

Thuggee in Colonial India: A Historical Study of Its Emergence, Social Organisation, Ritual Practices, Modus Operandi, and Suppression by the British State, c. 1799–1839

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Abstract

This paper examines the historical phenomenon of Thuggee in colonial India by analysing its social foundations, organisational structure, operational methods, ritual world and eventual suppression by the British administration. It approaches Thuggee not simply as an ancient religious cult or as a complete colonial fabrication, but as a historically specific form of organised banditry whose practices were subsequently classified, standardised and amplified through colonial investigation and representation. Drawing primarily upon nineteenth-century accounts associated with William Henry Sleeman and related colonial writings, the study traces the emergence of Thuggee within the political and economic disruptions of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, including the decline of regional military employment, the expansion of long-distance travel and commerce, and the protection extended by zamindars, local chiefs and polygars in exchange for revenue or shares in plunder.

The paper reconstructs the internal hierarchy of Thug gangs, led by zamadars or jamedars and divided under subedars into specialised functionaries such as Sothas, who befriended and deceived travellers; Bhutorts, who carried out strangulation; and Luggahas, who prepared graves and concealed bodies. It also discusses the gradual initiation of male children, the role of the ustad, intermarriage within Thug communities, and the absence of women from expeditions. Particular attention is given to the modus operandi of gangs: infiltration into travelling parties, selection of isolated sites, use of coded signals, strangulation with the rumal, disposal of corpses, and distribution of booty. The analysis further explores ritual practices connected with Kali or Bhawani, including consecrated objects, sacrificial ceremonies, omens, taboos and exemptions from killing, while noting variations across regions and communities.

The study also examines Ramasee, the specialised vocabulary and gestural system attributed to Thugs, and compares highway gangs with river-based groups operating along the Ganga in Bihar and Bengal. Finally, it evaluates the colonial response, including regulations imposing responsibility upon zamindars, the use of approvers and captured Thugs as informants, the arrest of leaders such as Firangeea, and the establishment of the Thuggee and Dacoity Department under Sleeman in 1835. By distinguishing between criminal practice and colonial knowledge production, the paper underscores the need to read official testimonies critically, since the evidence was generated through interrogations, confessions and administrative campaigns that claimed to reveal the phenomenon. It concludes that Thuggee represented

both a real pattern of organised predatory violence and a colonial legal-administrative category whose suppression strengthened surveillance, policing and later forms of criminal classification in British India.

Keywords: Thuggee, Sleeman, Ramaseea, Omens, Bhawani, Rumaal Polygars, Strangle

Introduction

The act of deceiving travellers and strangling them to death for the sake of plunder and Religious Sacrifices was called Thuggee.

During 1600 to 1840 nearly 5 million lives had been claimed by the thugs throughout India.

The Thugs often made one or two expeditions per year. Their victims were exclusively the travellers, pilgrims, soldiers, merchants, money-carriers etc. Few subjects in the History of colonial India have attracted as much fascination, fear and controversy as Thuggee. During the first half of the nineteenth century, British officials claimed to have discovered a vast underground association of hereditary murderers operating throughout the Indian subcontinent. These criminals allegedly travelled in organised gangs, befriended unsuspecting travellers, strangled them with cloth ligatures, buried their bodies and divided their property. According to colonial accounts, these activities were not merely committed for profit. These were performed as a sacred duty to the goddess Bhawani, commonly identified by the British Kali. The supposed combination of religious fanaticism, secret language, inherited criminality and systematic murder made the Thug appear to colonial observers as an enemy fundamentally different from the ordinary robber.

The terms used to describe the phenomenon were themselves significant. The word “Thug” was derived from the Hindi and Urdu word *thag*, generally meaning a deceiver, cheat or swindler. The designation “Phansigar” was associated with *phansi*, meaning a noose, and therefore referred to a strangler or one who used a noose. British writers gradually transformed these flexible indigenous terms into labels for members of a supposedly distinct criminal fraternity.

The colonial narrative became widely known through the writings of William Henry Sleeman, particularly *Ramaseena*, published in 1836, and later compilations such as *The Thugs or Phansigars of India*. Sleeman presented Thuggee as a coherent “system” with its own vocabulary, rules, ranks, genealogies, religious observances and methods of killing. His reports influenced administrative policy, popular journalism and fiction. Philip Meadows Taylor’s novel, “*Confessions of a Thug*”, published in 1839, transformed the colonial archive into a dramatic story of secret murder and helped popularise the image of the remorseless Indian strangler in Britain and elsewhere.

Modern historical research has challenged the literal acceptance of these representations. The central historiographical question is whether Thuggee was an actual and recognisable form of organised criminal activity or mainly a colonial invention. The most convincing answer lies between these extremes. Evidence indicates that mobile gangs practised planned robbery and murder before the height of the British campaign. However, the colonial administration collected, classified and reorganised this evidence in a manner that made varied criminal practices appear to belong to one ancient and centrally organised institution. Kim Wagner consequently describes Thuggee as a historically specific type of banditry rather than either a pure colonial fantasy or a timeless religious cult.

The “Nature” of Thuggee must therefore be examined at two interconnected levels. The first is the social reality of mobile robbery, deception and violence practised by gangs in particular regions and historical circumstances. The second is the construction of “Thuggee” as an administrative, legal and cultural

category by the colonial state. The distinction is essential because most surviving evidence was produced through the very campaign that claimed to uncover the crime.

Emergence of Thuggee

The first instance of Thuggee was given by Ziauddin Barani during explanation of the Administrative policies of Allauddin Khilji that were prevalent along the Ganga and Yamuna doab. But the Culture and practice of Robbers and Thugs were closely intermingled .

The development of Thuggee must be located within the political and economic transformations of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century India. The first Illustration of Thagee came from the pen of Dr. Richard Sherwood who came to know about the thugs of South India. He claimed that this system came into existence after the invasion of Muslims .Still the British came to know about it after the Battle of Srirangapatnam in 1799. Their motive of operation was to disguise themselves into the group of travellers and to Strangler them at a safe place with the help of a yellow or white Scarf (Rumaal). This mode of murder is investigated by Dr. Sherwood says that such types of murderers emerged in the Capital city of Greece after the invasion of Persia. Hence in India It is brought by the musalman invaders. However the worship of Bhawani Stands with a question about their belief.

Their expansion of the Network lies in the fact that Colonial conquest reduced the independence of regional rulers, reorganised systems of revenue and policing and weakened older forms of military employment. The contraction of indigenous military labour markets may have forced some soldiers, retainers and mobile groups to seek alternative livelihoods. Banditry could therefore be an adaptation to political displacement rather than the continuation of an ancient religious vocation.

This does not mean that every person accused of Thuggee had previously been a soldier or that criminal activity resulted only from unemployment. It suggests that Thuggee developed within a world where mobility, military organisation, patronage and predatory violence were already connected. The Company's territorial expansion simultaneously disrupted this world and exposed it to more intensive investigation.

The increased movement of merchants, pilgrims, officials, soldiers and money across long-distance roads also created opportunities for highway robbery. Travellers often joined larger parties for security, especially when crossing unfamiliar territory. Gangs could exploit this custom by presenting themselves as soldiers, merchants, pilgrims, servants or fellow travellers. Their ability to appear ordinary was central to their success. Unlike dacoits who openly attacked villages or caravans, those later classified as Thugs generally relied on concealment, companionship and surprise.

There was a system of Patronage for the phansingars. Many Zamindars and local polygars gave protection to the Thugs in return for a good Sum of money or Share in their loot. The Patrons often implied taxes on the thugs . According to Sleeman 24rupees of Tax per Thug in Central India and Hyderabad was imposed. The patrons not only gave them Shelters but also protected them during any British investigation or expedition. The reason for Patronage lies in the fact that Due to low crop production and frequent Drought there was a high loss or less collection of Revenue to the zamindars hence they accompanied with Thugs to gain money and jewellery.

The making of A thug.

A Gang of phansigers Consists of from 10 to 50 or even greater number of persons a majority of whom were musalman. In Hindus, Rajputs and Lodhis were outnumbered. Brahmins too though Rarely Joined the gang eg. Firangeea and his father Parashuram, Both were Thug Leaders. The phansingars bring up

their Male children to the profession unless they have bodily defects in them. At the age of ten or twelve he is permitted to accompany a party. One of the gang members, generally a close relation, becomes his Ustad. At first during the murder the boy is sent to some distance from the scene along with one of the watchers : then Allowed to see only the dead bodies : afterwards more and more of the Secret is imparted to him. A share of the booty is usually assigned to him.

He is allowed afterwards to assist in matters of minor importance, while the murder is perpetrating : but it is not until he has attained the age of 18, 20, or 22 years, according to the bodily strength he may have acquired, and

the prudence and resolution he may have evinced-, that he is deemed capable of applying the Dhouti, nor is he allowed to do so, until he has been formally presented with one by his ustad. For this purpose a fortunate day being fixed upon, and the time of the Desserah is deemed particularly auspicious, the preceptor takes his pupil apart and presents him with a Dhouti, which he tells him to use in the name kali ; he observes to him that on it he is to rely for the means of subsistence, exhorts him to be discreet and courageous. conclusion of this ceremony his education is considered to be complete, he is deemed qualified to

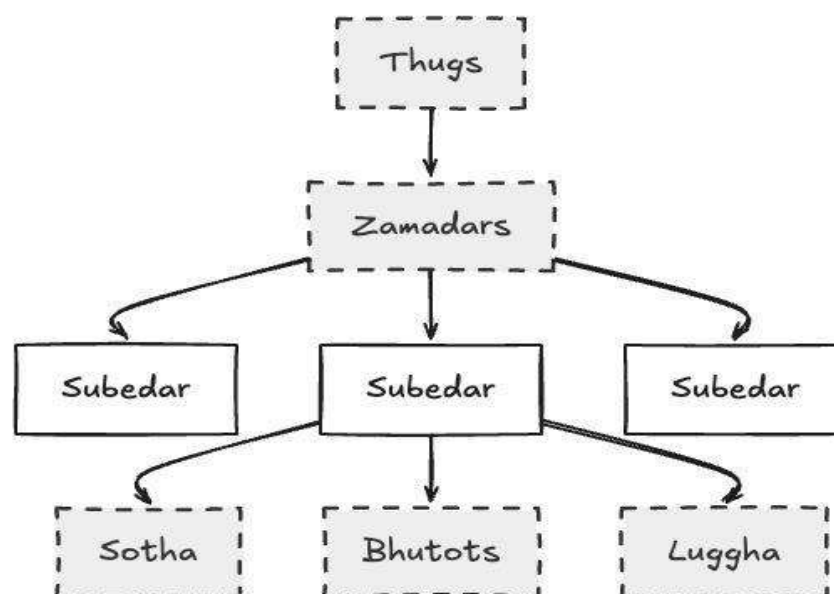
act as a Phansigar, and he applies the noose on the next occasion that offers.¹

Before going on expedition during the worship of Kali they use to eat a Consecrated goor. frangeea had stated that there is something in that goor if a person or even a horse tastes that goor (A local sweet made by juice of cane sugar),he would become a thug forever no matter what assets he may have. the Consecrated goor and the pickle- axe were the Symbol Of Loyalty towards their profession and devi Kali. The Next step was concealment of the affair. for which Zamirdars and local chieftains arranged Safe Shelter for them. A famous scandal investigated by Sleeman was the involvement of a very reputed Zamindar of Hingolee, Hooree Singh. He was a prominent patron of Thugs near Sagar , Jabalpur and Gawalior district. Not only shelter but these chiefs also provided markets and accessible nexus to sell their exclusive booty without the fear of getting caught.

William Henry, The Thugs or Phansigars of India

(London: Richard Bentley, 1839), 12.

The Social Structure of phansigars



A Gang of Thugs consists of nearly 100 to 150 members. These gangs were dictated by the gang leader called Zamadars or Jamedars. Their Jamedars were musalmans in most cases. The Zamedars had experience of some 30 years. Then came the Subedars with experience of 10 to 15 successful expeditions. The Subedars were the head of a unit of the thugs with nearly 30 to 50 members. These members were divided into three groups. The first one was Sotha or the invigilers whose duty was to persuade the group of travellers by their tricky means of communication. The Second one was the Luggha whose duty was to dig the graves according to the number of the Victim travellers. The Third Category was Bhurtort or the Strangler whose duty was to Strangle on the signal with the help of their noose or Rumaal. Sleeman found that the thugs called themselves a descendent of one of the Seven clans named Muhammadu Thugs, Bhys, Bursote, Kachance, Hutter, Ganoo, and Tundel.

No evidence of women had been found as the members of their gang went for expedition. In some interviews it had been revealed that the women of the thugs were Sometimes unaware of the profession of their man and Sometimes they knew everything but were satisfied with the booty they got.

The bonds of phansingers were often drawn closer by intermarriages. However It had been seen that the thugs Of Hyderabad Considered themselves Superior to the thugs of Central India hear sagar and Jabalpur hence they were Unwilling to marry their daughters to the thugs of Central India. This social difference came from the difference of their rituals and belief system.

There were a class of Byoragee and gosaen thugs who travel along the country as religious pilgrims and pretend to alchemy the silver into gold. They were well known to the normal thugs and joined them when they met on roads.

Mr. Wilson reveals that the thugs had always had connections with some zamiandars. The thugs were invariably protected by principal landholders, The Thakurs or Local chiefs were always found ready to take these people under their protection in the desire of share In their Loots.

The Zamindars Only required a promise that they will not commit murders within their estates

A Thug will never kill a tiger, and believes that no man who has violated this rule ever survived long. They believe that no Tiger will ever kill a Thug, unless he has secreted some booty, or cheated some of the gang out of their just share. A mere tyro or understrapper, they think a tiger may kill, provided he be not of good thug descent ²

2 . William Henry, The Thugs or Phansigars of India

(London: Richard Bentley, 1839), 124

Modus Operandi

They used to go on expeditions usually twice a year. Their victims were the travellers who could be Indian Soldiers of the British Army, pilgrims, money Carriers, merchants etc. phansigars never committed robbery unaccompanied by murder. they had principle not to allow anyone escape however numerous the Victims could be

phansingers had the appearance of Ordinary inoffensive travellers. They are to reside around the High roads in the search of Victims. Sometimes they appointed some approvers who would investigate in the nearby town if there is someone who is going on a journey with a good amount of treasure. Once they meet a group of travellers they try to infiltrate the group by making an excuse of Attack of pindaris, robbery or entertainment. Sometimes they offered their service as horse keepers, water peddlers, Cooks, entertainers etc. To show themselves Harmless they often Carried Small children in their groups. However the motive was also to train the small children to become further thugs by learning the happenings. The

act of persuading the group of travellers was done by a rank of Thugs Called Sotha, who were good at persuading and talking techniques. After getting permission to travel with the victim group there were few people who would advance fast and get to search a good place to Strangle and Bury the Bodies. They also had the duty to dig graves for the travellers. The Grave digging was done by a special food called pick - axe . It was sacred for the thugs as it-was used during the worship of devi kali .There were also a group of thugs who followed the Victim travellers so that they could sense any back up force or any other group of travellers following them. After reaching the marked place , the thugs would propose to them to take a rest as there is dense forest ahead so for the sake of safety they should take shelter here. After making tents for Rest there were two modes to Murder The First was to intoxicate their food so that they could easily Strangled. In the other case they would give Signal to the Stranglers Called Bhurthots, They would Come behind the travellers as soon as the Leaders says 'Paan laao' or 'aasman me kithe Saare taare hain', This was the Signal to Strangle. The stranglers carried a Rumaal or noose with two knots atThe end and a victorian coin tied in the central. This gave grip to the Strangler and help to break the Oesophagus. The strangling was accompanied by two assistants who would choke the body of the traveller to minimise the Resistance made.

After Strangling the Bodies were buried in the grave of nearly four to five feet. The bodies were not buried One in a grave but were Shockingly mangled and five to six buried in a single grave. A long and deep gashes were made from Shoulder to the abdomen to prevent the gas from decomposition Causing the Smelling of the dead body in case it would also attract Jackals and hyenas or other Carnivores animals to the dead body hence fear of getting caught. The Cut in the body is filled with earth to expedite decomposition.

Moreover the joints were dislocated so that the bodies could be piled in a single grave in less space with faces downwards.

As far as division of booty is concerned Thugs have Confessed that equal division of Plunder was made. A man of 60 years old gets the same amount as a 12 year old. If the plunder Contained horses and mules, They were reserved for the polygars and zamindars

Superstitions, Omens and Rituals

Sleeman in his diary states that various thugs had stated a peculiar kind of ritual to be followed before the expedition. The Thuggee was not only murders to them, it was an offering to their patroness Kali. In a Ceremony towards their goddess Kali or Bhawani a sacrifice of sheep is performed. They place their noose, knife and pickle-axe in a circle, scattering flowers over them, offerings were made, powders were burned and prayer offered for success. The head of the sheep is placed with a burning lamp upon it with the right forefoot in the mouth. The thugs asked their goddess to give signals if she approves the expedition they are meditating on. If there is any movement in the head and legs of the slaughtered Sheep it is considered as a consent of the Kali or otherwise the expedition is postponed.

Before going to expeditions they sent some persons of their gang to make Observations on the high road about the good or bad omens. Sleeman states that their sense of Considering omens were very unclear however there were some fixed signs. The favourable signs were : A lizard Chirping, A crow making noise on a living tree , A tiger appeared, The noise of a partridge denotes that they will get good booty.

The Unfavourable were : A hare or a Snake Crossing the road, A crow making a noise on a dead tree, An owl screeching, The noise of a jackal.

Thugs believed that the noose, pickle-axe and knife they carried were given by goddess Kali to their ancestors. White and yellow considered favorite colour of Kali, hence the colour of the Rimal (noose). No one ever doubted the inspiration of the pick-axe, which was called Kussee in their language. It was believed that holding this pickle-axe gives them Omen and Signals from divinity and saves them from possible Dangers.

Another part of their superstition and belief was they refrained from murdering a female. Though it was not always followed, also some specific Castes had immunity like Goldsmith, Ironsmith, Washerman, Stone-Cutters, Carpenters, A blind and physically disabled and many more. Because they were considered constant worshippers of Kali, hence exempted from slaughter. The thugs believed that if they violated the above rules, Devi Kali would punish their gang and they would not prosper. No instance had ever been found of insulting a woman by any Thug. This mentality often separated them from normal dacoits who were also active in that era. Firangeea, A Gang leader had killed a woman called Mughalani. In his interview he confessed that the murder of that woman caused me to get caught by the Britishers.

However it was not always the case. This rule was not followed by the gangs who inhabited near Jamuna and Narmada, they murdered women if they failed to separate them from the group of travellers.

the Ramaseena, the Kali and the River Thugs

To run such an organised gang and living within the community was not easy with simple mode of communication. Hence they had signs, words, phrases that were not understood by others. A collection of which is called Ramasee.

Sleeman states 'I have, I believe, entered in this vocabulary everything to which Thugs in any part of India have thought it necessary to assign a peculiar term; and every term peculiar to their associations with which I have yet become acquainted. I am satisfied that there is no term, no rite, no ceremony, no opinion, no omen that they have intentionally concealed from me.'³

They do not always have a secret term for everything especially for verbs they have all Hindustani terminations such as Lena to take, Dena to give, jana to go. And sometimes different terms were invented for the same thing by different gangs situated at distance from each other. But they had peculiar phrases about some actions like when the zamadar had to give signal to the stranglers he would say 'Tambkoo lao' or 'pan lao' or 'Aasman me kitne taare hai'.

1 - Drawing the back of the hand along the chin from the throat outwards implies that caution is requisite or some stranger is approaching.

2 - Putting the open hand over the mouth and drawing it gently down implies that there's no longer cause for alarm.

Sleeman says that he had heard of no Europeans ever murdered by phansigers. The reason behind this could be

- The Europeans were always accompanied with well equipped weapons and guards.
- All Europeans were officers hence the murder of the Europeans would make phansigers get highlighted and come under the purview of investigation.
- Sleeman also says that the luggage or the thing that they carried with them were often useless for the thugs. Moreover if they get to sell their belongings there would be more chances of getting caught.

Another area of consideration is that maximum thug leaders were Muslims however they worshipped Kali and admitted to the omens in the same way as Hindu. During questionnaire with the thugs many of

them like Bakhtiyar and Inayat Stated that they believe that The Kali is The fatima, daughter of Muhammad

And she helps in Searching a good Victim and Saves us from getting apprehended by giving omens and signs. Some of them also stated that Kali was just a professional deity for them and She had nothing to do with the after death effects of their karma.

The murders were actually an offering to the Kali. The thugs believed a story that they are the soldiers of the devi kali who helped her in killing the demon Raktabeej with the help of Rumaal that was given to them by the Kali or Bhawani as a weapon to the ancestors of the thugs.

The Thugs had few dogmas like they would murder the victims without Shedding blood as they believed that Shedding blood would disappoint Kali. Another dogma was not to leave any dead body unburied. Apart from burying them they had the option of dumping the bodies into nearby wells or pit holes. Burying the bodies was more prevalent in central India, Maharashtra and South India however Dumping in wells was practiced in North India as it was easily available being a common mode of Irrigation. more often it was believed that the unburied dead bodies would bring disgrace to devi kali.

Another peculiar gang of Thug was active around the course of River Ganga in Bihar and Bengal especially. They disguised themselves as a group of pilgrims who were going or coming back from Benares and Mathura. They would decorate their boats to attract the travellers and demand less fare. Half of the seats of the boat were filled by the thugs themselves in the disguise of some Sadhus or their disciples or pilgrims; this would convince the innocent travellers to join them in the boat. In the mid course of the River the Bhurtots would strangle them after getting a Signal. To conceal the dead body was easy for them as they would throw the dead bodies in the River water easily. In some cases the thugs would follow the group of travellers from the Pilgrimage sites itself and make them their acquaintances by sharing their experiences. After going to the bank of the river they would convince the passengers to take the boat of the thugs.

The highway thugs and the River thugs were often connected and would go on expedition together in few affairs.

3. William Henry, The Thugs or Phansigars of India

(London: Richard Bentley, 1839),

The Action Against Thuggee

The Thugs lived in villages like Other people and generally cultivated small portions of ground to maintain appearances So that the native chiefs if questioned pretended to know nothing of their real Character. They remained in concealment as they had various excuses of their absence throughout the year as they Said they went for Serine and returned periodically with an amount of earnings.

Their mode of living was so folkish in nature that no one would ever question or suspect their way of living. These things created difficulty for the Britishers to take actions against them. The Local Zamindars were themselves members of the thugs hence no approver would ever dare to Reach them. Apart from this there prevailed a belief that if someone cheats the gang and become approver he would have to face the vengeance of the deity Bhawani. Also the thugs had so well built up networks that no one could know who among them were the members of the gang .

The English themselves effected little towards the Suppression of thuggee. Moreover The thugs left no witnesses against them, The only Witnesses which could ever be brought were some of their own

fraternity. Many a time Rather than Betraying the Cult, Over 400 thugs put their Rumaal (noose) around their own necks.

During the Early Days, the British remained defensive as they had no clue from where to start. However they were concerned about the disappearance of their Soldiers who would return home on Holidays carrying their annual salary and became victims of thugs in the mid way. Earlier the British thought that the Soldiers had deserted the Service but after thousands of cases they started entertaining the matter of being bored and murdered. So to alleviate this menace they issued a general order to the native Soldiers to carry bills from treasury instead of cash to prevent them from getting robbed.

The other obstacle was scattered residences of the thugs. The members of a single gang often came from different parts of the country. Maximum members were from different States so the magistrate had no control over them.

Occasionally when a gang member of foreign territory gets arrested ,according to the English System the government would hand them over to the native chief in the hope of getting the thugs punished. But It often Ended in the release of those thugs in the exchange of money.

As The British Government knew that to control the activities Of Thugs the Zamindars should be taken into Considerations Hence The government of Bengal made The regulation IX Of 1808 and The Regulations VI Of 1810 to ensure the Accountability of the Zamirdars.

The Zamindar had to report any affair of thuggee in their jurisdiction. Also if any dead body is getting buried in their land, The Zamindars would be held responsible .

This regulation snatched the patron of the Zamindars from the thugs.

The Approvers were Phenomenal in the Act of Apprehending the gang of thugs. The first jemader or chief of thugs that was Apprehended with the help of an Approver was Firangeea, A Brahman by Clan and son of a famous thug jamedar, Parashuram who was Active in central India. After firangeea got arrested many of the thug gangs in Central India were seized with the help of Chain of Approvers.

Another Step to Check the Act and Revival of the Affairs, The Thuggee and Dacoity Department was established in 1835 by lord William Bentinck Headed by William Henry Sleeman.

They used the captured gang members as turncoat Spies and approvers, Also deployed local armed militia units (nujees) as detectives. Around 2500 thugs were hanged and more than 10,000 were exiled to Kala pani in Andaman Islands. This Act of organised murder was effectively suppressed by 1839. The former regulations against thuggee resulted in framework and enactment of the Criminal tribes Act of 1871.

Conclusion

The study of Thuggee reveals a complex historical phenomenon that cannot be adequately understood either as a timeless religious cult or as an entirely fictitious creation of British colonial imagination. The paper indicates that organised groups of mobile offenders employed deception, infiltration, strangulation and concealment of bodies to rob travellers across different parts of India. At the same time, the apparent uniformity, antiquity and coherence of “Thuggee” were substantially shaped by colonial officials who collected confessions, classified practices, standardised terminology and presented diverse forms of banditry as parts of a single criminal system. The history of Thuggee therefore belongs simultaneously to the history of violence and to the history of colonial knowledge production.

The political and economic conditions of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century India were central to its development. The weakening of regional states, contraction of older military occupations, expansion of Company rule and increasing movement of soldiers, pilgrims, merchants and money carriers created

both displacement and opportunity. Thug gangs exploited the ordinary customs of travel by appearing as harmless companions, servants, pilgrims or soldiers. Their effectiveness depended less upon open confrontation than upon patience, persuasion, secrecy and careful division of labour. The hierarchical organisation of zamadars, subedars, sothas, bhutorts and lugghas demonstrates that these gangs possessed practical structures for leadership, recruitment, murder, burial and distribution of plunder.

The paper has also shown that Thuggee was embedded in wider social relationships. Zamindars, polygars and local chiefs sometimes offered shelter, protection and markets for stolen property in return for payments or shares of booty. Family initiation, apprenticeship under an ustad, intermarriage and the participation of children helped reproduce the profession across generations. Yet regional differences in customs, terminology, marriage practices and methods of disposing of bodies caution against treating all accused groups as members of a single, centrally controlled fraternity.

Rituals associated with Kali or Bhawani, consecrated tools, omens, taboos and Ramasee vocabulary gave meaning and discipline to criminal activity, but these beliefs were neither completely uniform nor consistently observed. The participation of both Hindu and Muslim members further demonstrates that professional identity could cross formal religious boundaries. Ritual practice should therefore be interpreted as part of the moral and symbolic world of the gangs rather than as sufficient proof that every murder was primarily an act of religious sacrifice.

Finally, the suppression of Thuggee illustrates the expanding reach of the colonial state. Regulations imposed responsibility upon zamindars, while approvers, captured gang members, armed detectives and interregional intelligence networks enabled officials to overcome the secrecy and mobility of the accused. The establishment of the Thuggee and Dacoity Department in 1835 institutionalised this campaign and connected criminal investigation with surveillance, documentation and classification.

In conclusion, Thuggee was both a real form of organised predatory violence and a category reconstructed through colonial power. Its history must therefore be read critically, balancing evidence of criminal practice against the administrative processes that transformed scattered testimonies into an enduring image of the hereditary Indian strangler over time.

If we have done nothing else for India, we have done this good thing.

- General Sir William Henry Sleeman

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