!” (8). The reporter shows that, although the alleged fakir was in the coffin for 30 minutes, those present could attest that the interval was too short for the oxygen to cause any health damage. The final comment casts a sarcastic note upon the audience in search of wonders: “Enough to say that the Indian got his purse full of Romanian lei and went happily further abroad, so that he could bury himself for more of it!” (8) It thus shows that financially speaking, such performances were providing a substantial source of income.

The article in *Realitatea ilustrată* [Illustrated Reality] April 1928, unsigned, starts with a truism: “In the land of stories and marvels which is India, fakirs are certainly for westerners the most miraculous thing” (8). The author invokes the rhetoric used in popular magazines meant to appeal to generalization as a persuasive discourse tactic. Through the examples of the tricks he provides, the reporter insists on the work of fakirs as being a series of deceptions incorporated in cleverly-orchestrated performances. While referring to fakirs as mere performers, the author claims that some of their acts are the result of one’s imagination, such as “the trick of the mangonia tree” (9) where the seed of this plant grows incredibly in front of the viewers and even bears fruit. The “rope trick” is purposefully listed close to the end. The image of the fakir’s assistant climbing up a rope to be ultimately dismembered by the performer, his limbs full of blood falling to the ground, hints at the darker representations presented in the West upon such a performance, even if the fakir’s assistant has been eventually brought to life by his own master. Surprising in this text is not so much its content, but the fact that the author or the editorial team do not acknowledge in any way the original source: *Wiener Magazin*, second year, March issue. While the text appears almost entirely in the Romanian version, the editors of *Realitatea*

²⁶ Thawara Ray appears in various publications in Romania, Hungary and France, featured as an “Indian” fakir, though media reports on him for a few years only (1926-1935). Yet, Wenner Sándor specifies that Ray is Gallician apparently working in cabaret shows, see *A magyar színészet válsága Háborús és háború utáni színészetünk a kritika és az események tükrében*, ENDRÉNYI LAJOS NYOMDA- ÉS HÍRLAPKIADÓ VÁLLALAT R.-T. SZEGED, 1928: 298.

ilustrată [*Illustrated Reality*] publish a selection of photographs from the original article only. Interestingly, their aim is both to inform as well as impact the audience, yet they do not include in their selection, for instance, the yogi sitting on the ground and displaying his mortified upper limbs, as the caption in German shows: "...and an ambitious colleague who is even more pleased, wishing to find the gods and therefore raising both arms" (*Wiener Magazin*, 1928: 47). Other photos from the original edition do not appear in the Romanian magazine either, which may suggest that the editors undertook this change on their own. However, the yogi raising both his arms up appears again in Romania four years later, in 1932, in a similar popular journal targeting the average reader, namely *Ilustrațiunea română* [*The Romanian illustration*], (17 Aug.1932: 4). The editors once again take liberty to assemble the text and illustration: they include the original photo in *Wiener Magazin*, March 1928, yet add an arbitrarily coined caption: "[standing] for one year, keeping arms up" (1932: 4); the original photo had not covered any temporal reference regarding the yogi's posture. Another article published by *Realitatea ilustrată* [*Illustrated Reality*] confirms that the absence of credits to the original material was not a singular practice. Issue no.486 of *Realitatea ilustrată* [*Illustrated Reality*], presents a photograph illustrating "Lamb slaughter" (1936: 12) while photos from a series taken in the same place, allegedly Calcutta, goes in *Wiener Magazin*, December 1928 (38). Using photos or texts and amalgamating them at the editors' choice seem thus to have been in place for certain publications.

The fact that the works of "fakirs" were meant to instill a sensationalist impact on the audience comes out from the second article published in 1928 in *Unirea poporului* [*People's Union*], where the "miracle-performer" locked himself in a glass coffin, a familiar trickery used at that time. The detail of "long needles which he stuck in [his body] before his sleep" (6) hints at the level of skill possessed by the fakir known as Doca²⁷. In this account, a particular linguistic phenomenon occurs. The edition of *Unirea poporului* [*People's Union*] dated 8 January 1928 speaks about "Doca", while the French magazine *Excelsior*, the original source, mentions "To Kha" (1928: 4): the editor of the Romanian journal used a corrupted form the performer's name. The French article is brief yet detailed: the age of the performer is 54 and his routine altered ordinary body parameters: To Kha's pulse raised to 104 beats per minutes while the loss of weight raised to 20 livres (equivalent of 9 kilograms).

²⁷ Austrian and German newspapers indicate "To-Kha" was the stage name adopted by Ludwig Huber from Dusseldorf, born in 1873, see (*Neuigkeits*) *Welt Blatt* nr.191, 20 August 1929, p.5 or *Marburger Zeitung*, 10 Dec.1927, p.2. He was 54 at the performance delivered in Stuttgart, as confirmed by the Parisian *Excelsior* (1927, no. 6214, p.4).

One decade later, an ample article in *Realitatea ilustrată* [*Illustrated Reality*] (10 March 1937) not only restates the idea of tricks, but delivers a more sensational “testimony”. The fakir under question attempts to deliver his act in an Indian village: to apparently dismember a boy and bring him back to life in front of the audience, but the performance fails tragically. As soon as the audience notes that the child cannot/does not come back to life, the infuriated father takes a dagger and suppresses the fakir’s life in a few moments. The author, M. Mauzooruddin Ahmad, hints at self-mortification, dedicated to Shiva by Indian ascetics, which he considers a repulsive practice:

“For Shiva, they take the most terrible ordeals. The sons of Shiva get themselves prepared for their mission in the schools of ascetics, in the holy site of the pilgrimage, Benares. This preparation consists of a systematically completed exhaustion of body and soul. When they are finally seen as fully purified, they can be seen as wandering throughout the country, as penitents, continuing to mortify their body” (1937: 17).

While the journalist refers to spikes or burning iron crossing their tongues, he advances another darker side of their work, meant, once again, to shock and disgust the audience: “A sect part of these ones drink blood from human skulls and eat flesh of the bodies. Others think that, in the course of their spiritual development, they went so far that they can go over traditions and rights in order to commit the highest deviations” (17). A series of nine photographs illustrate the activities of fakirs, actually sadhus, presenting either individuals or groups being together; the last photograph shows an ascetic completing a self-mortification described as: “This redeemed one mutilated his legs for the glory of lord Shiva” (17), by which the author rejects such practices firmly.

Thirdly, as the term “fakir” became more familiar to the Romanian audience, journalists used various connotations. For instance, there are two connected articles, written at considerable time one after the other. These articles show that journalists looked beyond the primary context of the term, building on local cultural practice and opening “fakir” to contextualised meaning. The first, entitled “Turning-table or the fakir holding hope” appears in *Moftul român* [*Romanian whim*] on 24 February 1893. A stanza and a cartoon present two familiar literary personalities at that time: journalist Theodor Dimitrie Speranția²⁸ and his mentor, Bogdan Petriceicu Hașdeu, a prominent pioneer in Romanian philology (1). The stanza includes a pun based on the noun “hope” (Romanian ‘speranță’), suggesting that Speranția, whose name is obviously related to the Romanian word, is under the

²⁸ Theodor Dimitrie Speranția (1856-1929) was a journalist and writer publishing folkloric anthologies.

influence of his mentor. Four decades later, in 1935, Barbu Lăzăreanu refers the article written in 1893 and provides his view upon the two intellectuals under question. Lăzăreanu points out that Hașdeu has undertaken the nickname of “Fakir”, the word denoting his intense preoccupation with the occult after the premature loss of his daughter, Iulia Hașdeu, a prodigy. Then, Lăzăreanu comments the sarcastic cartoon published in 1893 where Hașdeu gets engaged in a séance where Speranță appears under his complete influence:

“In the 9th issue, the illustration on the first page, dedicated to a spiritualist duel, had the clarifying sub-title: “**Turning-table or the Fakir with Speranță**”.²⁹ This is how to decipher this legend. One of the two newly arrived from Ioan Nădejde’s *Contemporanul* [*The Contemporary*] and who came to be the most ardent disciples not only of *Revista Nouă* but of the spiritualist practice in this grouping was Theodor D. Speranță. Tony Bacalbașa would say about him: Nădejde holds Speranță [hope] în socialism³⁰, Speranță [hope] has put faith in spiritualism” (1935: 1).

According to Lăzăreanu, the spiritualist activity of Hașdeu allowed other journalists of the late 19th century to look critically not so much at such interests, but at Speranția as having deserted the team of journal *Contemporanul* [*The Contemporary*] founded by Nădejde for *Revista nouă* [*The New Review*], in order to become a follower of Hașdeu’s work. In his 1935 article, Lăzăreanu examines critically Speranția’s decision as mere opportunistic journalistic practice in the broader context of his mentor’s occult practice. While the reference to Hașdeu’s nickname stands out as marginal, it still allows Lăzăreanu to express his disapproving view.

This third and final grouping closes with a short piece of news published in 1938. The word *fakir* used in the article “The fakir in Epi” in *Ecoul* [*The Echo*] on 5 June 1938 mentions Mirzali Khan Wazir, a Pashtun local leader fighting for the independence of the Pashtunian state in the 1920s, a remote area located between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The article is succinct, mentioning local disorders in Waziristan as a result of “the agitation of the famous fakir in Epi” (5) where both Indian and locals were wounded or killed. The journalist does not point out that the term designates

²⁹ Pun, suggesting that Speranță was Hașdeu’s follower.

³⁰ A second pun, “speranță” and “nădejde” are actually synonyms, yet they actually hint at the two publicists of the time. Ioan Nădejde (1854-1928) contributed as a publicist and setting up journals *Contemporanul* [*The Contemporary*], *Revista socială* [*Social Review*] and *Critica socială* [*Social Critique*]. He also provided translations of classical works of socialism.

in this case a Sufi Muslim, showing thus his limited familiarity with the contextual sense of the term.

Conclusion

This series of texts, across regions and over one hundred years (1840-1942) suggest the following: firstly, ample narratives such as that provided by Honigberger, as detailed as possible despite the fact that he was not personally witnessing Haridas' experience, point out that travellers were interested to understand the works of one's mind and body. Conversations with several individuals whose credibility is unquestionable results in Honigberger's minute account about Haridas as well as other sadhus or yogis the physician met during his stay there. However, despite his curiosity towards less familiar phenomena such as the suspension of life, his position is that of an individual whose faith in European medicine does not shatter, being rather skeptical about medical results achieved by local hakims. He does not provide any opening at all in the direction of meditation or Indian philosophy, which suggests he was solely interested in the physical and physiological aspects. Nevertheless, his memoir is one of the earliest in south-eastern Europe featuring ascetics. On the other hand, Honigberger had personal direct contact with *sadhus*, being particularly interested in how one could physically overcome the poison of reptiles. Osborne's testimony shows a rather limited preoccupation with Indian *sadhus*, referring to his unsuccessful interaction with Haridas. Secondly, there is a shift in what regards the medium of texts: Honigberger's is essentially a memoir, in which he incorporates direct or indirect testimonies about *sadhus*, and this is valid for Osborne's text as well. The fascination with the "Orient" results in an explosion of texts in the following decades in periodicals published in Romanian later on. After the end of WWII this expansion translates in longer or shorter or shorter news or editorials. Journalists writing about "fakirs" express their interest in the works of *sadhus*, but they have no direct knowledge, so they often rely on external sources, primarily French or Austrian/ German ones. In the series of articles published by Romanian and Transylvanian periodicals between 1893-1942, the tone shifts dramatically: while the earlier testimonies show the willingness to comprehend the physical and psychological works of *fakirs*, texts published from 1920 onwards concern performers mainly, several of them being in fact Europeans. In this case, the interest moves from empirical or scientific examination to stories meant to attract popularity. Thirdly, while Honigberger and Osborne present the experience of the *sadhus* they had met, articles in Romanian media regard a different category, that of *performers*. Giving news about public deceit or entertainers who were not actually connected to India in any way, journalists acquire a more critical perspective as well.

References:

- A dormit în sicriu [He slept in the coffin]. (1928, 8 January). In *Unirea poporului*, nr.2.. 6.
- A spiritist duo, turning-table or the fakir holding hope [Un duet spiritist, masa învârtitoare sau fakirul cu speranță]. (1893, 24 Feb). In *Moftul român* [Romanian Whim] nr.9. 1.
- Un miracol de voință, fakirii [Miraculous will: fakirs]. (1932, 17 August). In *Ilustrațiunea română* [Romanian Illustration], no.34. 4.
- Bordaș, L. (2005). Memoriile orientale ale lui Johann Martin Honigberger: posteritate istorică și actualitate ficțională. In *Acta Musei Porolissensis*, XXVII. 507-532.
- Cederberg, A. (2017). *Journeys in the Kali Yuga: A Pilgrimage from Esoteric India to Pagan Europe*. Rochester: Destiny Books.
- Chakraborty, A. (2021). *Awkward one-armed babas: Ürdhvaḥāhu* Hindu Ascetics in Western Imagination. In *Essence & Critique: Journal of Literature and Drama Studies*, 1(1). 150 – 169. Retrieved July 3, 2021, from <http://journalofcritique.com/article/detail.php?id=60>.
- Dalal, R. (2014). *Hinduism: An Alphabetical Guide*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
- Ein indischer Richter, Babu Prankumar Ghose. (1912, 16 February). In *Neues Wiener Journal*, no.6579. 7.
- Enterré vivant pendant 120 heures. (1927, 17 December). In *Excelsior*, no.6214. 7.
- Fakir To Khas Auferstehung (1929, 20 August). (Neuigkeits) In *Welt Blatt*. 5.
- Fakirul din Epi [The Fakir in Epi]. (1938, 5 June). In *Ecoul* [Echo], nr.1729. 5.
- Fakirul si puricii [Fakir and fleas]. (1942, 1 February). In *Unirea poporului* [People's Union], 1 Feb.1942. 7.
- Fakirs' breathing. (1906, 6 June). In *Medicina populara* [Popular medicine], no.32. 3.
- Fünf Tage in Grab (1927, 10 December). *Marburger Zeitung*, no.279. 2.
- Gerein, J. (1999). *The Bogey-men of Hinduism: British Representations of Hindu Holy Men in Literature of the Raj, 1880 – 1930* (unpublished master's thesis). University of Regina, Regina, Saskatchewan. Retrieved January 9, 2022, from <https://ourspace.uregina.ca/bitstream/handle/10294/12735/MQ45323.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.
- Honigberger, J. M. (1851). *Früchte aus dem Morgenlande*. Wien: Gerold.
- Honigberger, J. M. (1852). *Thirty Five Years in the East*. London: H. Baillière.
- Indische Fakire und Ihre Kunststüke. (1912, 21 April). In *Neues Wiener Journal*, no.6579. 9.
- Lăzăreanu, B. (1935, 20 June) Fakirii din Cirenaica [Fakirs from Cirenaica]. In *Adevărul* [Truth], no.15772.1.
- Mauzooruddin Ahmad, H. (1937, 10 March). Arta vrajitoareasca a fachirilor [The magical art of fakirs]. In *Realitatea ilustrată* [Illustrated Reality], nr. 529. 16-17.
- Mallinson, J. (2011). Hatha Yoga. In K. A. Jacobsen (Ed.), *Brill Encyclopaedia of Hinduism: Vol. 3*. Leiden: Brill. 770-781.
- Minunile fachirilor [The wonders of fakirs]. (1912, 15 April). In *Gazeta Transilvaniei* [Transylvania's Gazette], nr.84.3.

- Nichter, L.S., Morgan, R. F., & Nichter, M.A. (1983). The Impact of Indian Methods for Total Nasal Reconstruction. In *Clinics in Plastic Surgery*, 10(4). 635-647. Retrieved January 9, 2022, from https://www.researchgate.net/publication/16834770_The_Impact_of_Indian_Methods_for_Total_Nasal_Reconstruction.
- Osborne, W.G. (1840). *Court and Camp of Runjeet Singh*. London: Henry Colburn.
- Ottokar F. (1928 March). Fakire und Ihre Wunder. In *Wiener Magazin*, no.3. 42-53.
- Polo, M. (2016). *The Travels* (N. Cliff, Tans.). London: Penguin Books. (Original work published ca. 1300)
- Pop, I. (2019). *A Short Illustrated History of the Romanians*. Bucharest: Litera Publishing House.
- Raman, R., Raman, A., & Manohar, P. R. (2014). The Arsenic and Mercury-containing Tanjore pills used in treating Snake Bites in the 18th century Madras Presidency. In *Current Science*, 106(12). 1759-1763. Retrieved January 9, 2022, from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24103017>.
- Said, Edward. (2001). *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. New Delhi: Penguin Books.
- Shah, K.H. (2007). The Jain Concept of Sallekhana: A Loss or a Gain? *National Seminar on BIO-ETHICS – 24th and 25th Jan. 2007*. 50-54. Retrieved January 9, 2022, from <https://www.vpmthane.org/Publications/Bio-Ethics/Kokila%20H.%20Shah%201.pdf>.
- Stoker, B. (1997). *Dracula*. N. Auerbach and D.J. Skal (Eds.). New York: W.W. Norton & Company.
- Târgul hoților, “Chore Hat” [Thieves market, “Chore Hat”]. (1936, 13 May). In *Realitatea ilustrată* [Illustrated Reality] no.486. 11-12.
- Tigers (Varia). (1902, 7 April). In *Tribuna* [Tribune], no.66. 7.
- Un vrăjitor indian în Ardeal: fachirul care joacă pe cuie ascuțite [An Indian wizard in Transylvania: fakir dancing on sharp spikes] (1926, 4 April). In *Unirea poporului* [People’s Union], nr.14-15. 8.
- Walker, B. (2019). Asceticism. In *Hindu World: An Encyclopedic Survey of Hinduism in Two Volumes: Volume I A-L*. London: Routledge. 78-80.
- Wenner S. (1928). *A magyar színészet válsága Háborús és háború utáni színészetünk a kritika és az események tükrében*, Szeged: Endrényi Lajos Nyomda- És Hírlapkiadó Vállalat R.-T.
- Yalamanchili, H., Sclafani, A.P., Schaefer, S.D., & Presti, P. (2008). The Path of Nasal Reconstruction: From Ancient India to the Present. In *Facial Plastic Surgery*, 24(1). 3-10. <https://doi.org/10.1055/s-2007.1021457>.
- Zalozieki-Sass, R. (1928, December). Tieropfer im 20 Jahrhundert. In *Wiener Magazin*. 38.
- Zubrzycki, J. (2018). *Jadoowallahs, Jugglers and Jinns: A Magical History of India*. New Delhi: Picador India.