The Feat of Fire-Walking
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CHALLENGES

The Feat of Fire-Walking

Rationalists attack the ancient practice as merely a matter of nerve, but they still can't explain it

Several South Indian politicians recently found themselves in hot water with their superstition-free, atheistic political party after participating in a firewalking ritual. In early September, they had traversed red-hot coals at the Bannari Amman temple in Chennai, even though party cadres had been warned against participating in such rites. In a frenzy of sarcastic rationalist rhetoric, the Deccan Herald of Bangalore reported, "Believers will tell you that piety and celibacy create a bio-electric field which throws up a protective shield. Such correct belief deflects the heat away from the soles! An exalted state of mind is very essential. Fire-walking is now done as part of science yatras and anti-superstition campaigns. The secret lies not in piety but in exercising a little gumption." There is a rationalist group in Malaysia which regularly crashes fire-walking events to show that those who have done no preparation at all can still cross the torrid coals.

So what are we to make of this? Is it true there is no real danger to fire-walking and that anyone with enough nerve will emerge unscathed as long as they do not linger too long? Several explanations--other than faith--are offered for why the

feet don't get burned, most focusing on the poor ability of hot (1700ÂiF!) coals to transfer heat to the feet. Another is the "Leidenfrost effect," experienced when one snuffs a candle out after wetting the fingers--the water turns to steam, and the steam, in turn, briefly insulates the fingers from the flame. The problem with this explanation is that firewalkers don't generally get their feet wet first. Other explanations involve thick soles, "transcutaneous hyperstimulation analgesia," operant conditioning and hypnosis.

Firewalking is an ancient and widespread ritual, found in a broad diversity of peoples in Malaysia, Japan, China, Fiji Islands, South Africa, New Zealand, ancient Greece and China and now in England and America as a new age practice. One California group, for example, advertised the experience as a means of "transforming fear, regaining personal power and communing with the sacred." Instead of a bed of coals, firewalkers in some places walk through a blazing log fire, in Fiji over red-hot stones. One year, two University of California professors tried it over a ten-foot long bed of coals, felt no pain and emerged with one blister--but the heat was so intense they could not keep their eyes opened as they crossed.

The rationalists have not settled on a specific explanation for fire-walking, and even the Encyclopedia Brittanica states, "Injuries from burns do occur, but they seem on the whole to be much less frequent than would be expected. This fact has not been completely explained."