

The Phenomenon of Thuggee and Colonial Knowledge Production: The Journey of an Inconsistent, Overlapping Colonial Project on Indigenous Criminality in Nineteenth-Century India

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Abstract: *Thuggee remains one of the most contested subjects in the historiography of nineteenth-century colonial India. British colonial administrators sought to construct a quasi-historical lineage for Thuggee, drawing on history, mythology, genealogy, and ethnology to establish its existence as a pre-colonial phenomenon. This search for antiquity was central to colonial knowledge production on Indian criminality, whose principal aim was to fabricate the image of a blood-thirsty, hereditary criminal fraternity. This project, however, never rested on accurate information about India's political and socio-economic realities; the resulting knowledge was muddled, inconsistent, and overlapping, yet it deliberately preserved an exotic, mysterious, and menacing portrait of Thuggee. That portrait was strategically useful: 'Thuggee phobia' helped legitimise colonial rule. This paper argues that despite — or rather because of — its evidentiary failures, colonial knowledge production on Thuggee succeeded precisely where it mattered most to the colonial state: in securing its own political interest.*

Keywords: Crime; Thuggee (Thug); Colonial Authority; Colonial Knowledge Production.

Introduction

Thuggee is among the most controversial subjects in the history of nineteenth-century India. Across the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, colonial administrators represented Thuggee as a professional, hereditary criminal organisation whose members — the Thugs — were said to worship the goddess Kali and to perform secret occult rites before each criminal expedition. According to this colonial account, Thugs ambushed unsuspecting travellers and traders from behind, then killed and plundered them by strangulation with a yellow scarf or handkerchief. Notorious hereditary criminals drawn from different religions, castes, and regions were said to have been bound together in this single organisation, communicating through a coded secret language. The mystery of Thuggee was supposedly ‘solved’ in the 1830s with the rise of Colonel William Sleeman within the colonial administration; large numbers of people were arrested on suspicion of Thuggee, and Sleeman was ultimately credited with its suppression. A grand colonial narrative of Thuggee subsequently entered both literature and academic writing¹. Yet this narrative conceals a deeper debate: was Thuggee a genuinely ancient criminal syndicate of the Indian subcontinent, merely discovered and destroyed by colonial authority — or was its ‘discovery’ itself a product of colonial knowledge production, one that served the justification of British imperial interest? Investigating this question is the central concern of this paper.

The Lexical Polysemy of ‘Thuggee’

The origin and precise meaning of the words ‘Thug’ and ‘Thuggee’ are themselves contested. James Sleeman derived the word Thug from the Sanskrit ‘sthag’, meaning to conceal². Amal Chatterjee has shown that, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the English word Thug instead derives from the Hindi ‘thag’, meaning to deceive — hence the Thugs were cast as a ‘cult of deceivers’³. Yet inconsistencies persist. A practical Hindi–English dictionary gives the near-synonym ‘dhokha’, whose verbal form yields ‘to deceive’, with English senses of deception, guile, and subterfuge. ‘Thug’, by contrast, more properly denotes a cheat or an imposter, and its verbal form yields ‘cheating’ or ‘dupery’ rather than ‘deceiving’. The most defensible rendering of ‘Thug’ is therefore ‘cheater’, not ‘deceiver’. To portray India as archaic, backward, and superstitious, however, colonial administrators seized on the word Thug without settling on its correct sense, instead overlaying it with a different and more sinister meaning. It is from this initial slippage that the wider debates and inconsistencies surrounding Thuggee originate.

¹Parama Roy, “Discovering India, Imagining Thuggee,” *The Yale Journal of Criticism*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (April 1996), p. 3.

²James Sleeman, *Thug or A Million Murders* (Sampson Low, Marston & Co. Ltd., London, 1933), p. 4.

³Amal Chatterjee, *Representations of India, 1740–1840: The Creation of India in Colonial Imagination* (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1998), p. 125.

Colonial Attempts to Construct a Quasi-Historical Antiquity for Thuggee

Although the etymology of ‘Thug’ and ‘Thuggee’ remained contested, James Sleeman worked hard to construct a link to ancient Indian origins. He drew on Book VII of the Histories of Herodotus, which describes a martial people called the Sagartii who served as irregular light cavalry — some 8,000 strong — in the army of the Persian king Xerxes. The Sagartii lived pastorally, spoke Persian, dressed in a mixed Persian–Pactyan style, carried only iron or brass daggers, and used a leather noose wrapped around the dagger to bring down enemy soldiers and horses in battle. Sleeman claimed that some descendants of the Sagartii entered India with a Mughal invader and never returned, settling permanently in Delhi⁴. The existence of the Sagartii within the Persian army, as described by Herodotus, may well be historically sound; their descendants’ supposed migration to India with a Mughal invader, however, has no historical basis and appears to be Sleeman’s own invention. For colonial ethnography, establishing a pre-colonial antiquity for Thuggee was considered essential to legitimising colonial rule, which is presumably why Sleeman located the first Thugs in pre-colonial Delhi — even though the colonial-era ‘discovery’ of Thuggee was centred on the Chambal river valley and adjoining tracts of central India.

To explain his emphasis on Delhi, Sleeman turned to Zia-ud-Din Barani’s Tarikh-i-Firoz Shahi (1356), which records that around 1290 the Khalji Sultanate captured roughly a thousand Thugs near Delhi. Sultan Jalal-ud-Din Khalji spared them execution, instead banishing them to Lakhnauti in Bengal. Sleeman used this episode to graft the Sagartii lineage onto the Thugs of the Khalji period, and, by tracing their onward transportation from Delhi to Bengal, to suggest that Thuggee was neither an isolated nor a purely regional phenomenon but a pan-Indian one, present from north to east since pre-colonial times. He reinforced this claim by noting a further arrest of 500 Thugs at Etawah under the Mughal emperor Akbar⁵. Yet it is worth asking whether these pre-colonial ‘Thugs’ — named in Barani’s chronicle and in an imperial Mughal farman — were truly hereditary murderers. Criminal law under the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughals was severe: convicted murderers faced execution or mutilation. The Thugs described in these sources instead received the comparatively lenient punishment of banishment, which suggests they were more likely associated with minor offences such as theft or forgery than with murder. Converting these minor offenders into hereditary, pan-Indian killers was Sleeman’s own construction.

In the seventeenth century, the Jain trader Banarasidas mentioned ‘Thugs’ in his autobiography, Ardhakathanak, describing two wayfarers whom the Mughal administration branded as such for attempting to pass counterfeit currency — hardly evidence of a professional murder fraternity⁶. The French traveller Jean de Thévenot, who visited India in 1666, likewise described roads infested by dangerous animals and by roving robbers who strangled and robbed travellers, sometimes with the aid of women who lured victims into ambush; Sleeman drew on

⁴James Sleeman, op. cit., p. 19.

⁵James Sleeman, ibid., p. 20.

⁶Radhika Singha, “Providential Circumstances: The Thuggee Campaign of the 1830s and Legal Innovation,” Modern Asian Studies, Vol. 27, No. 1 (February 1993), p. 104.

this account to assert the presence of Thuggee⁷. Yet Sleeman highlighted only the use of the noose, quietly setting aside the role of seduction that Thévenot also described, and Thévenot himself never used the word ‘Thug’. As a European traveller with no access to the interior of Indian society, Thévenot was in no position to identify a specific criminal fraternity; he described what any society experiences to varying degrees — the presence of thieves and robbers who adapt their methods over time. To elevate this into evidence for a hereditary professional murder-cult is not historically justified; it reflects a fictitious construction serving imperial interest rather than a documented historical reality.

Figure 1. Key Moments in the Colonial Documentation of “Thuggee,” 1816-1867

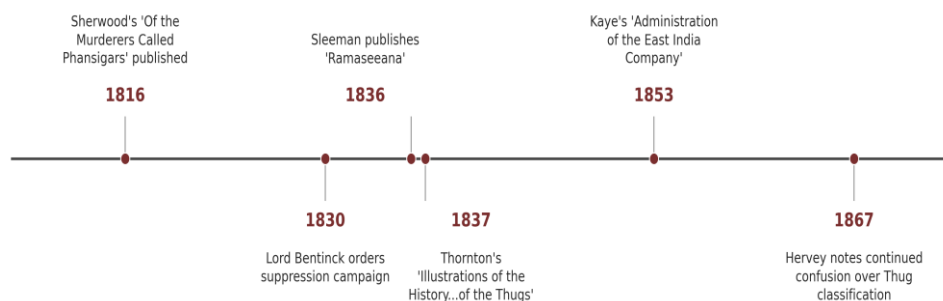


Figure 1. Key moments in the colonial documentation of ‘Thuggee’, 1816–1867 (compiled from sources cited in this paper).

The Fabricated Phenomenon of Thuggee and the Colonial Knowledge-Production Project

The colonial construction of a mysterious ‘Thuggee puzzle’, and the parallel colonial drama of unravelling that same puzzle, were two faces of a single project of knowledge production, whose climax lay in manufacturing a pre-colonial antiquity for Thuggee. Colonial writers accordingly searched for connections between Thuggee and the sculptures of the Ellora Caves, or the Puranic story of Kali’s slaying of the demon Raktabija⁸. These attempted connections to Indian art and mythology were inconsistent, inadequate, and largely unrecognisable to Indians themselves. In practice, the term ‘Thuggee’ in colonial usage was not tied to any specific race or region, nor was it linked to any actual murder syndicate; in rural Hindi usage it more commonly denoted petty offenders — cheats, swindlers, and fraudsters — and was sometimes applied to itinerant magicians, jugglers, and acrobats whose livelihoods depended on sleight of

⁷James Sleeman, op. cit., p. 20.

⁸James Sleeman, ibid., pp. 21–23.

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hand. The colonial equation of ‘Thuggee’ with a hereditary murder fraternity was, on this evidence, essentially baseless⁹.

The Dutch scholar Peter van der Veer has argued that the colonial grand narrative of Thuggee emerged from the convergence of four elements: a marked rise in highway robbery across the subcontinent in the early nineteenth century, which made Indian roads seem newly dangerous; the practice of animal sacrifice in Kali worship, which colonial administrators found repugnant; the fearsome iconography of Kali herself — her lolling, blood-stained tongue, her garland of skulls, her stance upon the prone body of Shiva — which deeply unsettled the Protestant sensibilities of British officials; and long-standing customs such as sati and female infanticide, which colonial observers took as further proof of Indian barbarism¹⁰. In the first half of the nineteenth century, colonial authorities organised Indian criminality primarily along lines of religion; in the second half, they extended this classificatory apparatus to caste, tribe, and race. The elaboration of a phenomenon as complex as Thuggee was, in this sense, the signature achievement of this wider colonial project of classification¹¹.

Figure 2. Peter van der Veer's Four Converging Elements in the Colonial Construction of the Thuggee Narrative

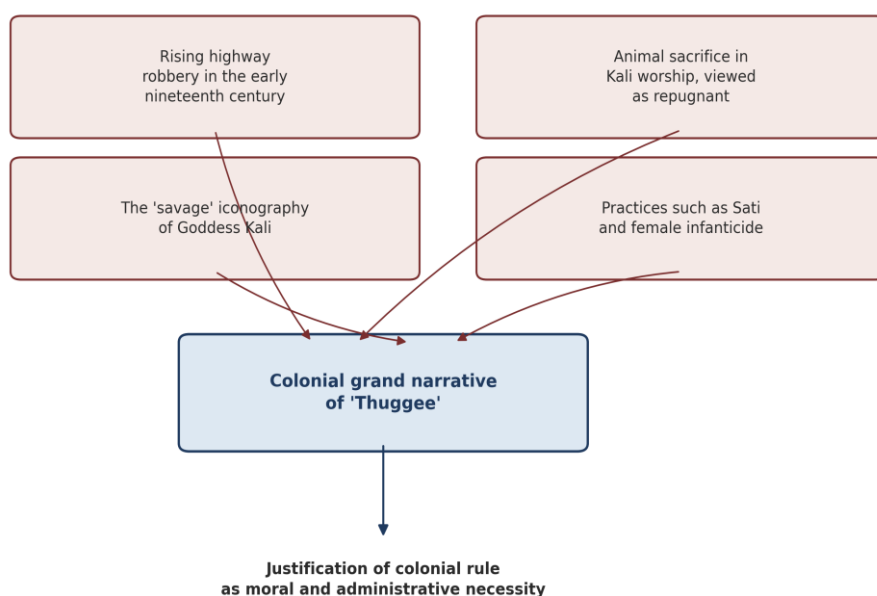


Figure 2. Van der Veer's four converging elements in the construction of the colonial Thuggee narrative.

⁹Stewart N. Gordon, “Scarf and Sword: Thugs, Marauders, and State-formation in Eighteenth-Century Malwa,” *The Indian Economic and Social Review*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (December 1969), pp. 408–409.

¹⁰Peter van der Veer, *Imperial Encounters: Religion and Modernity in India and Britain* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2001), p. 152.

¹¹Peter van der Veer, *ibid.*, pp. 151–153.

Colonel William Sleeman's own writing on Thuggee, despite his status as the hero of its suppression, is riddled with contradiction. In *Ramaseeana*, he wrote that Thuggee had long been endemic across India owing to the superstitious character of native society, and that the crime came to colonial attention only after conquest; on Lord William Bentinck's orders in the 1830s, Sleeman then undertook its systematic suppression. Elsewhere in the same book, however, Sleeman states that Thuggee was, in the first half of the eighteenth century, confined to the areas adjoining the Narmada valley, and spread across the whole country only in the second half of that century — inspired, he suggested, by the plundering example of the Pindaris some fifty or sixty years before his own time. If Sleeman's own chronology is followed, Thuggee could not have become a pan-Indian phenomenon before the 1770s or 1780s¹² — directly contradicting his separate claim that Thuggee was a two-hundred-year-old, pan-Indian institution. This internal contradiction typifies the unstable character of Sleeman's 'knowledge' of Thuggee. Nor were the confessions he extracted from captured Thugs any steadier a foundation. Asked why Thugs worshipped the goddess Bhowani (Kali) for good fortune, one prisoner reportedly replied that ordinary people, not only Thugs, worshipped Bhowani for luck — and pointedly added that the East India Company itself sometimes worshipped Kali at the Kalighat temple in Calcutta¹³. Sleeman also observed considerable enmity among approvers: witnesses shielded their own kin while readily incriminating other members of their gang. Some approvers, having turned informer, became eager collaborators. One, Bhuktawar, disclosed his former gang's hideouts and past crimes without hesitation, reasoning that his confession had already transformed him from Thug into Company servant (*sarkar ka naukari*)¹⁴. Another approver, Rambaksh, similarly declared himself indebted to the Company (*namak halal*) and now an enemy of his former associates¹⁵.

Through the 1830s and 1840s, colonial authorities assembled such confessions in an attempt to construct a long tradition of Thuggee. Yet these same confessions, taken together, provide no real evidence of any Thuggee antiquity before the nineteenth century: even Sleeman's own genealogies of Thug families extended no further than three generations, including adopted children — far too shallow a lineage to sustain the claim of an age-old, pan-Indian institution. Nonetheless, establishing such antiquity mattered a great deal to the colonial project, since it was through the construction of India's civilisational 'otherness' — barbaric, backward, and ignorant, set against an enlightened metropole — that colonial rule found part of its moral justification. Manufacturing an antique, cult-like status for Thuggee served precisely this purpose, licensing an increasingly rigorous colonial security regime across the subcontinent¹⁶. Even so, not every colonial official found the resulting narrative persuasive. Edward Thornton doubted that true confessions could reliably be obtained from Thugs at all, since most such

¹²William Sleeman, *Ramaseeana or a Vocabulary of the Peculiar Language Used by the Thugs* (G.H. Huttman, Military Orphan Press, Calcutta, 1836), pp. 5, 13.

¹³Radhika Singha, *op. cit.*, pp. 96–97.

¹⁴Radhika Singha, *ibid.*, p. 100.

¹⁵Radhika Singha, *ibid.*, p. 100.

¹⁶Radhika Singha, *ibid.*, pp. 100–101.

statements, in his view, were themselves fictions constructed by the approvers¹⁷. As in any system of criminal justice, the colonial state relied heavily on confession evidence to construct its account of Indian criminality, yet it did not fully trust that same evidence — a tension that generated considerable inconsistency in how Indian criminality was classified. From the accumulated confessions, colonial administrators nonetheless assembled a chain of ‘penal truth’ about Thuggee, one that let the colonial bureaucracy claim to have penetrated every secret of the organisation and rendered its members inescapable¹⁸. Yet the colonial state also had reasons to keep Thuggee partly mysterious, partly obscure, and partly unpredictable, since an unresolved mystery justified continued vigilance; various unrelated criminals were accordingly folded into Thuggee’s uniform, homogenising rubric¹⁹, a process pursued throughout the first half of the nineteenth century as colonial administrators sought a new definition of Indian criminality — and, alongside it, new institutions of policing, surveillance, and ethnographic documentation²⁰.

Thomas Metcalf has argued that the Thuggee phenomenon gave form to British anxieties about Indian society and criminality more broadly. Colonial rule depended on native intermediaries, yet colonial officials never fully trusted them, fearing betrayal at any moment²¹. James Sleeman himself conceded that some subordinate native police and village watchmen (chowkidars) were, at various points, complicit with Thuggee rather than opposed to it — rendering these very intermediaries unreliable instruments of suppression²². The ‘discovery’ of Thuggee thus doubled as a vindication of the colonial mission to reform a supposedly barbaric native society, even as it entrenched an atmosphere of distrust and conspiracy that the colonial state projected onto India as a whole. Thuggee, in this sense, became a metaphor for a deeper and more persistent colonial anxiety about the fragility of British control²³. It follows that British authority sought to resolve this anxiety publicly — first by dramatising the discovery of a barbaric criminal fraternity, then by claiming mastery over India through its suppression. This need for reassurance did not end with the 1830s: the Thuggee and Dacoity Department persisted long after Sleeman’s declared victory, reflecting an anxiety about native criminality that ran throughout the colonial period.

Sleeman’s own reputation reinforced this dynamic. No colonial officer before him claimed to have uncovered so vast a hereditary criminal fraternity, and none after him seriously questioned his account; instead, later officials largely repeated his narrative. The essential purpose of this narrative was to serve colonial interest, and Sleeman’s presentation of Thuggee as an age-old

¹⁷Edward Thornton, *Illustrations of the History and Practices of the Thugs* (W. H. Allen and Co., London, 1837), pp. 145–146.

¹⁸Parama Roy, *op. cit.*, pp. 9–13.

¹⁹Parama Roy, *ibid.*, p. 8.

²⁰Parama Roy, *ibid.*, p. 10.

²¹Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 1995), pp. 41–42.

²²James Sleeman, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

²³Thomas R. Metcalf, *op. cit.*, pp. 41–42.

native fraternity was, in this sense, substantially a fiction²⁴. His work of discovery and classification — gathering people of different races, classes, and castes under a single ethnographic category of criminality — became a template for colonial knowledge production on Indian crime more broadly. Administration, criminal law, and ethnography were thereby folded into a single, centralising apparatus of imperial control²⁵.

Writing in 1853, the senior colonial official John William Kaye observed that British power across its Asian and African colonies had consistently sought connections to local custom, literature, religion, and vice, chiefly to expand its knowledge of the colonised. India's relationship with England before the eighteenth century, Kaye noted, had been narrowly commercial, built on the trade in silk and muslin; to the ordinary Englishman of that period, India meant little more than the image of barefoot, turbaned, dark-skinned people on a dusty road²⁶. Even prior to conquest, then, English attitudes toward India were coloured by condescension and a presumption of superiority. After conquest, extracting revenue became the central colonial preoccupation, and a body of new criminal law was enacted with the declared aim of reforming a supposedly criminal-minded populace — successfully, in the colonial state's own estimation, restoring order to Indian society²⁷. The ultimate purpose of gathering knowledge about India, on Kaye's account, was to convert that knowledge into administrative and financial profit²⁸.

Influenced by Evangelical and Utilitarian thought, Kaye recorded that eighteenth-century colonial orientalist had relied on Hindu pandits and Muslim maulvis to translate and interpret Indian religious and legal texts. This scholarship illuminated much that had been unknown to Christian Europe, but it did little to strengthen colonial surveillance or administrative control, since it dealt with textual, not practical, knowledge. What the colonial state additionally required was a different, more operational kind of knowledge — one embedded not in scripture but in the everyday life of Indian society, and therefore invisible to earlier oriental scholarship and to European travellers, who had likewise observed Indian society only from its surface²⁹. With the consolidation of the Pax Britannica, colonial officers of the 1830s and 1840s took up this task of uncovering such hidden knowledge with considerable determination, since doing so reinforced the argument that colonial rule was indispensable to India's enlightenment and modernisation. On Kaye's reading, Indian society was inherently 'retrograde' and riddled with evils that only colonial administration, understood as a kind of moral remedy, could excavate and correct. The supposed discovery of a hidden fraternity of murderers such as Thuggee, and its suppression by colonial authority, fit neatly within this larger narrative of colonial knowledge as the precondition for colonial rescue.

²⁴Amal Chatterjee, op. cit., pp. 127–128.

²⁵Mark Brown, "Crime, Governance and the Company Raj: The Discovery of Thuggee," *The British Journal of Criminology*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (January 2002), p. 88.

²⁶J. W. Kaye, *The Administration of the East India Company: A History of Indian Progress* (Richard Bentley, London, 1853), pp. 354–356.

²⁷J. W. Kaye, *ibid.*, pp. 354–356.

²⁸J. W. Kaye, *ibid.*, pp. 354–356.

²⁹J. W. Kaye, *ibid.*, pp. 354–356.

Stewart N. Gordon has observed that colonial administrators in the early nineteenth century consistently minimised the real diversity of Indian criminality in their reports, choosing instead to emphasise superficial similarities across very different kinds of offenders³⁰. Dr Richard Sherwood's article 'Of the Murderers Called Phansigars', published in the Madras Literary Gazette in 1816, was foundational to this process, even though Sherwood never used the word 'Thug' or 'Thuggee'. Sherwood instead described considerable variation among the 'Phansigars': some operated in large gangs and robbed openly by daylight; some left their victims' bodies on the road; others worked in small groups at night and buried their victims³¹. Sleeman later flattened this documented diversity into a single, uniform, pan-Indian criminal syndicate — a move that, from the standpoint of Evangelical and Utilitarian reformers, represented a significant victory over Orientalist scholars who had favoured preserving existing Indian customs and institutions. Evangelicals, by contrast, treated Indian tradition as inherently primitive, while Benthamite Utilitarians — with the strong backing of Governor-General Lord William Bentinck — sought to remake Indian law and criminal justice according to their own principles. The abolition of sati, the promotion of English education under Macaulay's famous Minute, and Sleeman's own anti-Thuggee campaign were, in this sense, three expressions of a single reforming impulse³².

Confusion over the classification of Thuggee persisted among colonial officials well into the 1860s. In 1867, Colonel Charles Hervey, General Superintendent of operations for the suppression of Thuggee and Dacoity, admitted that departmental staff often found it genuinely difficult to identify a crime as 'Thuggee' after the fact: some offenders robbed without killing, others killed without robbing, and still others combined both. Reports frequently described a method consistent with Thuggee without formally classifying the perpetrators as Thugs. The so-called Dhatura Thugs, or Dhaturias, who used datura poison to incapacitate and rob their victims (occasionally causing fatal overdoses), were sometimes recorded merely as poisoners rather than as Thugs³³. Around Cawnpore, local tricksters who had learned a rope-and-coil trick from an Irish soldier used it to run a gambling game called tashmabazi, and were accordingly labelled 'Tashmabaz Thugs' by colonial officers³⁴. Elsewhere, criminals who murdered parents on the road in order to kidnap and sell their children were classified as 'Megpunna Thugs'³⁵. In this way, an increasingly heterogeneous range of offences was absorbed into a single, ostensibly uniform criminal category.

If senior colonial administrators themselves could not agree on what constituted Thuggee, it is unsurprising that subordinate officials struggled even more. This underlying vagueness pervaded the entire Thuggee project, whose claim to represent a centralised criminal

³⁰Stewart Gordon, op. cit., pp. 408–409.

³¹Colonel William Sleeman included Dr. Richard Sherwood's article in Appendix V of Ramaseena, pp. 327–362.

³²Stewart Gordon, op. cit., p. 410.

³³Stewart Gordon, ibid., p. 411.

³⁴Kim Wagner, Thuggee: Banditry and the British in Early Nineteenth-Century India (Primus Books, New Delhi, 2014), p. 132.

³⁵Radhika Singha, op. cit., p. 142.

organisation was not, in fact, borne out by the approvers' own confessions. Thugs captured in Malwa, for instance, frequently professed no knowledge of supposed fellow Thugs operating in Bengal or the Deccan; there is little evidence of any systematic distribution of loot along a command hierarchy, of coordination between distinct gangs, or of any attempt — rescue, ransom, or retaliation — to assist captured associates. Gang membership was, if anything, notably fluid: dissatisfied members left to join other gangs, and gangs themselves could expel members who failed to perform. None of this resembles the coherent, hereditary, pan-Indian fraternity that colonial writers described. Stewart Gordon has accordingly argued that 'Thuggee' was, in an important sense, a category invented by the Thuggee and Dacoity Department itself, rather than a pre-existing social reality that the Department merely documented³⁶. Such a department-invented category inevitably produced an unstable, often contradictory body of 'knowledge' that has continued to complicate the historiography of Thuggee ever since. The task for historians, then, is not to take colonial archival reports on Thuggee at face value, nor merely to unmask them as instances of Victorian moralising or the White Man's Burden, but to situate them within the concrete administrative, political, and social transformations of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century India³⁷.

The Socio-Political and Economic Background of Thuggee, and the Limits of Colonial Knowledge Production

Hiralal Gupta has argued that Thuggee must be understood against the backdrop of the political and socio-economic turmoil that followed colonial conquest. The British defeat of the Maratha confederacy, in particular, left large numbers of military and civilian personnel from the native states without employment, as most native armies were disbanded. Colonial authority offered little in the way of rehabilitation or resettlement for these uprooted populations, and the resulting social dislocation — which the colonial state itself largely failed to comprehend — was, on Gupta's reading, the true seedbed from which Thuggee emerged³⁸. Had colonial authority prioritised social welfare over political conquest, Gupta suggests, a phenomenon like Thuggee would likely never have taken the form it did; colonial paramountcy and rising criminality were, in this sense, two faces of the same historical process. Native states across central India and Malwa were dismantled one after another, but the colonial state never established a stable political or economic substitute for what it had destroyed — and it was this administrative vacuum, rather than any inherited criminal tradition, that produced figures later labelled as Thugs³⁹.

From the later eighteenth century, bands of mounted plunderers with martial backgrounds, often patronised by local rulers, were active across central India and Malwa, raiding as far afield as Awadh, Bengal, Rajputana, Hyderabad, and Mysore. As Mughal central authority weakened, these bands operated with growing impunity, frequently under Maratha patronage. Following

³⁶Stewart Gordon, op. cit., p. 413.

³⁷Stewart Gordon, *ibid.*, p. 413.

³⁸Hiralal Gupta, "A Critical Study of the Thugs and Their Activities," *Journal of Indian History*, Vol. XXXVII, Part II (August 1959), p. 169.

³⁹Hiralal Gupta, *ibid.*, pp. 169–170.

the Maratha defeat at the Third Battle of Panipat in 1761 — a defeat widely attributed to the poor performance of the regular Maratha cavalry — Maratha chieftains such as Holkar and Scindia began recruiting mercenary artillerymen, known as Gardis, trained in European tactics. Gardis, unlike regular cavalry, were paid in cash rather than through land revenue assignments, and their upkeep was correspondingly expensive; to meet these costs, Maratha chieftains either increased pressure on their tenantry or, quite often, permitted Gardi units to plunder nearby villages and prosperous towns in lieu of regular pay. As the British defeated one native power after another in the later eighteenth century, their armies were disbanded in turn: some soldiers found service with the East India Company or with neighbouring states, but many did not, and instead turned to organised plunder for their livelihood. The situation worsened between 1798 and 1805 under Lord Wellesley's Subsidiary Alliance system, which required allied states to disband their own armies, throwing yet more soldiers out of work⁴⁰. The subsequent defeat of the Marathas between 1803 and 1815 swelled these ranks further, producing the notorious Pindari bands. Although the colonial state eventually suppressed the Pindaris, smaller gangs of plunderers persisted across the subcontinent; unable to attack fortified towns or villages, they instead preyed on smaller targets — lone travellers, traders, and pilgrims on the road. It was these residual bands that Sleeman would later label Thugs, describing the phenomenon in explicitly Utilitarian terms as a generalised danger to all travellers, rich and poor alike, in which murder rather than plunder was cast as the primary motive⁴¹. Radhika Singha, however, cautions that subsistence-driven crime of this kind cannot be read as evidence of an organised murder cult: a desperately poor man could turn briefly to plunder and prey upon others just as poor as himself, without belonging to any hereditary criminal fraternity⁴².

India's peripatetic populations — communities that had long lived on the margins of towns, villages, and forests — posed a related problem for colonial administration, which found such groups difficult to tax and therefore treated them with particular suspicion, often likening them to the Roma of Europe, who were themselves widely stereotyped as criminal⁴³. Colonial administrators generally favoured settled, tax-paying populations, and viewed any person without fixed, sedentary roots — including religious mendicants such as Hindu sanyasis and Muslim fakirs — with corresponding suspicion, even though such mendicants commanded real respect within Indian society and could not easily be targeted through direct police action. Sleeman himself shared this suspicion of India's itinerant populations and incorporated a range of peripatetic groups into his catalogue of 'Thug tribes' in *Ramasecana*⁴⁴. The Thuggee and Dacoity Department accordingly reported the discovery of 'Tin Nami Thugs', 'Gosain and Bairagi Thugs', 'Jogi, Kanphuttie, and Thori Thugs' — consciously blending religious mendicancy with criminality — and even recorded the arrest of 'Brahmin Panda Thugs' at Cuttack⁴⁵. In 1838, Sleeman confidently identified Gosains, Bairagis, and other mendicants as professional assassins, only to retreat from this position within months, after his own assistants

⁴⁰Radhika Singha, op. cit., pp. 107–108.

⁴¹Stewart Gordon, op. cit., p. 429.

⁴²Radhika Singha, op. cit., p. 109.

⁴³Radhika Singha, *ibid.*, p. 102.

⁴⁴Radhika Singha, *ibid.*, pp. 102–103.

⁴⁵Radhika Singha, *ibid.*, p. 139.

failed to substantiate similar charges against Thoris and Jogis, and after a local mob in one instance clashed with the police to rescue arrested mendicants. In the Hyderabad region, Sleeman himself cautioned Captain Malcolm against proceeding with a trial of certain Bairagis, on the grounds that religious mendicants fell only ambiguously within the Thuggee and Dacoity Department's jurisdiction, and that prosecuting them risked provoking public distrust of colonial authority more broadly⁴⁶. Kim Wagner has argued that while yogis, bairagis, and other mendicants were occasionally involved in sporadic criminal activity, folding them wholesale into the category of 'Thuggee' was analytically unjustified: at most, such networks might be described as an itinerant underworld, or a loosely organised counter-society, rather than as evidence of a coordinated, pan-Indian criminal conspiracy⁴⁷.

Conclusion

Taken as a whole, the colonial engagement with Thuggee was a deeply overlapping and confused affair. Crime of many kinds existed across India, as it did everywhere else in the world; what distinguished the colonial treatment of Thuggee was the underlying imperative to represent Indian criminality as exceptionally barbaric and primitive by comparison with the metropole. Colonial knowledge production played the central role in constructing this image, drawing together subcontinental history, pre-colonial textual sources, mythology, criminal genealogy, and native ethnography into a single, deeply incoherent synthesis. Through this process, petty offenders — swindlers, snatchers, cheats — were refashioned into a formidable, age-old fraternity of hereditary murderers. And yet, despite these evidentiary failures, colonial knowledge production on Thuggee achieved exactly what it was designed to achieve: the effective safeguarding of colonial interest in India. The Thuggee and Dacoity narrative, contradictory and overlapping as it was, retained its official authority for the remainder of colonial rule. The history of Thuggee, in this sense, is best understood as a paradox: a project that succeeded politically precisely because, and not in spite of, its failure as a project of accurate historical or ethnographic knowledge.

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⁴⁶Radhika Singha, *ibid.*, p. 140.

⁴⁷Kim Wagner, *op. cit.*, p. 130.

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