

On the Origin of Thuggee: Determining the Existence of Thugs in Pre-British India

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The thugs of India have captured Western imaginations since their crimes were discovered by British administrators in the early 19th century. Since that time, the thugs have been represented in various ways within Western historiography, ranging from the trope of ‘thugs as a satanic cult’ to the conception of ‘thugs as the imagined constructions of British orientalist colonizers.’ This paper challenges both representations by searching pre-British Indian primary sources for evidence of the existence of thugs before the arrival of the British in the late 18th century. Locating thugs in these primary sources illustrates that the thugs were neither an imagined construction of British imaginations nor a demon-worshipping cult dedicated to human sacrifice, but rather a group of highly fraternal, highly superstitious criminals dedicated to highway robbery and murder.

Upon India’s independence in 1947, there were 128 tribes, constituting 3,500,000 individuals, officially classified as criminal tribes.¹ Established in Regulation XXVII of 1871, the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) sought to identify, surveil, and ‘rehabilitate’ groups of Indians who, due to their itinerancy, presented a challenge to British authority. As such, tribes deemed ‘criminal’ typically included travelling craftsmen, traders, entertainers, and displaced peasants, and measures to combat their itinerancy included forced settlement, roll calls, and travel passes.² However, the CTA could not have been passed without the precedent having been set of understanding crime in India on an organized, hereditary level, and this precedent came in the form of thuggee. Thuggee was discovered by the British administration in the early 19th century as a distinctly Hindu form of highway robbery. ‘Thugs,’ or the individuals of a secret sect who worshiped the Hindu goddess Kali, were discovered to be responsible for numerous murders which had taken place on Indian highways.³ In order to arrest,

¹ Andrew J. Major, “State and Criminal Tribes in Colonial Punjab: Surveillance, Control and Reclamation of the ‘Dangerous Classes,’” *Modern Asian Studies* 33, no. 3 (2000): 657.

² Anastasia Piliavsky, “The ‘Criminal Tribe’ in India Before the British,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 57, no. 2 (2015): 327.

³ Kim A. Wagner, *Thuggee: Banditry and the British in Early Nineteenth-Century India* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 1.

prosecute, and eradicate the secret society of thugs, the British administration passed the Thuggee Act of 1836, which set a legal precedent because it allowed individuals to be convicted based solely on affiliation to a criminal group, with no evidence of having committed a crime.⁴ In recent decades, historians have begun to revisit the British administration's campaign against thuggee, with many arguing that thuggee was an orientalist construction formed with the intention of legitimizing increased British judicial power in India.⁵ Because the Thuggee Act of 1836 set the legal precedent which eventually led to the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, this argument has important ramifications for the legitimacy of the Criminal Tribes Act. This paper serves as an inquiry into the origins of the idea of criminal tribes by asking the following question: was thuggee a valid, extant criminal activity in India prior to British arrival, or was it an orientalist construction created to legitimize increased judicial power? After a brief overview of the historiographical work done in this field, this paper will utilize analyses of native Indian texts, which pre-date British arrival, to prove that thuggee was an actual Indian phenomenon. However, it will also be shown that, although thuggee existed prior to British arrival, it *was* manipulated into a distinctly Hindu crime to reinforce ideas of racial superiority. Therefore, thuggee, as defined by the Thuggee Act, was both legitimate as an extant group of criminals, and constructed as a Hindu religious practice. As a note, multiple spellings and misinterpretations have confused discussions of thuggee. The word thuggee is derived from the Hindi word *thagi*, which means 'deception' or 'trickery.' Yet thuggee is a British appellation, as native Indians generally refer to thugs as *phansigars*, or stranglers, from the Hindi word *phasi*, which means 'noose.' This paper refers to thuggee as the crime of highway murder, and thugs as the individuals who committed thuggee.

⁴ Radhika Singha, *A Despotism of Law: Crime and Justice in Early Colonial India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 214-5.

⁵ In Edward Said's *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2003), he defines orientalism as: "the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient--dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient." An orientalist construction in this context is therefore an understanding of India that is not based upon reality but upon the Western mission to categorize and subjugate India.

The thuggee campaign has given rise to three schools of historical interpretation: the orthodox, the revisionist, and the post-revisionist.⁶ Orthodox histories, written immediately following the discovery and eradication of thuggee in 1836, take for granted the accuracy of British sources and conclude that thuggee was a demonic cult which required cleansing by the British Empire.⁷ The revisionists wrote primarily in the second half of the 20th century and were influenced by post-orientalists such as Edward Said. They argue that the thuggee described in the orthodox histories was, at best, an insignificant phenomenon manipulated to further colonial interests. At worst, they denounce thuggee as a complete fabrication by William Sleeman, the head of the Anti-Thuggee Department.⁸ This interpretation continues to attract adherents into the present, such as Henry Schwartz, who, in his 2010 monograph, argues that the ‘fact’ of thuggee was nothing more than a manifestation of interplay between notions of British superiority and fears of native resistance.⁹ Recently, a post-revisionist interpretation has found a middle ground between the polar opposites of orthodoxy and revisionism, arguing that, through careful analysis and by using a wider array of sources, historians can separate the facts of thuggee from the misrepresentations of British

⁶ This periodization of historiographical approaches to thuggee was first introduced by Alexander Lyon Macfie in his article, “Thuggee, an Orientalist Construction?,” *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 12, no. 3 (2008): 390. I have adapted his periodization by applying the terms “orthodox,” “revisionist,” and “post-revisionist.” These terms do not relate to any accepted historiographical periods, but rather encapsulate the relative nature of each progressive historiographical approach; the terms “orientalist,” “anti-orientalist,” and “neo-orientalist” are another possible terminology.

⁷ See Edward Thornton, *Illustration of the History and Practices of the Thugs* (London: W.H. Allen, 1837), James Sleeman, *Thug, or a Million Murders* (London: Sampson Low, 1933), and George L. Bruce, *The Stranglers: The Cult of Thuggee and its Overthrow in British India* (London: Longmans, 1968).

⁸ See Stewart N. Gordon, “Scarf and Sword: Thugs, Marauders, and State-formation in Eighteenth-century Malwa,” *The Indian Economic & Social History Review* 6, no. 4 (1969): 403-429, Amal Chatterjee, *Representation of India, 1740-1840: The Creation of India in the Colonial Imagination* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1998), but especially Parama Roy, “Discovering India, Imagining Thuggee” *The Yale Journal Criticism* 9, no. 1 (1996): 121-145.

⁹ Kavita Daiya, review of *Constructing the Criminal Tribe in India*, by Henry Schwarz, *South Asia History and Culture* 2, no. 3 (2011): 448.

orientalist writers. Yet these post-revisionists, such as Kim Wagner, Avinash Singh, and Martine van Woerkens, are restricted by their anti-orientalism. They argue that, while thuggee did exist, it was not a pre-existing part of Indian culture but a result of British interference in India's social structures.¹⁰ This is certainly a step away from the knee-jerk revisionism of earlier decades, but it does not go far enough in recognizing the existence of thuggee prior to British arrival.

Before we can search for the existence of thuggee prior to British arrival, however, we must determine exactly how the British defined thuggee. The first mention of thuggee in British archives is during murder investigations in 1809, in the Indian region of Etawah. Magistrate James Law's report to Commander-in-Chief William Dowdeswell described all that was known of the thugs. Namely, that they were a "strongly leagued together" organization, that they were ancient, and that they were highly secretive.¹¹ A month later, in Judge of the Court of Circuit T. Brooke's report to Dowdeswell, thuggee was further defined as a crime in which unsuspecting travelers were approached in disguise, strangled with a scarf or catgut string, looted, and hidden.¹² This is essentially the same definition of thuggee outlined in Richard Sherwood's 1819 report, which emphasized that thuggee was a hereditary profession, that groups of thugs were highly diverse, involving multiple castes, religions, and ethnicities, and therefore that thugs were identifiable by their criminality alone.¹³ It is not until William Sleeman's anonymously published article in 1830 that thuggee came to be understood as a religious practice. He claimed that thuggee was "an organized system of religious and civil polity prepared to receive converts from all religions and sects and to urge

¹⁰ See Kim Wagner, *Thuggee: Banditry and the British in Early Nineteenth-Century India* (Basingtoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), Martin van Woerkens, *The Strangled Traveler: Colonial Imaginings and the Thugs of India*, trans. by Catherine Tihanyi (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), and Radhika Singha, *A Despotism of Law: Crime and Justice in Early Colonial India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998).

¹¹ Law to Dowdeswell, 23 December 1809, in *Stranglers and Bandits: A Historical Anthology of Thuggee*, ed. by Kim A. Wagner (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 68.

¹² Brooke to Dowdeswell, 23 January 1810, in *Strangers and Bandits*, ed. by Kim Wagner, 69.

¹³ Richard Sherwood, "Of the Murderers called Phansigars," in *Ramaseeana, or A Vocabulary of the Peculiar Language Used by the Thugs*, by William Sleeman (Calcutta: Military Orphan Press, 1836), 327.

them to the murder of their fellow creatures under the assurance of high rewards in this world and the other.”¹⁴ These five characteristics—strangulation, secrecy, organization, antiquity, and religiosity—distinguished thuggee from other categories of criminality and provided the basis on which the Thuggee Act of 1836 prosecuted thuggee separately from other crimes. Thus, it is these characteristics that we must search for in native records to determine the existence of thuggee before British arrival.

In the *Upadesamala*, a 12th century Jain text, there is an allegorical story about the sacking of a city called Avanita by “a horde of thieves intensely well practiced in *thagavidya* [author’s emphasis],” *thaga* meaning deceitfulness and being the origin of the word thuggee, and *vidya* meaning worship.¹⁵ Though allegorical, this offers evidence that in the 12th century there were notions of groups of thieves identified with the word *thaga* and defined by a connection between spirituality and theft. Even more revealing is Ziauddin Barani’s 14th century history of Sultan Jalálu-d dín Fíroz Khiljí’s reign (1290-1296), in which he describes how “thieves were often brought before him [the Sultan]....In his reign some *thags* were taken in the city, and a man belonging to that *fraternity* was the means of about a thousand being captured [emphasis mine].”¹⁶ This passage proves that there was a group of thieves called ‘thags’ in existence in the 13th century, and the use of the word ‘fraternity’ indicates that the thags were organized into groups connected through familial relations. Furthermore, it suggests that these fraternities were organized tightly enough that a thousand could be caught based on the intelligence of only one. Finally, there is a record of Aurangzeb’s farman, or royal order/directive, to the diwan of Gujrat on 16 June 1672. This farman outlines a portion of the Mughal penal code, and the tenth law of the code reads:

¹⁴ William Sleeman, “To the Editor of the Calcutta Literary Gazette,” *Calcutta Literary Gazette* (3 October 1830), in *Stranglers and Bandits*, ed. by Kim Wagner, 176.

¹⁵ Paul Dundas, “Some Jain References to the Thags and the Samsaramocaka,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 115, no. 2 (1995): 282.

¹⁶ H.M. Elliot, *The History of India: as Told by its Own Historians: the Muhammadan Period: The Posthumous Papers of H.M. Elliot* (Calcutta: Susil Gupta (India) Ltd., 1953), 54.

10. A strangler whose act of strangulation has been legally proved should be chastised and confined till he repents. But if he is habituated to the work and the fact is proved, ... then execute him.¹⁷

This law indicates the existence of habitual stranglers at least one hundred years before the beginning of the Raj. It is impossible to know for sure whether the habitual stranglers referred to in the 17th century were also the familial, organized, thieving groups of thugs referenced in the 12th and 14th century texts. Nonetheless, these sources prove that groups of criminals which identified with four of the five thuggee characteristics - strangulation, organization, secrecy, and antiquity - existed in India long before the British began imposing institutional reforms. Therefore, the post-revisionist argument that thuggee was a product of British interference in Indian social structures becomes untenable.

However, there remains the missing characteristic of religiosity. As mentioned, there is no reference to thuggee as religious murder until Sleeman's 1830 article.¹⁸ Yet it was this idea of religious murder which became the essence of thuggee's infamy worldwide, and popular works from the Philip Taylor's contemporaneous *Confessions of a Thug*¹⁹ to the cinematic block-buster *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*²⁰ have represented thuggee as first and foremost an evil cult,²¹ and revisionists and post-revisionists alike have pointed to how the British administration used the image of thuggee, as tied to the Hindu religion, to prove the backwardness of India and justify colonization.²² There was no pre-British reference to a thuggee religion and British

¹⁷ Jadunath Sarkar, *Mughal Administration*, (Calcutta: M.C. Sarkar, 1935), 127-8.

¹⁸ William Sleeman, "To the Editor," in *Stranglers and Bandits*, ed. by Wagner, 176.

¹⁹ Philip Taylor, *Confessions of a Thug* (London: Richard Bentley, 1839).

²⁰ *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, directed by Steven Spielberg (Paramount Pictures, 1989).

²¹ Alexander Lyon Macfie, "Thuggee: An Orientalist Construction?" *Rethinking History: The Journal of Theory and Practice* 12, no. 3 (2008): 386-7.

²² See Avinash Singh, "State and Criminality: the Colonial Campaign Against Thuggee and the Suppression of Sikh Militancy in Postcolonial India," *Sikh Formations* 8, no. 1 (2012): 37-58, and Kim Wagner, *Thuggee: Banditry and the British in Early Nineteenth-Century India* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007).

primary sources themselves suggested that thuggee was not explicitly religious as much as it had a specific set of superstitions which co-existed with the religions of individual thugs. Much of what we know about thuggee comes from interviews of thugs-turned-informers conducted by William Sleeman. In Sleeman's interviews, the informers testified that they believe in a deity named Bhowanee, also known as Bhavani, who mandates murder through omens.²³ They admitted to believing that adherence to these omens was what allowed thugs to avoid capture, as well as that because they killed on the sanction of their deity, their murders were not morally wrong.

Q.- Do you ever recollect any misfortune arising from going on when a hare crossed the road before you?

Nasir, of Singnapore.- Yes; when General Doveton commanded the troops at Jhalna we were advancing towards his Camp; a hare crossed the road; we disregarded the omen, though the hare actually screamed in crossing, and went on. The very next day I, with seventeen of our gang, were seized....

Q.- And you think these signs are all mandates from the deity, and if properly attended to, no harm can befall you?

Nasir. - Certainly; no one doubts it.²⁴

...

Q.- Then do you never feel any dread of punishment hereafter?

Sahib [a Muslim thug].- Never; we never murder unless the omens are favorable; and we consider favorable omens as the mandates of the deity...and what she orders in this world, we believe, that God will not punish in the next.²⁵

This belief in the patronage of Bhavani via adherence to omens is a very different thing from the systematized religion Sleeman describes in 1830, in which “[Bhavani’s] temple at Bindachul...is constantly filled with murderers from every quarter of India,” and thugs make “pilgrimages to her temple...generally in the latter end of the rainy season.”²⁶ This description finds no support in Sleeman's interviews, and is explicitly repudiated by one informant. This informant claimed that he to never made offerings to Bhavani, nor to ever having sought

²³ William Sleeman, *Ramaseeana, or A Vocabulary of the Peculiar Language Used by the Thugs* (Calcutta: Military Orphan Press, 1836), 141-2.

²⁴ William Sleeman, *Ramaseeana*, 141.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 146.

²⁶ William Sleeman, “To the Editor,” in *Stranglers and Bandits*, ed. Kim Wagner, 176.

advice from temple priests. Yet he fervently believed that by obeying omens sent by Bhavani, he would be forgiven for his murders in the next life.²⁷ Furthermore, Richard Sherwood wrote in his 1816 report that the thugs “pay the most servile regard to omens...Cali or Marriatta is regarded as their tutelary deity...and the goddess is entreated to reveal to them, whether she approves of the expedition they are meditating.”²⁸ He makes no reference to any of the temples, cult worshiping, or human sacrifices which became pivotal characteristics of thuggee in British orthodox histories. We can therefore conclude that, while thugs did hold on to certain superstitions regarding their crimes, thuggee was not an essentially religious practice before or after British arrival in India.

In the pursuit of determining whether thuggee was a legitimate phenomenon or an orientalist construction, this paper has found that orthodox and revisionist historians have failed to approach the actual nature of thuggee because of their respective historiographical environments. The former were restricted by insufficient access to native sources and held back by ideological presumptions of superiority, while the latter were burdened by the need to break free from orientalism and promote Indian nationalism. With modern access to native sources, post-revisionist historians gained the opportunity to delve deeper into the true nature of thuggee. In response to the post-revisionist debate over whether thuggee was an orientalist construction or a result of British institutional reform, this paper has utilized references to thuggee within the 12th century Upadesamala, the 14th century history of Ziauddin Barani, and the 17th century farman of Araunzeb to prove that thuggee did exist in India before British arrival. Yet this paper found that the existence of thuggee before British arrival is not equivalent to British conceptions of a characteristically religious cult. While the British built up thuggee to be an essentially religious crime, the lack of pre-British references to religiosity, and the data from Sleeman’s own interviews, indicates that thuggee was not centered around religious belief or worship, but rather merely encompassed a specific set of superstitions. While the 12th century revisionist desire to undo injustices of oriental colonialism is commendable, this paper illustrates how their excessive revisionism led them to deny the reality of a legitimately provable historical

²⁷ William Sleeman, *Ramaseeana*, 150.

²⁸ Richard Sherwood, “Of the Murderers called Phansigars,” in *Ramaseeana*, by William Sleeman, 341.

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phenomenon. There can be no more doubt that, despite the exaggerated religious nature of thuggee, the crime of thuggee *did* exist, and thugs did operate *before* the arrival of the British.

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