The great Indian mango trick

How India became a ‘land of miracles’ in popular culture

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Shamshuddin, who looks younger than the 62 years he claims to be, sits on the stage with baskets and an assortment of tools. He is in a blue-checked lungi and a vest, while his son Mustafa is dressed in modern clothes.

The great Indian mango trick is to be performed. Shamsuddin is a fifth-generation practitioner of the street magic trick. Is the basket rigged? Does the lungi itself hold secrets of the trick?

These questions may have confounded even those who first saw the trick played in dusty Indian villages nearly 1,400 years ago. A version of this trick was even played to the Mughal ruler Jehangir who was a great admirer of magicians, says John Zubrzycki, a former Australian diplomat, journalist and historian. He is the author of Jadoowallahs, Jugglers and Jinns, which traces the evolution of the conjuring traditions of India, and he narrated the historical importance and influence of Indian magic during the session “Making Jadoo: A journey through the street magic of India” at The Huddle.

The trick derives itself from the legend of Buddha who used to perform miracles under the mango tree. “Fearing this, heretics chopped down all the mango trees in the area,” Mr. Zubrzycki said. However, Buddha threw a mango seed in the ground which immediately sprouted a 50-foot mango tree under which he performed miracles.

The trick has since captured and captivated not only the country but also the West where it has been called the “most perfect achievement of the conjurer’s art” and proof of India as a “land of miracles”, Mr. Zubrzycki said.

But street magic is a sight rarely seen in India’s cities and towns now. At The Huddle, the familiar environs of a village surrounding the magician with a keen eye to spot every trick were recreated as participants gathered close to Shamshuddin.

Tunes of Mohammad Rafi played on in a flute in an attempt to bring out a “snake”. The magician has the crowd eating out from the palm of hands as he throws multiple red herrings. A rubber snake is pulled out, but he explains the trick. The real trick, he says, starts with a mango seed. Under a cloth and a basket, some water and mud is sprinkled. When the basket is pulled out, a small mango sapling is seen. “It is small. Maybe, it was under my lungi all along,” he said. Again, underneath the cloth, he puts some water and mud. The gods are summoned and incantations recited. The basket rises and when the cloth is pulled out, a larger mango tree pops out.