

## Thuggee, Banditry and the British in Early Nineteenth-Century India

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Within long dominant historiographic traditions, the twilight years of the Mughal empire, when the British East India Company was buying up revenue rights from one penurious satrap after another, the times met the Hobbesian definition of “war of all against all”. With life being “nasty, brutish and short”, the advent of company *raj* was a little less than providential. In accord with the Hobbesian principle, “propriety” or the right to property in this new order, as in all “commonwealths”, vested with the sovereign power, though this aspect has not really been adequately explored.

As Kim Wagner puts it in the preface to his book, first published in 2007 and now available in an Indian edition: “India in the nineteenth century was no place for a weakling... Hot dusty winds rattled the palm leaves, mosquitoes buzzed, malaria, cholera, dysentery and smallpox struck down nearly half the debilitated white residents before their time”. To this, may be added the constant threat of famine, admittedly not a scourge that Wagner pays serious heed to, since perhaps the White residents of India were never severely exposed to it. As a Commission reporting in 1901 noted, there had been no fewer than twelve famines between 1765 and 1858, not to mention four visitations of what were classified as “severe scarcities”.

An excavation of history from available records and artefacts would necessarily be refracted through multiple prisms, among which, contemporary concerns are perhaps key. The records themselves reflect the temper of the times in which they were created and the social and political processes they served. And then there is another manner of refractory prism far more befuddling: how did the subjects of the documents perceive their relationship with the recording process? In a context of transition, when legal regimes were themselves in flux and indeed ill understood, could a subject testifying before an officer

of the law be seen as rendering evidence in a manner that is intelligible by contemporary standards? The task of unfurling that mystery is rendered especially complex by the fact that the subjects had no voice of their own, no methods of placing an imprint in the rapid flux of time. They were often the orphans of history.

The study of *thuggee*, understood as a form of highway robbery accompanied by a macabre ritual of murder, has followed two main templates. In colonial construction, it was about the calming hand of the British East India Company restoring order in a society being led inexorably towards chaos by the ugly recrudescence of practices such as *thuggee* and *sati*. When nationalist forces, as they were called later, recovered their voice after the disorientation of the colonial conquest, a different construction emerged. As Hiralal Gupta puts it in a 1959 work, “*thuggee* actually emerged as the result of the chaos and instability caused by the expansion of the Company’s rule”. In a later work, Stewart Gordon puts it altogether more formally: “We cannot and will not know the nature of the ‘thugs’ or any other marauding group of the eighteenth century until we return them to a historical and geographic setting, and view them in the context of the ongoing structure and process of power”.

Wagner’s work on *thuggee* begins with the premise that all records inherited from the past are unreliable as testaments of what the phenomenon was really about. Eric Hobsbawm, a pioneer of modern historical methods, brings into focus “an alternative history of banditry, which emphasised the differences between official and local perceptions regarding the legitimacy and status of outlaws”.

Much of the understanding of *thuggee* emanated from *Ramaseeana*, a work by the colonial administrator, W.H. Sleeman, published in 1836, when in official perception the menace was believed mostly extirpated. This is where

*thuggee* acquired a firm anchorage in traditional religious beliefs and practices, as an inheritance of the benighted past that was the British mission to liberate India from. Wagner suggests that this may have been a self-serving construction to invest Sleeman's efforts with a greater than deserved gravity.

In tracing historical roots, Wagner finds references to *thuggee* in the late mediaeval period, including in the work of poet-saint Surdas who lived and wrote in the sixteenth century. His conclusion is that the word "*thug*" did in its "indigenous use ... fully correspond with the later British use of that term; that is, as meaning a robber, who deceived, murdered and plundered travellers on the road". Whatever the antiquity of the phenomenon, following the 1770 famine, there was a perceptible uptick in its prevalence, though concurrent descriptions are seen by Wagner to be using the term "dacoity".

This was a time of transition when East India Company possessions in India were being consolidated under a new class of intermediaries: *zamindars* vested with the right to gather revenue from the tiller. Areas that suffered from an upsurge in violent crime though, abutted on lands under the sovereign control of other powers, such as the Marathas and the Nawab Vazir of Awadh. The company's initial response was to enforce a legal writ through the new class of intermediaries, often seeking to hold them liable for failure to put down crime. These administrative moves culminated in the Regulation IX of 1808 and Regulation VI of 1810, both of which took aim at violent crime with its ritualised forms of murder. These changes in law created an administrative category that was seamlessly transformed into a social construct. *Thuggee* became from then on, a marker of primordial group identity.

Utilising newly vested powers, company officials pursued their campaign with vigour, but serious reservations soon began to emerge on the fairness of targeting particular individuals on grounds of identity. Many of the harsh enforcement measures chosen by the company were, moreover, spurned by the *zamindars* and landlords who found little incentive in following a course of action that undermined their own social standing and authority. In these times, the company's administrative philosophy was premised upon winning the consent of the colonised people by incorporating supposed elements of local traditions. The Nizamat Adalat, which was effectively a court of appeals set up in Calcutta to review decisions of district judiciaries, did not look kindly upon the exertions of the company officials of the time.

This led to the replacement of the top company official in the area of concern. N.J. Halhed was appointed to a magistrate's position, replacing the official who had caused serious outrage with his identity-based attacks

on crime. Wagner does not elaborate on Halhed's antecedents and this is a disappointment for a surname that is justly famous from the early years of the company *raj* in India. Nathaniel Brassey Halhed was an intimate of Warren Hastings, with considerable responsibility for establishing the early template of British rule beginning with an understanding that respect for native traditions was essential to obtaining the consent of the governed. This philosophy inspired the construction of a vision of Indian society that froze in place certain principles: that European Christian and Hindu civilisations shared a common origin and that caste was the basic building block of the Indian social matrix.

Whatever his relationship with Warren Hastings' confidant, N.J. Halhed was assigned to his post in the *thuggee* heartland with explicit instructions that he was not to proceed against any person on "any general suspicion or imputation of bad character". The kinder, gentler overtures to the local intermediaries though, did not fetch any better rewards than his predecessor's rough and ready approach. Halhed recorded, indeed, that more than the rewards that the *zamindars* obtained for their service to the company, "their chief revenue is realised from a participation in the spoils of a set of robbers in their pay and protected by them".

His parleys with the *zamindars* proving unfruitful, Halhed embarked on a more heavy-handed approach to disarm the entire area where the *thugs* were believed to have their operational bases. It was, needless to say, a course of action guaranteed to raise hackles among the company's intermediaries and engender stiff resistance among the populace. In this environment of mutual hostility and suspicion, a detachment of the company's army, proceeding from Agra to Etawah on an inspection visit, was set upon by armed gangs in the vicinity of the town of Sindouse, already famous then as the epicentre of the *thugs*. This has been in all subsequent constructions, a key episode in the campaign against *thuggee*. For all the tens of thousands of natives killed, Lieutenant Maunsell, who led that small army expedition, remains the only White man to have fallen to the *thugs*.

Little though was to change and "no new measures were introduced to secure the conviction of suspected thugs". A hegemonic discourse on *thuggee* also seemed far from the administrative priorities of the company, as the Maratha wars intervened. Though statistics cannot be relied upon in the absence of an agreed definition of the phenomenon, violent crime as registered by the company administrators, also seemed to be on the decline through the 1810s. With the intrusion of the evangelical element in the 1820s and the extension of the company's territorial authority, a new construction began to dominate the official discourse. The dissolute and barbaric religious

influence over *thuggee* was emphasised, uniting under a common rubric, differently motivated crimes widely dispersed in space. And a common approach, unmindful of the subtleties of fair legal procedure, was sanctioned, which emphasised the supposed deterrent effect of capital punishment. At the head of the campaign was W.H. Sleeman, a captain in the company army, who found in it a vehicle to further his career ambitions. His subsequent turn to literary expression in *Ramaseena*, then came to be accepted as the authoritative text on *thuggee*.

Wagner successfully establishes that far from being the kind of mystical cult it was made out to be, *thuggee* was part of the process of state formation in colonial India. The various avatars in which it was painted, were integrally connected to different stages in the articulation of the colonial state apparatus and its effort to consolidate a territorial spread through cooptation of credible intermediaries in adequate numbers.

Finally, the effort to provide an alternative narrative by tapping into the voices of the real people engaged in *thuggee* has to depend on their narratives as embedded in colonial records. At the end of the book, the methodology remains incompletely justified, but with the plurality of sources that he taps, Wagner succeeds in a reconstruction that is more subtle and persuasive than anything prior to it. Far from being a cult that was self-nurturing in material and ideological terms, the *thugs* were perhaps best viewed as social bandits in Hobsbawm's sense. They would not have been half as persistent a phenomenon without some manner of nourishment within the larger social matrix. And their extirpation, if it really was that, was equally about a decline in an absolute sense, as about a change in nomenclature. *Thuggee* was decreed to have ended, because official records stopped classifying a certain category of incidents in that fashion.