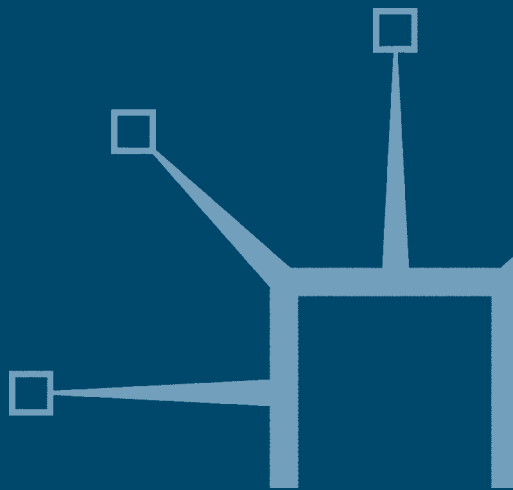


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Thuggee

Banditry and the British in Early
Nineteenth-Century India

Kim A. Wagner



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This book is dedicated to the present inhabitants of Sindouse (Sandaus, Uttar Pradesh), who made me happy by their hospitality, by serving me goor and calling me 'Kim Singh'.

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Preface

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. Many of the military who survived sickness were too often killed by sabre gashes, or the surgeon's amputation. But the death of John Maunsell, son of a small landowner in Ballywilliam, County Limerick, was altogether different – a violation of secret custom, or at heart, a savage jest.

Maunsell, a lieutenant in the 23rd Native Infantry of the Bengal Army, set out on horseback in October 1812 from Agra, in what were then called the North-western Provinces, on a visit of inspection to Etawah, seventy-five miles south-east, accompanied by two sepoy orderlies and a horse carrying his belongings and equipment. All three were armed, Maunsell with sword and holster pistols, the sepoy with the Brown Bess musket and bayonet.

On the second day of his journey Maunsell had camped near the village of Sindouse in one of the wayside groves known as *choultries* in common use then by travellers, with a well, a few lime trees, a little grass and a shrine. It is easy to visualize the scene after the hot and dusty ride – the horses tethered, the tents pitched in the shade out of the late afternoon's blaze, the green paroquets chattering and the small monkeys shrieking in the branches. Maunsell, according to custom, would have pulled off his hot red broadcloth uniform with relief and splashed in buckets of cool well water in the enclosure behind his tent. In imagined security, he probably stretched out on his camp bed in the hot night and slept soundly after his long day in the sun.

Three days later when neither he nor his orderlies had reached Etawah, a troop of cavalry was ordered out to search the road. In a wayside grove they found among the ashes of a recent fire, charred regimental buttons and badges that were identified as those of Maunsell and the sepoy. They were assumed to have been murdered, but the bodies were not found. This added to the mystery of what was already an unusual affair; fear of reprisals had for some time discouraged attacks upon Army officers.

Had exceptional qualities or influential friends brought Maunsell's name before the eyes of the great in India, the outcome would have been different, because the evidence would have been sifted more thoroughly, the suspects questioned severely and the truth might have come to light. Instead, a punitive force attacked and destroyed the villages near by, seizing at random any inhabitants thought likely to have taken part in the murder and handing them over to the Indian local authorities for trial. And in the East India Register for 1812 Maunsell was reported to have died in action against banditti on 22 October.

Some forty thousand people of whom Maunsell was the only white person, died mysteriously while travelling through India that year – as indeed they had done as long as records were kept. They set out, on foot or horseback, on journeys of up to several hundred miles between cities, and were never seen again. Misadventure was the officially recorded cause of their deaths, though sinister rumours did reach the Government and would have been investigated had the East India Company been interested in anything but trade and money.¹

This is how the author and journalist George Bruce in 1968 evoked the mystery of thuggee, as it was thugs who were supposed to have strangled Maunsell and his followers and buried their bodies without trace.² Maunsell's murder constitutes the key event around which the narrative of this book evolves. It has been my ambition to write a *microstoria* of the circumstances surrounding the murder of Lieut. Maunsell and especially of the locality where it occurred and where thuggee flourished. The area around Sindouse in Northern India was infamous as the hotbed of thuggee and a huge amount of extant material relating to various socio-political aspects of thuggee in that particular place has survived. By focusing on a single event and a specific area, it is my hope to elicit a better understanding on a whole range of issues concerning thuggee more generally. The event of Lieut. Maunsell's death thus serves as a point of entry that allows me to engage with the overall subject in a more concrete manner.

There is no agreement among historians as to the actual nature of the phenomenon of thuggee. Within the last five years no less than three monographs, and as many articles, have been published on the subject – each telling a different story.³ Yet the fact remains that many of the primary sources which survive in archives in England and India have never been fully utilised. By engaging with the sources, I intend to examine the social preconditions of banditry as well as the British response, and thereby reassess one of the most enduring myths of colonial India.

Acknowledgements

This book is based upon my PhD dissertation, *Thuggee and the Construction of Crime in early 19th century India*, University of Cambridge, 2003, and in that respect a warm thanks must be extended to my supervisor Prof. C. A. Bayly, whom I cannot praise too highly. Though not appreciated at the time, his incessant calls for 'less detail' and more 'wider significance' greatly improved my writing and helped give my text some semblance of coherence. I must also acknowledge my debt to Benedicte Hjejle, whose spadework in the archives was invaluable when I began my own research. I have also benefited tremendously from discussing my work with a number of people (in no particular order): Michael Dodson, Deep Kanta 'Toto' Lahiri Choudhury, Ben Hopkins, Norbert Peabody, Tim Harper, Paul Dundas, Francesca Orsini, John Smith, Eivind Kahrs, Dirk H. A. Kolff, Tom Lloyd, Sanchari Dutta, Clare Anderson, Crispin Bates, Markus Daechsel and Seema Alavi (even if she did refer to me as 'gorawallah thag' or 'white thug'). No-one has challenged my ideas more than my dear friend, Ricardo Roque, while the comments and criticism of the Splinter Reading Group at King's College (Robin Osborne in particular), and of my old Danish study-buddies Torben Jørgensen, Matthias Bjørnlund, Henrik Lundtofte & Jørn Iversen ('nunc est bibendum') have been much appreciated. This book would not have been published without the help and support of Richard Drayton, who saved my manuscript from falling victim to the Cambridge–Chicago dispute. Thanks also to Michael Strang and the staff at Palgrave. In India, my first round of research was made cheerful by the company of John Pincince, while Jyotirmoy Chaudhuri graciously agreed to accompany me on my first visit to Sindouse and put me up during a second trip. Last but not least, special gratitude to my parents, who introduced me to India and its history many years ago, and to my beloved Sara and Gustav for bearing with me while I was in the grip of the thugs.

Warm thanks is also extended to the staff at the Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections (formerly Oriental and India Office Collections) at the British Library, the National Archives of India, as well as Cambridge University Library. Generous funding and support from the Danish Research Agency, Churchill College Cambridge, King's College Cambridge and the Smuts Memorial Fund has allowed me to focus on my research under the best possible conditions.

Abbreviations

Act	Acting
Agt	Agent (to the Governor General)
APAC	Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections (formerly Oriental and India Office Collections), British Library
Asst	Assistant
BC	Board's Collections
BCJP	Bengal Criminal Judicial Proceedings
BD	Bengal Despatches
BL	British Library
BoC	Board of Commissioners
BoD	Board of Directors
BoR	Board of Revenue
CC	Court of Circuit
C&C	Ceded & Conquered Provinces
CoD	Court of Directors
Collr	Collector
Commg	Commanding
Cons	Consultations
<i>DGUP</i>	<i>District Gazetteers of the United Provinces</i>
Div	Division
FA	Faujdari Adalat
Govt	Government
GS	General Superintendent
HD	Home Department
<i>IESHR</i>	<i>Indian Economic and Social History Review</i>
Irreg	Irregular
JD	Judicial Department
Jnt	Joint
LP	Lower Provinces
<i>MAS</i>	<i>Modern Asian Studies</i>
NA	Nizamat Adalat
NAI	National Archives of India
PD	Political Department
Pol	Political
Princl	Principal

Procs	Proceedings
Resdnt	Resident
SFA	Suder Faujdari Adalat
SP	Superintendent of Police
T&D	Thagi & Dakaiti Department
WP	Western Provinces

Abbreviated Sources

The following is a list of key sources, referred to in abbreviated form.

Ameer Alee:	Deposition of Ameer Alee, 14 April 1832, BC, F/4/1406, APAC.
Anonymous Article	Sleeman's anonymous article in <i>Calcutta Literary Gazette</i> , 3 (October 1830).
Doorgha	Deposition of Doorgha, 26 May 1833, T&D, D.2-(1), NAI.
Halhed Report	Halhed to Perry, 10 Dec. 1812, in Perry to Dowdeswell, 15 Jan. 1813, BCJC, P/131/12, 30 Jan. 1813 (no. 62), APAC.
Hussain Trial	Testimony of Ghulam Hussain in trial of four thugs, 9–17 Nov. 1810, in Brooke to Dowdeswell, 21 Dec. 1810, BCJC, P/130/27, 18 Jan. 1811 (no. 46), APAC.
Maunsell Proceedings	Deposition of X, in Procs regarding murder of Lieut. Maunsell, para X, Dec. 1812, Perry Papers, 5376.
McLeod Report	McLeod to F. C. Smith, 10 Oct. 1834, BC, F/4/1567/64218, APAC.
Paton Collections	'Collections on Thuggee and Dacoitee, by Capt. James Paton', Add. Mss. 41300, BL.
Perry Papers	T. Perry Papers, Add. Mss. 5375–80, CUL.
Punna	Deposition of Punna, 29 May 1832, T&D, D.2-(1), NAI.
Ruheem Khan	Examination of Ruheem Khan, 30 Dec. 1810, Appendix B, in Shakespeare to Bayley, 30 April 1816, BCJC, P/132/44–45, 30 Aug. 1816 (no. 7), APAC.
Shakespeare Article	J. Shakespeare, 'Observations regarding Badheks and T'hegs', <i>Asiatic Researches</i> , 13 (1820): 282–92.

- Sheikh Inayat Sheikh Inayat, no date but 1832, T&D, D.2 (vol. 1), NAI.
- Sherwood R. C. Sherwood 'Of the Murderers Called P'hansigars', *Asiatic Researches*, 13 (1820): 250–81.
- Stockwell to Perry Stockwell to Perry, 19 Oct. 1818, in Perry to Shakespeare, 24 Dec. 1818, BCJC, P/134/6, 19 March 1819 (no. 10), APAC.
- Wright Report Wright to Miller 12 March 1810, BCJC, P/130/14, 30 March 1810 (no. 6), APAC).

Glossary of Terms Used in Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Century India

The glossary does not include words that are part of the thugs' slang (the *Ramasee*).

<i>akali</i>	Sikh zealot
<i>amil</i>	revenue official
<i>barkandaz</i>	a match-lock man
<i>bazaar</i>	market
<i>bhagi</i>	rebel or noble robber
<i>bhang</i>	a cannabis preparation, sometimes containing opium
<i>bhumeawat</i>	fight for land, honour and identity
<i>chauki</i>	police post
<i>dacoit</i>	gang robber
<i>dacoity</i>	the practice of dacoits
<i>darogha</i>	police officer
<i>fakir</i>	Muslim ascetic
<i>farman</i>	imperial decree
<i>fatwa</i>	opinion on Islamic law
<i>faujdari adalat</i>	criminal court
<i>ghat</i>	landing place
<i>goodna</i>	tattoo
<i>harkaras</i>	messenger or spy
<i>jama</i>	land revenue
<i>jemadar</i>	lieutenant or gang-leader
<i>kazak</i>	mounted robber or bandit
<i>kharif</i>	summer harvest
<i>mullah</i>	Muslim priest
<i>naukar</i>	service
<i>nautch</i>	dancing-girl
<i>nizamat adalat</i>	superior criminal court
<i>nullah</i>	ravine
<i>panda</i>	Hindu priest

<i>pandit</i>	Hindu priest
<i>pargana</i>	sub-district
<i>patwari</i>	village accountant
<i>phansigar</i>	strangler
<i>puja</i>	religious ceremony
<i>pundit</i>	a learned man
<i>rabi</i>	spring harvest
<i>raja</i>	ruler
<i>rumal</i>	kerchief
<i>ryot</i>	peasant
<i>sair</i>	commodity tax
<i>sati</i>	widow-burning
<i>serai</i>	shelter for travellers
<i>sepoy</i>	soldier
<i>sowar</i>	cavalry trooper
<i>subedar</i>	captain or gang-leader
<i>taluqdar</i>	person with the right of collection revenue
<i>tehsildar</i>	revenue collector
<i>thana</i>	police post
<i>thanadar</i>	superior police officer
<i>yogi</i>	Hindu ascetic
<i>zamindar</i>	petty ruler or landholder
<i>zillah</i>	district

Introduction

According to the conventional account of thuggee, which George Bruce exemplifies brilliantly, the thugs were a fraternity of ritual stranglers who preyed on travellers along the highways of nineteenth century India. Their unsuspecting victims were first deceived into joining the thugs and later at some secluded spot strangled, plundered and buried, supposedly assuming the status of human sacrifices to the goddess Kali. Thuggee was said to be an ancient practice sanctioned by Hinduism and the thugs supposedly observed a plethora of religious rules; they relied on omens, performed rituals and spoke a secret language. Concurrent with the expansion of the East India Company's possessions in India, the British administration became aware of the existence of thuggee but failed to respond due to a lack of reformist zeal. Yet from 1830 onwards, the British official W. H. Sleeman managed to unravel their secrets and by using pardoned thugs as so-called approvers, or informers, he put an end to their reign of terror. In 1836 Sleeman published his account of the operations in the important work entitled *Ramaseeana*, upon which all later accounts of thuggee in standard works and works of reference have been based.¹

While thuggee proved to be an important element in the founding of the early colonial state in India, it also became one of the most potent images of colonial lore and fiction, and one that has survived almost unaltered till this day. As 1839 saw the demise of thuggee in India, nominally at least, it also saw its birth as a literary subject with the publication of Philip Meadows Taylor's *Confessions of a Thug*, which to this date remains the quintessential novel on thuggee.² The thugs captured the Victorian imagination like few other things; Thomas De Quincy toasted 'Thugdom' and by the time Wilkie Collins included three thug-like Brahmin priests in the *Moonstone* (1868) the word itself had found its way into everyday use, albeit with somewhat different connotations

from that of its original meaning.³ The frequent references to thugs in travel literature of the time likewise bear testament to the popularity and fascination of the subject, often communicating a mixture of repulsion and attraction in the description of the stranglers.⁴ A number of well-known authors have been inspired by the subject, most notably Eugene Sue in *Le Juif errant* (1844–45), Edward Bulwer Lytton in *A Strange Story* (1862), John Retcliffe (pseud. Hermann Goedsche) in *Nena Sahib oder Die Empörung in Indien* (1859), Mark Twain in *Following the Equator* (1897) and John Masters in *The Deceivers* (1952).

As the very epitome of the stereotypical image of religious fanatics, the thugs populated the same exotic realm as the Assassins, African leopard-men, witch doctors and cannibals. Visual imagery has always been part of the representation of thuggee, as the numerous illustrations in newspapers and books of the nineteenth century reveal. The very graphic nature of the representation of the thugs made them an obvious subject for filmmakers and the classic black-and-white movie *Gunga Din* (1939) starring Cary Grant was only the first of many to deal with thuggee, followed by the camp horror of the British Hammer production *The Stranglers of Bombay* (1960). Later came Steven Spielberg's successful *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) and *The Deceivers* in 1988, and thus the colonial stereotype has proven to be a persistently popular subject far into the postcolonial era.

Not surprisingly, the suppression of thuggee assumes a place of honour within the colonial history of the Raj. It was always a key assumption of historians within what may be described as the colonial tradition that in spite of all the deficiencies of the East India Company's administration, its rule in India was after all redeemed by the suppression of barbaric 'Hindu' customs and thuggee in particular. In an early work on the thugs, James Hutton encapsulated this sentiment:

Let British supremacy in India cease when it will, the suppression of Thuggee will ever remain a glorious monument to the zeal, energy, and judgment of the civil and military servants of the East India Company. It is easy to direct epigram and innuendo against the idea of a body of merchants ruling a vast empire with enlightened and disinterested beneficence. But the impartial student of Anglo-Indian history can readily adduce many such examples as the preceding – for instance, the suppression of Suttee, human sacrifices, and infanticide; the repression of torture, gang robberies, and voluntary mutilation – in order to prove that these merchants were truly princes, these traffickers the honourable of the earth.⁵

This was of course an unequivocal appraisal of the achievements of benevolent British rule during the so-called 'Age of Reform' and reflects the extent to which various Indian practices, real and imagined, were demonised. In what was to become a recurring aspect of literature on thuggee, Hutton's account was based exclusively upon Sleeman's work, from which he quoted extensively, and far into the twentieth century most authors come across as ventriloquists of Sleeman. J. W. Kaye, the historian of the Indian empire *par excellence*, regarded the discovery and extirpation of thuggee as a sign of the increasing knowledge of India and its people on the part of the British.⁶ This view was based on the perception that British colonial rule had progressed from a distanced and alienated armchair administration with no feeling for the land, to a more local system manned by officials on the ground with an intimate knowledge of, and indeed affection for, India and its peoples.

One of the most important aspects of the knowledge the British perceived themselves to possess was that the defining trait of Indian society was the caste-system. According to the Orientalist notion, the caste-system was strictly hierarchical, rigid and non-negotiable. A street-sweeper inevitably belonged to the street-sweeper caste and hence it followed that Indian criminals, and thugs in particular, constituted caste-like hereditary classes. In R. Russell's renowned ethnographical survey *Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India* of 1916, the thugs were accordingly listed as a distinct group between Telis, or the caste of oil-pressers, and Turis, a class of cultivators.⁷ Although Russell stated that the thugs did not constitute a caste *per se*, the article was structured just as if they were one, listing myths of origin, religious beliefs and rites of initiation. Thuggee was thus re-inscribed within the context of Orientalist knowledge of India.⁸

By the 1930s, as the colonial era was gradually coming to an end, Sleeman's grandson, James Sleeman, stressed once again the redeeming aspect of his forefather's actions: 'And it is but right when British rule in India is so unfairly challenged and so unworthily attacked, that the extinction of this ancient religion of murder should be represented as yet another jewel in the crown of Empire.'⁹ According to James Sleeman, the thugs were not driven to crime by pragmatic reasons but out of 'sheer lust of killing' and their plunder of the victims was of secondary importance: 'Here was no body of amateur assassins, driven to crime by force of circumstance, but men of seeming respectability and high intelligence, often occupying positions of importance and respectability in their normal lives, secretly trained from boyhood to the highest

degree of skill in strangulation.¹⁰ Popular works like Francis Toker's *The Yellow Scarf* (1963) and Bruce's previously mentioned *The Stranglers* (1968) successfully conveyed the colonial stereotype of thuggee into the postcolonial era.¹¹ Toker and Bruce made Sleeman the hero of their historical fiction and thereby followed in the steps of James Sleeman in what approximates a colonial hagiography. The same goes for Jan Morris's 1973 best-selling popular history of the British Empire, *Heaven's Command*: Sleeman is described as 'a figure of Cromwellian integrity' with 'steady blue eyes' and, according to Morris: 'A blind eye was turned, and the rumours and legends of Thuggee inspired in the sahibs and their wives little more than a chill frisson, until in the 1830s the evangelical impulse reached the Indian Empire too, and moved the British not merely to conquer, exploit or consort with their subjects there, but actually to reform them.'¹² Thus the notion of the extinction of thuggee as an act of civilizing benevolence is by no means a thing of the past in what has become a deeply moralistic story of good versus evil.¹³

Within the colonial tradition a few more serious accounts of thuggee are also found, written by scholars who have managed to steer clear of the most sensationalist misconceptions. One work, which stands out, is Benedicte Hjeje's unpublished thesis entitled *The Social Legislation of the East India Company*, and though she does not critically examine the colonial representation of thuggee, she has carried out extensive research and thus gives a much more nuanced account of the development of the operations against thuggee.¹⁴ In 2002 Martine van Woerkens published the first scholarly monograph on thuggee and although she operates with a criticism inspired by literary theory, her book in many respects constitutes a resurrection of the colonial representation of thuggee. Thus Van Woerkens deconstructs Sleeman's account of the thugs even as she uses it to recast them as 'Tantric heroes' and the successors to an Islamic mystic tradition.¹⁵ The most recent publication on the subject is a piece of popular history by Mike Dash, namely *Thug – The True Story of India's Murderous Religion*. While it is well researched and generally resists the most obvious Orientalist stereotypes, the author's unabashed praise of Sleeman and the late thuggee campaign means that ultimately the book follows in the time-honoured tradition of Sleeman hagiographies.

* * *

The one-sided depiction of the thugs and praise of the British operations against them, however, do not stand unchallenged. The first dent in the colonial representation of thuggee was made in 1959 by the Indian

historian Hiralal Gupta, who argued that thuggee actually emerged as the result of the chaos and instability caused by the expansion of the Company's rule.¹⁶ In an incisive article on thuggee Stewart N. Gordon explained the phenomenon in terms of the power structure of indigenous states as expressed in his final remarks: '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 on-going structure and process of power.'¹⁷ Sandria Freitag later developed this argument with great sophistication, while C. A. Bayly introduced the concept of 'information panic' to explain the initial reaction of the British officials who first encountered thuggee in 1809.¹⁸ The most comprehensive work on thuggee to date is probably that of Radhika Singha who has examined the colonial perception of thuggee within the context of legal innovations of the colonial state.¹⁹ Today it should be obvious that the colonial representation of thuggee is indeed full of inconsistencies and exaggerations and that the thuggee campaign of the 1830s, rather than just being an attempt to put a stop to violent crime, was also prompted by a whole range of other factors.

The more critical approach to the subject of thuggee found in these recent works makes concessions to the problems associated with the use of colonial representations and is thus expressive of the lasting influence of the work of scholars such as Edward Said.²⁰ In its most radical form the literary critical approach has also given rise to several recent studies, occupied only with the deconstruction of the colonial representation of thuggee, as opposed to the historicity of the subject. Denying the sources any historical value, other than being evidence of inherent Orientalist bias, scholars such as Parama Roy, Amal Chatterjee and Máire ní Fhlathúin have argued that thuggee as described in Western accounts was little more than a figment of the colonial imagination.²¹ Based on Michel Foucault's concepts of discourse, power and knowledge, the subject of thuggee is reduced to the study of Western constructions of the 'other', and thus Chatterjee states that he treats the colonial texts: '... primarily as representations. That is to say they are neither evaluated on their supposed accuracy, nor assessed on the extent of knowledge of India which they display.'²² Most contemporary studies of marginalised groups, including the thugs, have in fact focused exclusively on the colonial discourse, which is furthermore assumed to be internally consistent and hegemonic: all colonial representations are expressive of the same Orientalist bias.²³ A similar attitude to the colonial representation of thuggee is also found in more popular accounts – take for instance the

historian Simon Schama who in his *A History of Britain* coins the term 'thugophobia' to describe the British response to thuggee.²⁴

Clearly the colonial representation of thuggee cannot be taken at face value. Yet events and their representation are not easy to prise apart and I maintain that there is some correspondence between representations of India and the social reality of India.²⁵ It is precisely the historian's task to assess how the sources relate to the past they represent. The discursive construction of thuggee did not occur in a vacuum of self-referential texts, but in a specific historical context and as the result of specific events and ideas. In the words of the anthropologist Nicholas Thomas: 'Noticing that histories are written, and repudiating the positivist's preoccupation with an exhaustive (and therefore inaccessible) image of the past, should not, however, lead us to scrutinize nothing other than historical representations, or insist that there is no reality external to such representations.'²⁶ The often-used terms of representation and misrepresentation within literary criticism does imply a hierarchy of probabilities and plausibilities. Which is why the literary approach must go hand in hand with a more empirical analysis and contextual source-criticism – they are in fact inseparable.

I aim to re-inscribe thuggee in its Indian historical context and not merely consider it as a colonial phantasmagoria. By reading the sources against the grain I believe there is sufficient evidence to reconstruct the beliefs of the thugs while at the same time re-examining the epistemology of colonial knowledge of thuggee. The character of the available material is such that the history of the phenomenon of thuggee need no longer be limited to the study of its representation.²⁷

Thuggee reassessed

Sleeman did not 'discover' thuggee in 1829. The British authorities first became aware of the existence of what they called thuggee in Southern India in 1807 and in Northern India in 1809 and they took the phenomenon very seriously, though it remained a political problem and not the moral issue it later became. All the police measures and legal innovations implemented during the thuggee campaign of the 1830s can – in one form or another – be traced back to the 1810s. The reason why Sleeman has been remembered in history as the great scourge of thuggee, and the strength of the case of those who think thuggee no more than a colonial construction, derives from his being an eminent self-publicist. A clear example of this is the anonymous article he had published in 1830, in which he described the horrors of thuggee with all

the sensationalist terminology and reformist zeal of the period. His superiors read the article and agreed that the author was so well informed that he would be invaluable in the fight against thuggee – and shortly afterwards Sleeman was appointed to the position he wanted in the first place. In other words, Sleeman created the sense of an urgent emergency for which he was the only remedy (according to himself). Later, having assumed the position as the sole authority on thuggee, he publicised his ‘discovery’ and the story of the fight against thuggee in *Ramaseeana*. Yet Sleeman owes much more to the early operations against thuggee during the years 1809–12 than to any initiative and ingenuity of his own.

When Sleeman is said to have discovered thuggee, and *Ramaseeana* and the so-called ‘thuggee archive’ are made to stand in for the total body of British knowledge of thuggee, it shows that the subject is conceptualised in terms of Sleeman’s work alone and the historical account of the colonial hagiographies is accepted.²⁸ Deconstructing Sleeman’s account of thuggee is vital, but in the words of Marc Bloch, it is ‘to avoid error, but not to acquire knowledge’.²⁹ Ascribing a greater significance to events that have hitherto been neglected, I hope to redirect the discussion of thuggee to the ‘pre-Sleeman’ period and to extend the range of sources to be investigated, both English and Indian. I propose to bring a new reading to the familiar sources on thuggee by employing material that has not before been brought to bear on the subject of thuggee by historians. I am thus proposing a substantial expansion of the so-called ‘thuggee-archive’ proper.

This book examines the response of the administration of the emerging colonial state to banditry and highway robbery in early nineteenth-century India, delineating the development of the official view(s) of indigenous crime. Moreover, I try to answer some of the key questions regarding the phenomenon of thuggee: what exactly was the meaning and implication of the term ‘thug’? Did thuggee constitute a clearly defined, distinct, criminal practice entailing a unique *modus operandi*? Did the people engaging in thuggee perceive it to be a criminal practice in the first place? To what extent would they even consider themselves to be thugs? As we shall see, the notion of identity is central to the understanding of phenomena like thuggee, and this is particularly so concerning the diverging perceptions of British officials and the indigenous population. On the subject of the changeable identities of peasant-soldiers in early modern Northern India, Kolff states:

The written sources of history, contemporary oral references to these men, or British census reports, could not do justice to this multiplicity.

They referred to them only by the identity that, in the relevant context, seemed to be the most conspicuous and, therefore, the 'real' one. Whether any modern historian will ever, on the basis of such sources, be capable of restoring to life the multifaceted and fluid character of *ancien régime* Indian social history, is doubtful.³⁰

This could very well have been said of the thugs – but I will still attempt to restore them to historical visibility by exploring what can be said of the life and careers of the people involved in thuggee, their religious, ethnic and social background, kinship ties, customs, and language, as well as the interaction and cooperation between different gangs – in other words, the patterns of organisation and infrastructure of thuggee. Did thuggee in fact constitute, or was it part of, an Indian underworld? The most ambitious part of this book seeks to access the mental world of the thugs, the significance of the myths and tales they told, their religious beliefs, sense of honour and, last but not least, their perception of the thugs' alleged association and networks.

In order to get a better understanding of the phenomenon of thuggee as it appeared at the beginning of the nineteenth century it is necessary to look at the specific context in which it emerged. There is a pressing need for both a more concrete approach, and at the same time, a more nuanced depiction of the historical events and connections. Accordingly, I have made the events surrounding the murder of Lieut. Maunsell, and the area of Sindouse where it occurred, the pivotal point of this book – as a way of entering the world of the thugs and obtaining a more comprehensive understanding of the topographical and socio-economic background of thuggee. Focusing on a single event may be seen as favouring the singular and writing off the ability to make more general assertions with a wider application, yet the relation between event and structure, or local and general, is not one of opposites but of interconnectedness.³¹

Since a large proportion of the thugs apprehended and convicted across Northern India either originated from or had some relation to Sindouse, the importance of that area is very tangible and this study will thus touch upon the key aspects of the phenomenon of thuggee.³² While the larger perspective may be more important in the wider context of Indian history, it is the individual stories and anecdotal tales that often provide the rare insights and answers to questions unavailable in large-scale studies. Such an approach, I believe, provides a more complex account of thuggee, which reveals that thuggee was not an essence, but that it assumed different forms in different contexts and accordingly, it cannot be studied *in toto*.

Sindouse is situated within Chambal Valley in Northern India – the proverbial home of dacoits in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.³³ Thus the area where thuggee was particularly prevalent has been associated with banditry for almost two centuries and has retained its reputation as bandit-badlands to the present day.³⁴ In the secondary historiographical literature, the thugs are seldom described in terms of banditry and yet thuggee is one of the best documented instances of banditry historically speaking. This makes the findings and theoretical considerations of scholars working on banditry worldwide and during various periods immediately pertinent to the study of thuggee and, it is to be hoped, the opposite is also the case.³⁵ Accordingly, this book addresses some of the key issues related to the issue of banditry more generally, as well as questioning some of the arguments advanced by scholars such as Hobsbawm and Blok.³⁶ In his incisive work on banditry, Blok has focused on the pursuit of honour as a driving force behind banditry and this aspect is also evident from the testimonies and depositions of the thugs.³⁷ Yet it remains to be examined to what extent becoming a thug constituted a disjuncture in an otherwise 'ordinary' life and whether it entailed seclusion from 'law-abiding' society as is often the case with banditry. Thuggee as a practice was not motivated by revenge nor is it clear that it was an expression of social protest.

The merit of Hobsbawm's work is primarily to have brought into focus an alternative history of banditry, which emphasised the differences between official and local perceptions regarding the legitimacy and status of outlaws. This crucial aspect of the history of criminalised groups and practices, and a prerequisite to the understanding of the source material, is even more pronounced in the colonial context when the cultural barrier is added to the social one. Throughout this book I shall repeatedly return to the notion of legitimacy, mainly in terms of the thugs' self-perception *vis-à-vis* the British criminalisation of thuggee but also concerning the views of the indigenous authorities and the local population, who were, in effect, the thugs' neighbours. Although I retain certain reservations regarding Hobsbawm's concept of the 'social bandit', I have focused on the social preconditions of thuggee in the present study.³⁸

A more general contribution I hope to make is in this case primarily methodological. The frame of any inquiry into a phenomenon such as thuggee is to a large extent defined by the judicial procedures and institutions that produced the sources in the first place. Is it at all possible to say anything that does not, in one way or the other, simply reiterate the judgment of the authorities who criminalised the practices in question to begin with? My answer is affirmative and in Florike Egmond's words

‘the present study may be regarded as an exploration of the possibilities, limits, and limitations of the criminal records’.³⁹

This book is divided into three parts. Part I: Chapter 1 is a thorough discussion of the methodological issues related to the primary material concerning thuggee and to the use of trial-records and evidence derived from informers. I am making the argument that it is possible to utilise the approver depositions and information collected from the thugs but that it has to be done with great circumspection and with the generic status of the material in mind. Chapter 2 concerns the existence of thuggee in pre-colonial India based on indigenous sources and questions whether thuggee can reasonably be described as a British ‘invention’. Chapter 3 starts out with a brief introduction to the legal system of early colonial India, presenting a basic context for what follows. Contrary to most accounts, the British first ‘discovered’ thuggee in 1809, in Northern India, and Chapters 3–5 trace the initial operations and measures against the thugs in the period 1809–12. Chapter 5 ends Part I with the ambush and murder of Lieut. Maunsell near Sindouse in the ravine badlands of Northern India. Here the chronological account is ‘frozen’ as I take a closer look at the area where the attack occurred and from which many of the thugs hailed.

In Part II: Chapters 6–9 I reinterpret the phenomenon of thuggee as it emerged as an institutionalised type of banditry. Chapter 6 describes the topography and history of the area in order to understand what gave rise to thuggee, and Chapter 7 gives a detailed account of the practice of thuggee, the constitution of the gangs, their *modus operandi* and so on. In Chapter 8, I discuss the existence of an itinerant underworld in connection with thuggee, while Chapter 9 is an attempt to describe and explain the mental outlook of the thugs: their sense of honour and religious beliefs. Within this chapter I show how and why thuggee emerged as it did in Sindouse and I address some of the wider issues concerning banditry pertinent to the subject. From here the chronological narrative is picked up again, from 1812 till the 1830s.

Part III: Chapter 10 takes a second look at the attack in 1812, this time with the knowledge of the preceding four chapters in mind. Underlying what was perceived as an act of rebellion was a whole range of local conflicts and strategies of which the British officials seem to have been ignorant. Chapter 11 describes the aftermath of the attack, and how the imposition of British notions of law and order had pervasive consequences for all involved. Chapter 12 describes the sporadic measures implemented by the British authorities to combat thuggee in various parts of the sub-continent throughout the 1810s and 1820s. Chapters 13 and 14 concern

the origin and development of the thuggee campaign of the 1830s, including the opportunism of officers like Sleeman, who effectively reinvented thuggee through lengthy interviews with thug-informers. Chapter 15 sums up the development of the British response to thuggee, from 1809 to 1836, and how the phenomenon which was initially perceived as no more than a type of banditry gradually evolved into the religious stranglers that we know today. In the Epilogue I return to the event of 1812 as described by George Bruce, and to the area of Sindouse which has for the past 200 years been intimately associated with violent crime in various forms.

* * *

In 2001, during time off from archival work at the National Archives in Delhi, I went to Sindouse on a whim, not knowing what to expect. As it turned out the village is located most beautifully among the ravines in a very remote part of Uttar Pradesh, still infamous as bandit country. At first I was a bit worried how the villagers might react when I told them their ancestors had been ritual stranglers. However, I need not have worried. When my interpreter explained the purpose of my visit the answer came promptly from one of the elders: 'Ah, yes, back then this area was full of thugs.' Thus I found that the thugs were remembered in local tradition and, somewhat surprisingly, so was the attack on Halhed in 1812. The stories told today of the thugs around Sindouse are not those found within the literature and as such suggest that thuggee does have a place in the collective memory of Indian villagers, which is not entirely dependent of the colonial representation. This convinced me of the relevance of making the area the subject of a case-study and I have since been back to Sindouse and those I consider my friends there. To visit the area and walk through the ravines that I knew only from archival records dating back to the early nineteenth century was a fascinating experience for me as a historian. The memory of my visits to Sindouse has spurred me on, and permeates the pages of this book.

Part I

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1

Engaging the Colonial 'Archives of Repression'

Perhaps the most important aspect of crime for the historian is the simple fact that it generates a wide diversity of documentation in virtually all record-keeping societies, a diversity that provides an unusual range of perspectives on the past.

Muir and Ruggiero¹

The first and most immediate obstacle that faces the historian of thuggee is the fact that the thugs did not leave us any written sources of their own. They did not have any religious texts, iconography or artefacts that related specifically to thuggee and which would allow us to examine their practices independently. With few exceptions, the material we have was produced by British officials with – at best – a limited knowledge of the language and culture, and they were by definition prejudiced and negatively inclined towards the very practice it was their task to eradicate.² However, the primary sources on thuggee offer a rare insight into parts of Indian society and history about which we otherwise know very little. For more than 30 years the British collected the depositions and testimonies of thousands of Indians, most of whom were illiterate, from all corners of the continent and all rungs of society.³ In the process the British also gathered a huge amount of information not directly pertaining to thuggee, thereby documenting a vast range of socio-economic and religious issues and aspects of Indian rural life.

The very thing that draws the criticism of some scholars, namely the British preoccupation with gathering information and documenting the 'Other', means that we have complete and very detailed sources with few temporal gaps. The interrogation and interviews with thugs, for

example, not only give us a version of the informers' own words, but also the questions posed by the British officials. Each step of the judicial procedure has been recorded and thus we have all the stages of individual cases amply covered. Accordingly, the detailed nature of the material provides us with a key to assessing the information more critically as it reveals what really interested the British. The time-span covered by the sources furthermore allows us to trace the development and process by which colonial knowledge of the phenomenon came into being.

Robert Darnton has suggested that 'opaque' documents, such as poems and jokes that no longer make sense to us, are the best means of gaining further insights into the mentality of the past.⁴ I am in turn suggesting that the police inquiries and trial records relating to thuggee in all their opacity offer a similar point of entry. The fact that we are dealing with British interrogators and Indian prisoners and informers makes the relative position of the characters very clear and makes it easier to 'identify and evaluate the bias and biases that create and permeate particular texts'.⁵ We know the precise circumstances in which the sources emerged and therefore have a good indication of just how skewed the points of view reflected in these sources are – accuser *vis-à-vis* accused; this provides us with a very distinct point of reference when dealing with the sources. The 'evidence' that has been manipulated is itself evidence of that manipulation, thereby providing the means for a more incisive interpretation.

Work on the records of the Inquisition in Europe has shown what can be done with this kind of material. Carlo Ginzburg uses such records to give a vivid picture of the religious life and beliefs of an otherwise insignificant miller in sixteenth-century northern Italy.⁶ From similar sources E. Le Roy Ladurie has brought to life the medieval village of Montaillou, including the habits and conflicts and even sexual relationships of its occupants.⁷ In the words of Carlo Ginzburg, 'the "archives of repression" certainly provide us with rich evidence about these people.'⁸ It is my contention that the '*thuggee*-archive' proper, when approached with circumspection, may provide us with precisely the kind of 'rich evidence' that makes the reconstruction of the beliefs of the thugs possible. The British may have misinterpreted the phenomenon they encountered, but they in turn left us with sufficient material to reassess thuggee – both as a colonial construction and as a social reality.

* * *

As the thugs murdered the people they robbed as a matter of course, we have very little solid circumstantial evidence and most of what the

British knew (or thought they knew) about thuggee was derived from the individual approvers from 1810 onwards.⁹ The main obstacle to interpretation presented by the primary material is the pivotal role of the approver as the main source of information available to the British. The information given by the approvers to the British authorities can be divided into three categories: (1) the initial confession of specific crimes prior to a pardon, but often given in the hope of such; (2) the approver testimony or deposition, following a pardon; and (3) the interview, independently of any legal proceedings.

An approver's basic motivation was to avoid punishment and he might therefore be induced to say almost anything to save his own life or that of his relatives and so on, which renders such testimony very difficult to use. One aspect of the confession is precisely that it has to be believable in order to be accepted, and if the interrogator already has a preconceived notion of the case in question, the confession in effect has to comply with this. Peter Burke's incisive description of the situation and process by which a confession could be coaxed in Early Modern Europe is equally applicable to nineteenth-century India:

The historian has access to the clerk's record ... of a dialogue in which the interrogator, who may have been new to the region, probably spoke a standard form of the vernacular while the accused replied in dialect. The possibilities for misunderstanding were considerable. The interrogator had been through the whole business many times before and knew, all too well, what he was trying to find. The accused did not know what was happening and may well have been searching frantically for cues and clues to what was wanted. The situation was like a parody of the interviews between modern anthropologists and their informants in the field – anthropologists are much concerned about the possibility that the answers they receive may be little more than what they have suggested, unconsciously, to the informant.¹⁰

The very context in which the deposition is given renders it neither voluntary nor spontaneous: the question is to what extent the content of the deposition itself has been coerced and manipulated.

The approver testimony is therefore not merely an account of past events, but a reproduction of the past with a specific purpose in mind – namely to describe facts of the crime and the identity of accomplices present.¹¹ A clear example is the almost total absence of references to the families of the thugs and the periods between the expeditions, which they spend at home. These were simply not relevant for the purpose of

condemning the persons accused of thuggee. The instrumental nature of the approver deposition is also evident when the narrative of the approver is interrupted every time an instance of murder is recounted and the individual stranglers are named, often including their caste and relations. It should, however, be pointed out that the amount of material collected in connection with the thug trials at times went far beyond what would have been necessary to convict individuals. The details of the information pertaining to aspects that had no direct relevance regarding the guilt or innocence of suspected thugs reveal that this was not merely a colonial project to facilitate the conviction of Indians.¹²

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The interviews with approvers conducted by Sleeman and his fellow officer James Paton are probably the best known 'thug-sources', since Sleeman published a number of them in *Ramaseeana*.¹³ These interviews were conducted in order to gather information on a whole range of issues, most of which had never been broached in the strictly legal context of the confession and approver testimony. In other words, it afforded the British a chance to clarify and elaborate their knowledge of thuggee outside the legal context and in a more informal manner.¹⁴ This is obvious from the nature of the questions asked, some of which were clearly intended for a Western audience, rather than for the information of the interviewer himself: some of the interviews were clearly conducted with the express purpose of publication.¹⁵

In connection with his work on banditry in seventeenth–eighteenth century Netherlands, Florike Egmond mentions the limitations of the available sources concerning the individuals involved: 'Very little information can be found on certain important aspects of their lives: I would have liked to know more about relations between men and women, fights and insults, honour, attitudes towards children, love and anger, friendship and humour, their ideas about themselves and about different groups, about religious beliefs and the stories they told each other.'¹⁶ In the context of thuggee the interviews touch upon each and every one of these subjects, and often at great length and in considerable detail – as opposed to the rather more functionalised depositions. This makes them a quite unique set of sources, irrespective of the reservations regarding the motives of the officers for conducting these interviews. While the questions posed by Sleeman and Paton shaped the conversations, the approvers constantly discussed among each other as well and the real value of these exchanges lies in the incidental references. Thus, for instance, the anecdotal story of how one approver got his name

happened to touch upon key aspects of the socio-economic background and context of thuggee prior to the British operations.¹⁷ In other words, the interviews may provide information that was not necessarily the intended object of the British, and Sleeman and Paton may be regarded as anthropologists only insofar as their material can be read against the grain.

This material is extremely useful as it presents us with a faithful record, not of thuggee *per se*, but of the process by which the colonial knowledge of the phenomenon came into being. By looking at the questions posed by Sleeman, we can see what subjects occupied him and how the approvers reacted to his questions. The fact that we have both the questions and answers enables us to observe the interaction between the interrogator and the informant: the 'colonial encounter' in action. The issues that predominantly occupied Sleeman and Paton during the conversations concerned the goddess-worship of the thugs, the observance of omens and rules associated with thuggee, and the variances in practice of the different gangs. These themes and subjects were introduced by the approvers themselves but were quickly picked up by the British and ascribed a disproportionate significance. I find it very likely that the extreme interest in the religious aspects exhibited by the British influenced the manner in which the approvers discussed their religious identity. The goddess-worship of the thugs was a quite common affair and served to legitimise their profession, but to Sleeman it proved that thuggee was a ritualistic and superstitious practice. Thus, it is curious to see how the strategies, of the captured thugs and of Sleeman respectively, coincided at certain points in the interviews, as they all strived to present thuggee as an extraordinary practice. Accordingly, the interplay between the thugs and their captors was not just one-sided, and to talk of Sleeman's representation of the subject only as a biased construction is clearly a simplification. The thugs 'were never passive dupes or simple victims of Europeans'.¹⁸

Contrary to Van Woerkens's claim, I would argue that Sleeman's religious thuggee cult emerged from the distortion of an existing phenomenon of highway robbers – not *vice versa*. I am in fact suggesting a development that parallels Carlo Ginzburg's celebrated case of the *benandanti* in early modern Italy.¹⁹ In the same way, the thugs, who had never mentioned religious motives during the early period, gave detailed descriptions of their religious beliefs and practices in the interviews with Sleeman and Paton, and thuggee gradually took on the appearance of a superstitious religion of murder. This is not simply a case of the captured thugs uncritically adopting the British view, of

Orientalism being imposed upon the colonised subjects. Through a process of lengthy interviews, with leading questions, over an extended period of time, an account of thuggee was elicited from the captured thugs, which was easily made to conform to the official perception of the phenomenon.

* * *

While the significance of the approvers as part of Sleeman's representation of thuggee is immediately apparent, it is even more crucial to recognise the formative character of the events of the preceding two decades. By the time Sleeman became involved, the British authorities had more than 20 years of experience of thuggee and, accordingly, his representation of thuggee was only the final stage of a much longer process. In the early period the British did not expect anything specific from an approver's testimony regarding the particulars of thuggee because they did not know what thuggee was. As the use of approvers became institutionalised and literally hundreds of thugs went through the procedure of giving depositions, a sort of self-generating mechanism came into play by which the accounts became standardised. During the 1830s, therefore, the approver had to conform to a fixed model in order to be granted a pardon: he had to verify the official perception of thuggee in order to be believed. Unlike Sleeman, the handful of officials engaged in combating thuggee during the early period was not trying to build a coherent argument concerning a pan-Indian murderous society. Accordingly, the primary sources of the early period do not exhibit the same prejudice and bias regarding thuggee as the later material. The early material is not purely objective in any sense, but its discursive context is decidedly different from the material 'produced' during the 1830s.

The information initially received by the Magistrates in Etawah in 1809–10, before they knew of the thugs themselves, came from *zamindars*, *daroghas* and peasants. It thus reflected some kind of popular indigenous perception of thuggee, which was indeed 'translated' and 'interpreted' by the British, but these accounts were too diverse for a hegemonic colonial project to have elicited them in this form. The indigenous accounts are obviously as subjective as all others, which is apparent in their reference to the debauchery of the thugs – a common, stereotyped depiction of criminals. The decisive point, however, is that this information was not markedly different in basic content from the depositions and confessions subsequently given by captured thugs – be

it in 1810 or 1830. Accordingly, one would have to reject the authenticity of these early statements completely in order to deny that thuggee existed outside colonial discourse. In spite of the obvious tendency and bias of certain British officers, they cannot have invented or constructed thuggee out of nothing. Colonial representations of thuggee were furthermore not monolithic and in its entirety the material reveals the multiplicity of British perspectives.

In his work on early modern witch-trials, Ginzburg has argued that the gap between the defendants' confessions and testimonies and the official account of the interrogators enables him to write an alternative story without being fully dependant on the representation of the latter:

The voices of the accused reach us strangled, altered, distorted; in many cases, they haven't reached us at all. Hence – for anyone unresigned to writing history for the nth time from the standpoint of the victors – the importance of the anomalies, the cracks that occasionally (albeit very rarely) appear in the documentation, undermining its coherence.²⁰

This approach is not limited to the study of banditry, but to all subjects where the existent sources are primarily the product of judicial procedures and police inquiries, that is the study of any marginal group or phenomena that has left little or no independent material for the scholar to examine. In the case of thuggee we do actually have quite substantial 'cracks' in the primary sources – especially between what the approvers actually said and the manner in which this information was interpreted by the British. Most importantly, the British interpreted this information differently at different times, thereby adding yet another fissure to what is supposed to be a monolithic representation. There is also a noteworthy lack of references to thuggee as a religious practice and as a centrally organised secret fraternity prior to 1830. Another very important gap or disjuncture that may be discerned in the sources are the different views of thuggee: to the British it was a crime, pure and simple, while to the thugs it was a socially legitimate profession. The notion of legitimacy thus emerges as one of the key aspects in connection with thuggee.

Some miscarriages of justice certainly took place as a result of the legal measures and new systems of policing introduced in connection with the anti-thuggee campaign of the 1830s. Likewise, the approvers may

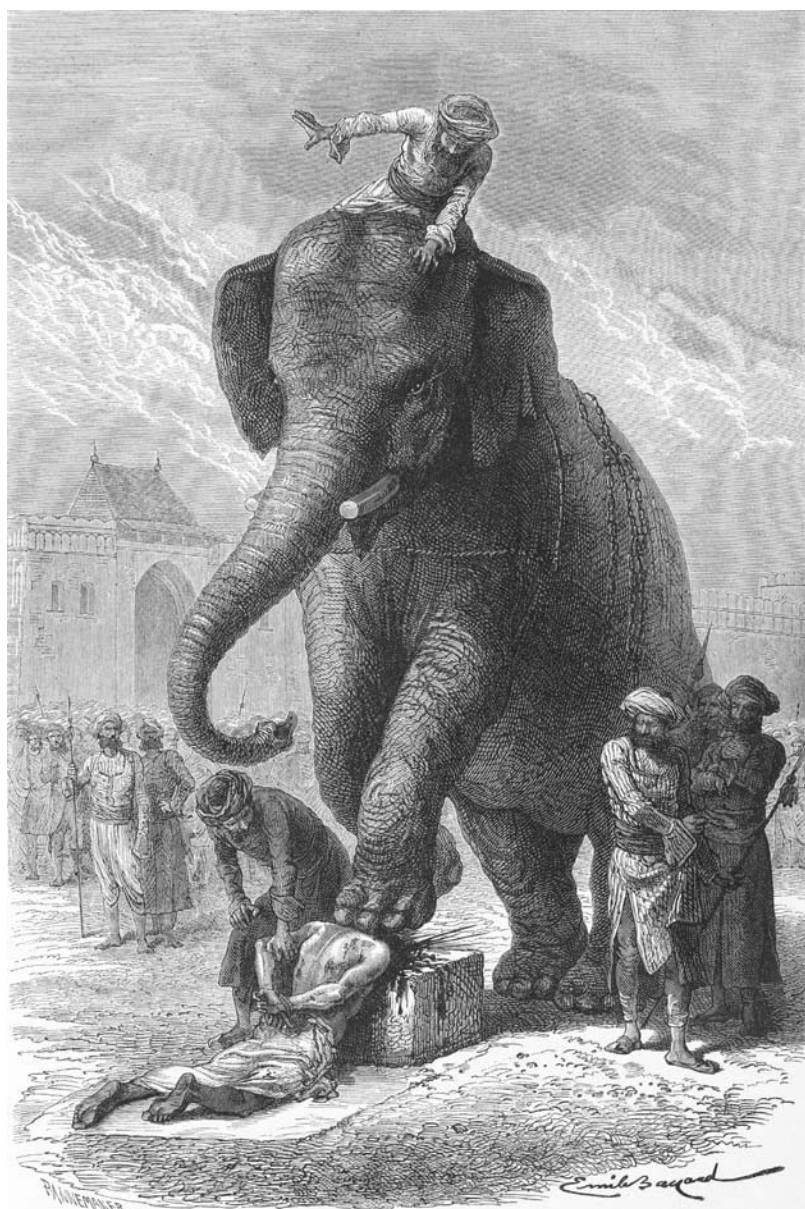


Figure 2 An execution of a criminal in one of the native states, demonstrating the colourful barbarism of indigenous jurisprudence – as seen from the West (from *L'Inde des Rajahs*, 1875)

have lied or forgotten about specific acts and events, they may have shielded friends and relatives and denounced enemies, and they certainly tried to present themselves in the best way possible. However, the study of thuggee and the utilisation of the sources do not rest with the guilt or innocence of specific individuals alone. This is not a matter of determining whether a captured thug is telling the 'truth' or not, but of understanding what he is *actually* saying and *why* he is saying one thing instead of another. What does the strategy of the thugs when facing the interrogator or interviewer reveal about their beliefs and practices and what is the real implication and significance of the statements made? As the anthropologist Marshall Sahlins has put it: 'A report may be historically inaccurate, or not factually supportable, yet still structurally revelatory.'²¹

At the same time historical accuracy is not immaterial. Even though some aspects of the approver testimonies and depositions may appropriately be questioned, I think it would be implausible to deny that the accounts do refer – in one way or the other – to a social reality. In other words it is not plausible that these individuals should have invented so similar stories at different times and places, when interrogated by different British officials, without reflecting related patterns of practices. When thuggee was first encountered in the South and Northern India there was no formal exchange of information on the subject between the authorities and yet the information collected about the phenomenon is virtually identical.²² Comparing the content of the depositions of, for instance, Ghulam Hussain given in 1810 at Mainpuri before the local Magistrate and that of Ameer Alee given in 1832 at Sagar before Sleeman also reveals that there were few temporal changes.²³ What *was* different was the way the depositions were interpreted according to the changing discursive contexts of the colonial administration.

The meaningful utilisation of the material is possible because we have so many different sources from different periods and places. It is only by juxtaposing the detailed material of the 1830s with that of the preceding two decades that we can truly appreciate and understand the value and limitations of the primary sources in their specific spatial and temporal context. The existing variations within the material substantiate its plausibility. It is thus the incidental details, the misunderstandings and disjunctures contained in the material that are really interesting. The complexity and diversity of the sources allows for a more nuanced depiction of the phenomenon and is indeed such that the history of

thuggee need no longer be limited to the study of its representation. I believe it is possible to be critical of the colonial representation *and* at the same time provide an alternative account of thuggee, which does not rely on sweeping assertions and preconceived notions of either the 'Orient' or the Orientalists.

2

Thuggee in Pre-Colonial India

In light of the debate over the British construction of thuggee, it is worth taking a closer look not only at the pre-colonial indigenous use of the term but also at various accounts of highway robbery predating the official discovery of thuggee by the British in the early 1800s. The literal meaning of the word ‘thug’ – in Hindi ‘thag’, Marathi ‘thak’, Sanskrit ‘sthaga’ – is a cheat or swindler.¹ The term was translated similarly in early British works on Indian languages – as ‘villain’, ‘rascal’ and ‘knave’ in Gilchrist’s dictionary of 1787, and as ‘impostor’ and ‘swindler’ in Drummond’s of 1808.² The Hindi form of the word ‘thaga’ was paraphrased in a twelfth-century Sanskrit text as ‘thaka’, which was used in another work to paraphrase ‘dhurta’ meaning ‘rogue’ or ‘deceiver’.³ In the classical texts the word ‘thag’ is commonly used to imply a deceitful villain or as an example of evil behaviour and beliefs. Halbfass makes much of the *Samasaramocaka* who supposedly practised ritual murder as an act of compassion and who were mentioned by the ninth-century Bhasarvajna.⁴ The word ‘thakasastra’ occurs in connection with the *Samasaramocaka*, which Halbfass translates as meaning the ‘sacred texts of the Thags’ claiming that ‘... this statement seems to be the oldest extant reference in Sanskrit to this sect of assassins.’⁵ But even though a specific group is referred to in the Sanskrit text there is nothing to suggest that the implied meaning of ‘thaka’ is that of a ‘sect of assassins’. When Halbfass does not translate the occurrence of the word ‘thaka’ in the Sanskrit text, the erroneous implication is that it has the same meaning that the British came to attach to it, that is that the ninth-century text refers to stranglers who murdered in honour of Kali and who were persecuted a millennium later.

Similarly, Paul Dundas has interpreted a twelfth-century Jain text, which tells of thieves who were practised in ‘thagavidhya’, as implying

'a magic spell personified as a goddess, worship of which here precedes criminal activities ...'.⁶ But according to Dundas 'There is no particular stress in the story on murderous activities carried out by these Thags nor any hint of religious motivation behind their activities.'⁷ Thus any religious connection made with the 'thags' in these texts remains unproven and it is sufficient here to note that 'thag', and hence 'thug', originally meant rogue or deceiver and that it was used in that capacity.

During the Chinese monk Hiouen Thsang's famous journey to India in the seventh century, he was set upon by bandits on the Ganges and only narrowly escaped being sacrificed to their goddess, and at a later stage a temple was pointed out to him where human sacrifice supposedly occurred. This has been interpreted as an actual account of thuggee, and the temple identified as one situated near Bhagalpur.⁸ However, by that rationale all accounts of banditry and human sacrifice in ancient India would have to be taken as referring to the thugs of the nineteenth century.⁹ Similar claims have been made for the biography of the Muslim emperor Firoz Shah Tughlaq, which mentions how the Sultan of Delhi, Jalal uddin Firz Khilji, in 1290 expelled a 1000 'thags' from Delhi.¹⁰ The lack of detail in this brief description makes it impossible to say whether the 'thags' in question were murderers and robbers or perhaps just harmless cheats and swindlers. By itself this source cannot prove the existence of thuggee at such an early state, but as we shall see further below it does have quite significant implications.

It is in later Indian poetry that we must look for further clues for the use and definition of the word 'thag'. The poet Kabir (c.1398–1448) often made use of the 'thag' as an metaphor of the divine deceit of the god: 'The Thug has robbed them all – yet none has guessed Ram's brigandage ...'.¹¹ But the first clear indigenous use of the word in a sense virtually identical to that later propagated by the British is in an allegorical piece by the poet Surdas (1478–1583):

Like a fish who yearns for a sliver of meat
and seizes a bamboo hook;
a crooked thorn,
It twists in the heart
and then will not come out.
As a hunter sounds a horn
and draws a herd of deer;
Aims an arrow,
looses it,
and threads their hearts upon a shaft.

As a *thag* lures a pilgrim
with *laddus* sweet with wine,
Makes him drunk and trusting,
takes his money and his life;
Just so, Honeybee,
Hari takes our love by deceit.¹²

Whether Surdas in this religious poem was actually referring to existing robbers or merely a literary or poetic convention is not of consequence in this context. What is important is the fact that there *was* a pre-colonial concept of robbers called ‘thags’ who deceived, murdered and plundered their victims. The mentioning of a pilgrim as the thag’s victim also suggests a conceptual association with either highways or places of worship and the intoxication and inveiglement of the victim is likewise noteworthy.

In the Janamsakhi-texts depicting the life and deeds of the founder of Sikhism, Guru Nanak, there are references of further interest. One story tells of ‘Sajjan the Robber’, who had a lodging house for travellers where he killed and robbed the guests and hid the bodies in a well. This story exists in several different versions, in two of which Sajjan is given the epithet ‘thag’, and the different terms used in the various versions of the story show that ‘thag’ and robber were used more or less interchangeably.¹³ To ensnare travellers, Sajjan had put up both Hindu and Muslim shrines next to his house and the moral implication of the tale was that he was feigning religious piety – a common theme in classic Indian literature. While the word ‘thag’ itself might not always be used, it abounds with stories of ‘common’ thieves and tricksters who don the garb of religious ascetics to dupe the gullible.¹⁴ In another story Guru Nanak spends the night in a village inhabited exclusively by ‘thags’ who plan to kill him while he is asleep – similarly to Sajjan.¹⁵ The deception and intended murder of travellers is thus associated with the ‘thags’ of the Janamsakhis.

In the various European travel accounts of the later Mughal period there are numerous stories of robbers, bandits and thieves who infested the roads and obstructed trade across the continent.¹⁶ The description of parts of India as being infested by bandits is also corroborated by quite a substantial number of contemporary indigenous sources.¹⁷ The Frenchman Jean de Thévenot,¹⁸ who travelled in India in 1666–67, described ‘The cunningest Robbers in the World’ who operated in the area of Delhi: ‘They use a certain Slip with a running noose, which they can cast with so much slight about a Mans Neck, when they are within reach of him, that they

never fail; so that they strangle him in a trice.¹⁹ Among the guiles of these robbers was also the use of a beautiful woman to deceive the unsuspecting victim. Rather than this being a first-hand description, it seems safe to assume that Thévenot was merely recounting what he had been told about robbers in that part of the country. The actual *modus operandi* of the robbers in question, however, is quite important as it contains some of the key elements that later came to constitute the definition of thuggee: the inveigling of unwary travellers and subsequent murder by strangulation. The Englishman John Fryer's account from 1698 is even more interesting, due to the description of an execution of Indian criminals that he himself witnessed near Surat in 1675:

The Third was a Pack of Thieves that had infested the roads a long time, and after some while Imprisonment the Banyans proffered money for their Redemption; but the Great Mogul sending an Express, they were led to Execution; They were Fifteen, all of a Gang, who used to lurk under Hedges in narrow lanes, and as they found opportunity, by a Device of a Weight tied to a cotton Bowstring mades of Guts, (with which they tew Cotton) of some length, they used to throw it upon Passengers so, that winding it about their Necks, they pulled them from their Beasts, and dragging them upon the Ground strangled them, and possessed themselves of what they had: One of these was an Old Man with his two Sons, the youngest not fourteen. This being their practice, they were sentenced, according to Lex Talionis, to be hang'd; wherefore being delivered to the Catwal, or Sheriff's Men ...²⁰

There is a clear correspondence between the method used by the robbers described by Thévenot and Fryer and it is also worth noticing that three of Fryer's robbers were related, which is reminiscent of the notion of the thugs as 'hereditary criminals' reiterated time and again during the 1830s. As it happens, an indigenous record lends credence to these two accounts, namely the *farman* issued by the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb in 1672.²¹ The *farman* was a decree or directive from the emperor concerning the legal procedures to be followed by his officials in criminal cases and Items 10 and 11 concerned:

10: A (suspected) strangler ... whose act of strangulation has (not) been legally proved, should be chastised (*tazir*)²² and confined till he repents. But if he is habituated to the work and the fact is proved, by legal evidence, or if he is well-known to the people and the governor of the

province (for such deeds), or traces of the strangulation and the property of the (murdered) man are found on him, and the subahdar [governor] and the officers of the *adalat* [court] feel a strong probability that he is the doer of such deeds, then execute him.

11: If a man suspected of theft, highway robbery, strangulation, or the felonious killing of people, is arrested and from indications (lit. signs) the *subahdar* and the officers of the *adalat* consider it most probable that he has often been guilty of the deed, – then imprison him that he may repent. If any one charges him with any of the above offences, resort of the *qazi* [judge]²³ (for trial).²⁴

The exact word used for ‘strangulator’ in this document is ‘phansigar’ which literally means ‘strangler’ and which was used interchangeably with ‘thug’ during the nineteenth century.²⁵ Yet, in spite of the terminology, it appears that acts were actually committed during Aurangzeb’s reign, which bore more than a passing similarity to what was later described by the British under the name of thuggee. We know that Aurangzeb complained of the insecurity of the roads where travellers and merchants were waylaid and Fryer’s claim that the thieves were executed by the personal order of the Mughal Emperor might thus be correct.²⁶ Banditry not only disrupted trade and the collection of revenue but also challenged the authority of the government and could easily escalate into rebellion.²⁷ Thus the Mughal authorities dealt severely with violence and robbery of the kind referred to in the *farman*. In both Mughal and British jurisprudence the concept of disposition towards crime (crime as a habit) and public notoriety were considered important factors in the meting out of punishment. Furthermore, Items 9 and 12 of the *farman* concerned ‘Grasias ... who are habitual robbers ...’ and ‘Wicked men ... who administer *dhatura*, *bhang*, the nut of *nux vomica*(?)²⁸ and such other narcotics to people in order to render them insensible and rob their effects ...’²⁹ Hence it appears that there was a notion of certain groups as being particularly inclined towards robbery and of robbers who poisoned their victims. Accordingly, the types of criminals referred to in Items 9 to 12 of the *farman*, when taken together, correspond very closely to some of the criminal categories utilised by the British in connection with thuggee in the nineteenth century.

In 1785, just a few decades before the discovery of thuggee, James Forbes made a brief reference to stranglers and as the concept of the thugs had not yet entered the official colonial discourse by this date, the account may be regarded on a par with the pre-colonial material.³⁰ In a

chapter entitled 'Oojen to Agra, 1785', Forbes recounted how an Indian acquaintance had been present at the fair at Sarungpur:

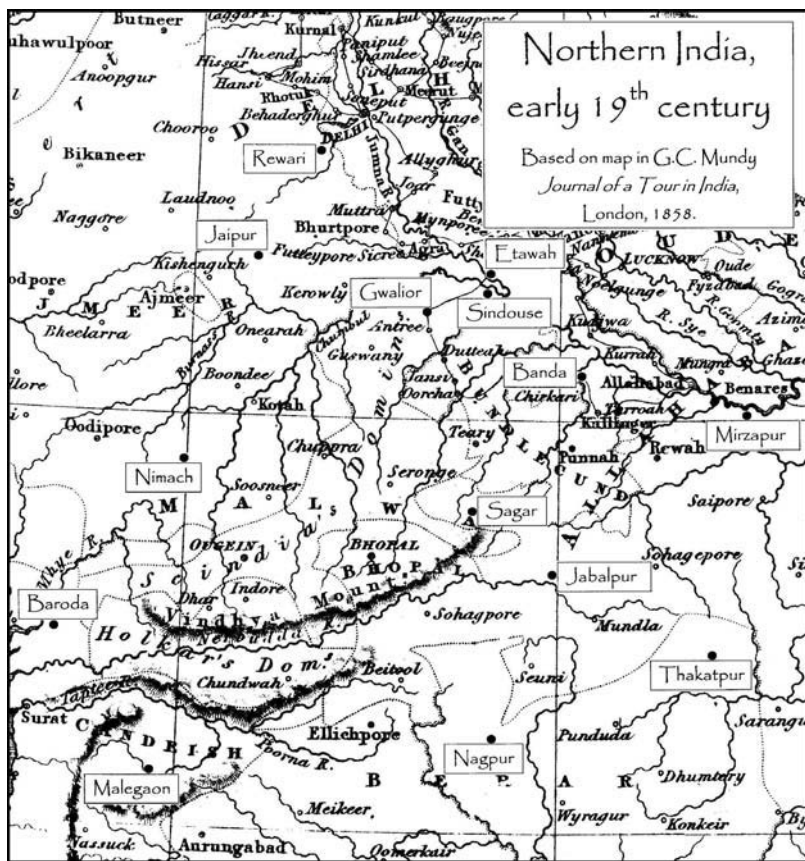
... when several men were taken up for the most cruel method of robbery and murder, practised on travellers, by a tribe called *phanseegurs*, or stranglers, who join passengers frequenting the fair, in bye-roads, or at other seasons convenient for their purpose: under the pretence of travelling the same way, they enter into conversation with the stranger, until an opportunity offers of suddenly throwing a rope round their necks with a slip knot, by which they dexteriously contrive to strangle them on the spot.³¹

The similarity of this description to the earlier ones is self-evident, but the source of the information this time is an Indian traveller, and accordingly the description reflects an indigenous viewpoint rather than Forbes's. The use of the term *phansigar* is important in that it combines the strict definition of that term, that is 'strangler', with the description of thuggee – robbery and murder of travellers by deception. It shows that, during this period, the words *phansigar* and thug were sometimes interchangeable: a *phansigar* could be a deceiver while a thug could be a strangler.³² This is also borne out by a reference in Drummond's dictionary of 1808 to a term with the same derivation as *phansigar*, namely: '*Phanseoo*, A term of abuse in Guzerat, applied also, truly to thieves or robbers who strangle children in secret or travellers on the road, as well as to authorised hangmen, who hoist culprits on the gallows.'³³ Forbes and Drummond's use of the term thus clearly corresponds with that of Aurangzeb's *farman*.

In conclusion, I believe I have demonstrated that in pre-colonial times the indigenous use of the word thug did *sometimes* fully correspond with the later British use of that term; that is as meaning a robber, who deceived, murdered and plundered travellers on the roads. This was not the only meaning of the term since its literal interpretation merely implied a cheat or a swindler without the necessary association of violence.³⁴ It seems to be very likely that thuggee or similar social practices did in fact occur in pre-colonial India, though I would be careful to place it chronologically earlier than the reign of Aurangzeb.³⁵ However, the similarity in content and temporal proximity of Thévenot and Fryer's accounts and Aurangzeb's *farman* renders it virtually impossible to deny the existence of the practice at this date. Though Sleeman did re-define thuggee, exemplified in the ambiguous terminology of the later legislation, it is still a simplification to describe the concept of the

'thug' merely as a British construction. There were virtually identical pre-colonial indigenous predecessors to the British understanding of the word and phenomenon.

The few European accounts of robbers and stranglers before 1800 had been of the anecdotal kind, referring mainly to the occurrences in territories and states ruled by Indians. However, as the East India Company gradually became more involved in politics on the subcontinent, the context in which banditry and crime in general was encountered likewise changed. In order to understand the background against which the initial discovery of thuggee was made, it is necessary to briefly look at the legal institutions established by the East India Company and the policies pursued in its new role as a state power.



Map 1 Northern India, early nineteenth century

3

The Discovery of Thuggee, Etawah 1809

Crime, law and order in early colonial India

In a village in Northern India around 1800 the law was represented on the most basic level by the *chaukidar*, or village watchman, who was usually little more than a night watch.¹ The village itself came under the jurisdiction of a *thana*, or police post, in charge of a *thanadar*, senior police officer, who had in his command a number of *daroghas*, or police officers. *Chaukidars* were locals and often depended on the *zamindars* and villagers for their livelihood and for various reasons many crimes often remained unreported outside the village boundaries. Locally the *daroghas* and *thanadars* also had much leeway regarding the majority of petty crimes and minor offences, which they were authorised to deal with. Only in more serious cases, such as murder, affray or the theft of large sums would the *thanadar* report to the English district Magistrate. Within the individual districts the Magistrate would deal with all lesser criminal cases, while the Courts of Circuit touring the districts twice a year tried serious cases such as armed robbery and murder. Cases that could incur severe sentences or the death penalty were then referred to the high court or Nizamat Adalat at Calcutta where the sentences of the Courts of Circuit were either confirmed or reversed.

The Nizamat Adalat was constituted by three British judges and, significantly, a Muslim law officer who decided whether the judgement passed was in accordance with Muslim scriptural law. On many levels the British administration continued the legal practices and institutions of the indigenous states that they succeeded, though always with a large degree of modification. The first legal regulations of the Bengal Presidency

of 1772 had been aimed at putting an end to what was perceived as the arbitrary despotism of indigenous practice by introducing the rule of law and enforcing the state's monopoly of violence.² The legislation was, in theory at least, based on Muslim law supplemented by various regulations. This attempt to combine Muslim and British notions of jurisprudence remained contentious right up till Macauley's Penal Code of 1837, which did away with the last remnants of Muslim law.

The British attempt to introduce the rule of law in India, however, was full of inconsistencies – especially when it came to violent crime and banditry. In Bengal violent crime and robbers had always been considered a serious threat to the establishment of law and order and especially after the great famine of 1770 there was a dramatic increase in what was known as 'dacoity'. The word was derived from the Hindi term 'daku' meaning simply 'robber' but was used in the meaning of gang-robbery usually accompanied with violence, which might imply anything from highway robbers, footpads or even river pirates.³ During the drawing up of the first regulations in 1772, the Governor General Warren Hastings proposed harsher punishment for dacoits whose notoriety ought to be sufficient for conviction in the absence of circumstantial evidence. In a remarkable application of the notion of guilt by association, he furthermore suggested that the families of wanted dacoits should become slaves of the state.⁴ Part of the reason for Hastings's suggestions was the perceived leniency of Muslim law, which only allowed for strictly defined types of evidence to be admissible in court. Hastings conceded that the spirit of his proposals was not in accordance with 'British principles of justice' but argued that until Bengal had attained a state of 'perfection', the end justified the means.⁵ The measures, however, were not incorporated in the regulations though they did reflect what would later become a common perception of certain types of indigenous crime; namely that ordinary laws were insufficient. This shows that right from the beginning there was, on some levels of the British administration, a willingness to slacken the principles of judicial legislation to ensure the establishment of law and order.

The establishment of revenue and tax settlements was absolutely crucial to the British in India after 1800, as the Company's economy was increasingly based on land revenue. The rulers and *zamindars*, however, often resisted this as it entailed a loss to them both economically and in terms of status and privileges. One such example was the powerful *zamindar* Bhugwan Singh of Shekohabad in the district of Etawah, in Northern India, who firmly opposed the separation of the *sair* (commodity tax) from the *jama* (land revenue) in 1802.⁶ Initially, the British

Government tried to solve the matter peacefully, but military intervention was constantly being contemplated and when negotiations broke down, a campaign was waged against Bhugwan Singh. To assemble a force large enough to lay siege to Bhugwan Singh's strongholds entailed a considerable disruption in the area, but the military commander was convinced 'of the good policy to crush any spirit of resistance or insubordination on its first appearance, that, this last consideration supersede in his mind others of a less important nature'.⁷ The ensuing siege of the stronghold of Sarsney was a full-scale military operation, including heavy artillery, which eventually led Bhugwan Singh to evacuate the fort.⁸ This case was by no means unusual, and the British spent the first decades of the nineteenth century fighting various petty rulers and *zamindars* in the so-called Ceded and Conquered Provinces in order to establish their authority and impose the revenue settlements.

Another aspect of the Company's policies during this period was the fact that its possessions all bordered onto foreign states. The incursions of bandits and marauders were often ascribed to the proximity of either the Nawab Vazir's territories in Awadh or the Maratha states, which provided an easy escape from Company jurisdiction. The Vazir's officials and *zamindars* were also themselves supposed to shelter and even encourage the various types of marauders who made incursions into the Company's territories.⁹ The British furthermore suspected that many local chiefs and villagers, both within their own and in foreign states, were actually harbouring robbers and marauders. Thus the *zamindars* became the main obstacle to the implementation of law and order in the Ceded and Conquered Provinces, both in their capacity of revenue-yielding landowners and as harbourers of criminals. The assertion of the Company's political authority therefore necessitated the total subjugation of so-called 'refractory' *zamindars*. The establishment of a functional revenue system, crucial to the Company's economic subsistence, thereby became inseparable from the measures to introduce law and order and suppress banditry.

The supposed prevalence of violent crime also led to increasingly strict punishments being implemented. Thus Regulation VIII of 1808 was passed on the basis of the report from the Nizamat Adalat, the superior criminal court, which showed an increase in robbery and dacoity accompanied with murder in the Ceded and Conquered Provinces, from 97 in 1806 to 154 in 1807.¹⁰ The regulation introduced the possibility that gang leaders, previously convicted robbers and those of notoriously bad character, not liable to suffer the death penalty, could be sentenced to transportation for life.¹¹ Furthermore, to ensure that hardened criminals

were not released after limited prison terms, all cases of robbery by open violence should be brought before the court of the Nizamat Adalat, rather than be dealt with at the district-level Court of Circuit. Shortly afterwards the judges of the Nizamat Adalat submitted a draft for another regulation, the purpose of which was to make the apprehension of suspected dacoits easier and ensure the cooperation of *zamindars* and local officials.¹² Regulation IX of 1808 made it a criminal act to neglect passing on information concerning dacoits living on or near one's land, which was punishable with a fine or imprisonment.¹³ A *zamindar* who actively assisted dacoits or supplied them with provisions would forfeit his estate to the Government. The two regulations were followed by a third one, which appointed a Superintendent of Police with exclusive authority to apprehend public offenders and maintain general order and tranquillity.¹⁴ The Superintendent of Police was to be Magistrate of the 24 *parganas* in eastern Bengal where dacoity was especially prevalent, and his task was to collect information from different parts of the country and thereby organise the apprehension of public offenders. Similar positions in other districts were established soon after.

This rash of legal innovations during 1808 reveals how serious the extent of violent crime was considered by the authorities. The sequence of events suggests that it was the report on heinous crimes in the Ceded and Conquered Provinces that was the direct, if not only, reason for the implementation of the regulations. Robbers could now be punished with transportation for life merely on the basis of public notoriety, regardless of the amount of property plundered or degree of violence resorted to. By making the harbouring and abetting of dacoits an offence, the Government also tried to affect the *zamindars* who obstructed the apprehension of criminals and force them to into cooperation. The Nizamat Adalat could make sure that harder sentences were passed when all cases of robbery came before them, and the Superintendent of Police could make the police establishment in the Company's territories more efficient. These were all judicial measures, implemented by the courts and which supplemented the various *ad hoc* solutions resorted to by local Magistrates, such as the use of informers, in the move to introduce law and order in the Company's possessions. Regulation VI of 1796 had made it possible for the courts to pardon criminals in exchange for them testifying against their accomplices, which was the same as 'King's evidence' in England but in India was called an approver.¹⁵ The use of informers and paid spies was generally considered to be the most efficient means available to the British in controlling crime in India, but at the same time also one of the more controversial ones.

In December 1808 the Acting Magistrate of Aligarh, James Patton, described the situation faced by local Magistrates during this period: 'The frequent occurrence of the crime of highway robbery, and the number of wounded people who apply for redress and restoration of their property, has continually excited my indignation and compassion, and I shall feel most happy should the present address in however a small degree constitute to the means of affording greater security to travellers in future.'¹⁶ The robbers and marauders were Mewatis, Jats and Rajputs, that is the martial groups of the Doab, and following the conventional colonial perception of indigenous crime, Patton described large parts of the population as inherently lawless and prone to violence.¹⁷ According to Patton, the highway robbers of the district could easily escape into the neighbouring *parganas* belonging to an independent ruler, or hide in the heavy jungle or small mud forts with which the district abounded, and subsequently sell their loot with great ease. The leader of these bands of robbers was inevitably a *zamindar* who entertained them for the express purpose of plunder. Patton was certain, however, that a permanent revenue settlement, which secured the interests and right of the *zamindars* would make them cease to support the criminals. The argument that nothing could be achieved in terms of reducing highway robbery without the support of the *zamindars*, yet again emphasised the connection between landed interests, the revenue settlement and the introduction of law and order. Accordingly, it was in a period of turbulence, marked above all by the measures to establish the authority of the colonial state upon new regions, that thuggee was first encountered by the British.

James Law and the initial findings

The district of Etawah was located in the lower Doab and part of the territory ceded to the East India Company in 1801 by the Nawab Vizir of Awadh which, following the wars with the Marathas 1803–05, became known as the Ceded and Conquered Provinces. The city of Etawah constituted a crossroads for the big trade routes that had emerged at the end of the eighteenth century, going from the Doab and south through Bundelkhand into the Deccan, and close to several important centres of pilgrimage and trade. To the south and west the district bordered onto the Maratha territories, which was a continuous source of conflict and problems. As in many of the newly ceded districts, banditry and robbery was rife in Etawah and murder and violent affrays the order of the day.¹⁸

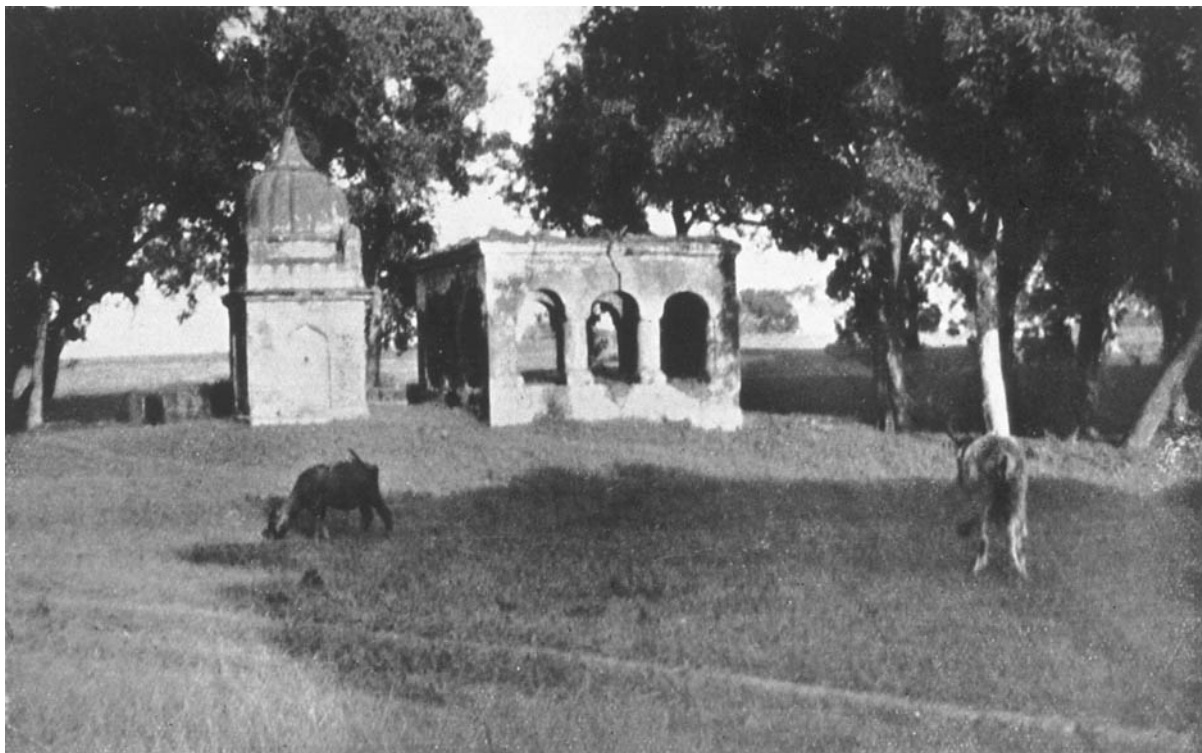


Figure 3 Allegedly a 'bele' or favourite burial site of the thugs, this early twentieth-century photo could be of any roadside shrine (from James Sleeman, *Thug or a Million Murders*, London: S. Low, Marston, 1933)

When in April 1809 ten mangled bodies were found in a well within the district it caused no stir as the area was generally considered to be lawless.¹⁹ Subsequently, James Law, the Magistrate of Etawah and responsible authority, was informed by the judges of the Court of Circuit that his exertions to apprehend the murderers in this case had been inadequate. Law was ordered to inquire whether the locals had seen or heard of any *kazaks*, or mounted marauders, in the area, indicating that robbers of this type were the main suspects. The Magistrate was also instructed to exert the 'utmost vigilance and promptitude in tracing and bringing to justice the perpetrators of which reflects such disgrace on a country which pretends to any system of police'.²⁰ The decisive factor, then, was not the murders themselves as much as the fact that they reflected badly on the system of police, that is implied a failure of the Company to impose proper law and order. Law hastily complied with the instructions, but no more was learned of either the victims or the murderers.²¹

Soon after, the judges of the Court of Circuit wrote to the Nizam Adalat regarding the prevalence of violent crime and referred to the case in Etawah.²² While murders by dacoits and highway robbers were usually reported to the magistrates, the judges were concerned that there were also secret murders and robberies on the highways with people being killed and their bodies hidden in ravines, in wells and in the jungle. Such crimes, which were believed to be numerous, were only accidentally discovered and therefore information rarely reached the Magistrates. These murders *were* seen as something different from the ordinary robberies so prevalent in the area at the time and 'The discovery of the perpetrators is of the first importance'.²³ The judges revealed a deep-seated concern not only about murders being committed in secret but also about things occurring among the indigenous population without the knowledge of the authorities. This colonial panic concerning the possibility of things going on 'under the surface' and unknown to the British was to become a recurring aspect of colonial rule, especially in connection with the Mutiny of 1857.²⁴

Meanwhile the inquiries of Magistrate Law had proven fruitless and in July 1809 the bodies of four native soldiers, who all appeared to have been strangled, were found in the jungle within his jurisdiction.²⁵ This time Law responded swiftly by issuing a reward for Rs 200 and ordering his assistant O. W. Steer to carry out a thorough investigation of the case. But this was not sufficient and when news of the incident reached the Vice President in Council, he expressed his deep concern for the continuance of violent crime in Law's district. As a consequence the

Magistrates of the two districts bordering on Etawah, namely Aligarh and Farrukhabad, were invested with powers of Magistrate in Etawah, and Law was directed to cooperate with them.²⁶ In other words, the discovery of bodies and failure to apprehend the perpetrators led to the delegation of jurisdiction over a district. As the second judge of the Court of Circuit, Y. Burges, submitted a report on the state of Etawah, the problems slowly began to accumulate for Law.²⁷ In Burges's opinion most of the trials were defective and full of irregularities, people who should have been released were still in jail, and these 'gross and glaring errors' were all ascribed to Law's 'apathy and indifference'. To make things worse Steer also wrote a report to the Judicial Department, describing in detail the collapse of law and order in Etawah and the lack of initiative exhibited by his superior.²⁸ According to Steer, hardly a day passed without half a dozen highway robberies, dacoities or thefts being reported, and the police establishment was furthermore too small to be efficient 'and therefore considering the long depraved habits and dispositions of the people no wonder is excited that crimes are committed'. The powerful *zamindars* in the westernmost parts of the district all kept horsemen as dependants and were strongly entrenched in their forts and, Steer argued, no security and protection could be afforded the population of the district until they were removed. Concluding his report, Steer made a passing reference to thuggee, the first ever in the official records in Northern India:

I shall not allude to a set of people denominated 'Tugs' who have from time immemorial carried on their abominable and lamentable practices, as from the nature of their proceedings I do not conceive it possible to prevent immediately their covert, and secret deeds; But this evil is even now gradually lessening and will no doubt at no very distant period be altogether suspended by the meliorating influence of a strict and vigilant police.²⁹

This curious and first allusion to thuggee contains many of the elements that were later to signify the British perception of the phenomenon: the thugs were a specific 'set' or group, their ancient existence, the abomination and secrecy of their practice, and the difficulty in suppressing their activities. Any reference to strangulation or *modus operandi* is conspicuously absent in the paragraph, and as to the impending elimination of thuggee, history was to prove Steer's prediction wrong. There is nothing to suggest that knowledge of thuggee was common among the British at this point, and Steer's reference does not seem to have met

with any response. Most likely he was repeating information he had acquired from the *daroghas* and villagers during his investigation of the murder of the four dead soldiers. When two more bodies were found in December 1809, Law tried to avoid incurring further criticism by initiating a more thorough investigation.³⁰ This time the dead bodies, which were found near a highway, were that of a man and a woman and had marks on their necks suggesting they had been strangled. The local *daroghas* were ordered to make inquiries in the area and a proclamation was published for the apprehension of the murderers. But Law also had some suggestions as to the identity of the offenders:

It is presumed that the murdered persons were travellers and fell victims to that detestable race of monsters called T,ugs, who are constantly lurking in jungles and wastes, entrap any travellers who may be incautious enough to travel by night. The T,ugs have infested the whole of the Doab, and this district in particular, from time immemorial, and they are so strongly leagued together, that scarcely an instance has ever been known of their having betrayed each others secrets. Until means can be devised to extirpate these abominable pests of society, and individuals can be prevented from travelling unfrequented places at night, murders will occasionally happen but what means are best to be devised for the discovery of those monsters and the prevention of the numerous enormities committed by them, I am unable to suggest, and I leave to others of greater knowledge and ability, to apply the proper remedy to such serious and distressing evils ...³¹

This description of the 'T,ugs' added to Steer's account: the thugs were now described as a 'race of monsters' that lurked in the night and entrapped their victims and who never betrayed their accomplices.³² When their method can be deduced from the marks of strangulation found on the two victims, the image of thuggee is actually complete. As a direct result of Law's letter, the Court of Circuit was directed by the Government to take 'into consideration the measures which should be adopted for the suppression of the class of offenders called T,ugs'.³³ It is, in other words, *the* point when thuggee became an official issue and thus entered the sphere of colonial law and order.

By this time the reports on thugs had struck a note, and T. Brooke, judge at the Court of Circuit, argued that no common rules would be effective against the thugs as the secrecy of their crime made it impossible to detect, regardless of the vigilance of the magistrates and police.³⁴ But there

was one giveaway: according to Brooke, the only 'tool' used by the thugs was a piece of thin silk twist or prepared catgut with a small coin tied to one end and he therefore suggested that anybody committed for trial for murder by strangulation should be sentenced to death if such a cord was found in his possession. Furthermore, any person arrested on the grounds of suspicion of being a thug should be condemned to 14 years imprisonment if such a cord was found in his possession. The judge acknowledged that the proposals were very severe, but no law, he argued, could be too severe for such 'ruthless villains'. The Government, however, did not consider the suggestions to be appropriate and while the Court of Circuit was ordered to take into consideration the presence of cords in the cases brought before them, no specific measures was to be introduced.³⁵ Accordingly, the Government was not yet ready to introduce different standards of evidence when it came to thuggee.

It is interesting to note that there was already beginning to emerge a concept of specific knowledge about the thugs, their methods and devices. Unfortunately, we cannot say much more about the origin of that 'knowledge', but must again assume that it was obtained from *zamindars*, *daroghas* and the like. The effects of Law's exaggeration of the secret nature of thuggee were also reflected in Brooke's suggestions, as there was no mention of preventive measures whatsoever. Thus it appears that the image of thuggee was such that the idea of preventing their crimes was not even considered at this stage. As it turned out, Brooke's suggestion that people should be convicted as thugs on rather slim evidence was to become a recurring theme in the later operations against the thugs.

On 30 December 1809 four more dead bodies were found near a village in Etawah and Steer, who was already in the area, immediately proceeded to the spot.³⁶ The inhabitants of the area had all fled the previous day when the *daroghas* had made enquiries and only two village *danucks* were left to provide information. The four bodies, supposedly those of soldiers returning from leave, had been found in a drainage ditch and had sword-wounds in the bellies, from which it was concluded that they had been stabbed while asleep and afterwards thrown in the ditch. Reporting on the case, Steer lamented that no regulation existed which forced the *zamindars* and *ryots* (peasants) to cooperate, especially since the police was understaffed and the village *danucks* old and incompetent.³⁷

Yet again, the Court of Circuit was dissatisfied with the way the case was being handled and called to Law's attention ten points where the investigation had been deficient.³⁸ Help could have been acquired from nearby military posts if the victims had indeed been soldiers, and the villages of

the area should have been searched to determine where the victims had spend the previous night. Even though Steer's criticism of his superior was eventually found to be exaggerated and the deplorable state of Etawah not due to the failure of the police alone, Law was transferred to the position of Collector of Bareilly on 19 January 1810.³⁹ The Magistrate of Agra, Thomas Perry, who had on earlier occasions been favourably compared to Law, became the new Magistrate of Etawah.⁴⁰ The cause for this transfer was stated by the Governor General to be the defective state of the police in the district of Etawah, and it seems likely that the unsolved cases of thuggee was the last straw and thus the direct cause of Law's removal. Accordingly, there was an active policy on the part of the Government by which officials were removed when they failed to put a stop to crime and replaced by others thought to be more efficient in this respect.

In early February 1810 another corpse was found in a well in Etawah and Law, who had not left his office yet, again despatched Steer to the scene.⁴¹ Steer's thorough investigation did not reveal any clues as to the identity of the offenders, but he did gather some information from the *zamindars* of the area.⁴² The body of the victim had four wounds inflicted by a large knife, of a kind which none of the *zamindars* or peasants owned. When asked on whom their suspicion rested, one of the *zamindars* answered: 'on "Thugs" but where they are, god only knows'.⁴³ Another claimed that the thugs lived across the Jumna River and, concerning the murders, he added: 'who else but the "Thugs" can commit them?' Whether or not the *zamindars* were being sincere, it is apparent that there was an indigenous concept of thuggee as a specific crime. In reporting on the case, Steer argued that no ordinary measure to capture the thugs would meet with success since the criminals would not denounce their accomplices and they were furthermore protected by *zamindars*. Success could only be achieved if a system of equal secrecy was put to use and Steer proposed that 15 or 20 spies should be engaged for that purpose. The spies should make inquiries in the different villages and places frequented by the thugs, and Steer declared himself prepared to oversee such arrangements. A month later the Government approved of the use of spies as suggested by Steer, acknowledging that it was a necessity in police work.⁴⁴

Thus we find that thuggee was first encountered during a period where the colonial state was still consolidating its rule and authority in the Conquered and Ceded Provinces and where issues of policing and the imposition of law and order rated high on the agenda. Meanwhile, a regulation was passed and new police measures taken into use in the fight against thugs.

Regulations and the Irregular Corps

It is hard not to think that the passing of Regulation VI of 1810 was caused, in part at least, by the increasing number of reports on thuggee. The regulation defined the penalties to which *zamindars* were liable if they neglected to pass on information on crimes committed by 'Dacoits, Cozauks, Thugs, Buddecks and other descriptions of public robbers'.⁴⁵ This regulation was basically identical to Regulation IX of 1808 and it is slightly puzzling why a new one was found to be necessary at all. While Regulation IX of 1808 mainly concerned *sirdars* or leaders of dacoit gangs it also referred to 'Gang-robbery', which would also apply to the four categories of robbers in the new regulation. Accordingly, it must have been considered necessary to specify these four types of criminals in the regulation, and emphasise the need for *zamindars* and others to cooperate with the police. This is the first time thugs appeared in the regulations as a distinct criminal category, and it is worth noticing that it was alongside fixtures of the colonial representation of indigenous crime. *Kazaks* were mounted marauders or bandits while Budheks were a 'tribe' or ethnic group who, however, were considered to be inherently criminal.⁴⁶ During this period Budheks were often expelled from the Company's possessions of which the Magistrate of Agra commented:

No man will ordinarily call himself a Dakoo, a Kuzzak, or a Thug, but a Buddhuk will avow himself a Buddhuk – it is in fact the designation of a race, which neither Dakoo, Thug, nor Kuzzak is – the provisions of Regulation VI 1810 appear to me a virtual order of expulsion from the Company's territories of the race of Budhuks. They are certainly a people infamous for robbery ... but the name expresses no otherwise than by popular estimation the character of a robber, and it appears contrary to the principles of penal law ... to conclude from a person being of a particular race that he is a robber.⁴⁷

The Magistrate's question touched upon a key problem regarding the perception of certain groups as being inherently criminal; if Budhek was a description of both a 'race' and of a criminal category, it naturally followed that all Budheks regardless of age and sex were to be imprisoned or deported. But when Budheks were mentioned in Regulation VI of 1810 alongside dacoits, *kazaks* and thugs, neither of which were ethnic groups, the differentiation between criminal and ethnic identity became increasingly blurred. Exactly what kind of criminal the thugs were was

not specified either. Thus it had not taken long from the discovery of thuggee until it became a legal, if unclear, category.

Alongside the legal improvements there were also new police measures being introduced. The type of robbers most commonly involved in highway robbery in the area was the *kazaks*, the mounted robbers mentioned in Regulation VI of 1810, and cavalry was thought to be the only means of protecting travellers against them. Detachments of irregular cavalry had been in use for some time to carry out police duties which necessitated mobility and armed force, but they now became regarded as indispensable in districts with undermanned *thanas* and where banditry was commonplace.⁴⁸ Lieut. Col. Gardner's Corps of Irregular Horse was established in 1809 and its 83 troopers initially deployed to support the police in Etawah. When the headquarters of the Corps was moved to Khasgunge, Gardner found the area to be in a very disorderly state and heavily infested with both *kazaks* and thugs.⁴⁹ According to Gardner, it was only the *zamindars* with links to the bandits who could find security for their possessions and travellers had to pay *barkandazes* or armed guards to escort them on the roads.⁵⁰ In the villages Gardner himself observed many horses whose owners had no visible means of supporting them, which he took as proof that they earned their livelihood by unlawful means. The mere presence of the Corps in Khasgunge had an immediate effect and in March 1810, 50 *kazaks* and *zamindars* surrendered themselves to Gardner, soon followed by a hundred more. These people were asking for pardon, and were willing to give full confessions of their offences and furnish security for their future good conduct. According to Gardner, the actual reason behind the mass surrender was hunger, 'for in many instances extreme want is the cause of their crimes'.⁵¹ Many of the *kazaks* were in fact confessing to crimes they had not committed simply to get food and thus it seems the need for subsistence was the cause of the high number of highway robberies in the area at the time.

At the same time Gardner was also gathering information on the thugs – described by him as 'inhuman wretches'.⁵² A large gang of thugs apparently lived under the protection of one of the bigger *zamindars* of Etah, whom Gardner was told received a fourth of the booty as well as horses from the leaders of the gang. In his reports to the Government, Gardner pointed out the futility in trying to obtain the evidence legally required to bring the thugs to justice as they never left any witnesses.⁵³ Gardner's interest in thuggee shows that by 1810 it had become a general concern of the authorities in the Ceded and Conquered Provinces, and furthermore that information was actively being sought from the

population. There was of course nothing new in the claim that the *zamindars* were sheltering robbers as well as receiving a share of their loot, but that this also applied to thuggee might have suggested an even more sinister phenomenon. And while Gardner was busy in Etawah several cases of thuggee were being uncovered in the district of Farrukhabad as well.

The report of Mr Wright

After the discovery of three bodies in March 1810, following another case a month earlier, the assistant to the Magistrate of Farrukhabad, W. Wright, was personally despatched to carry out an investigation.⁵⁴ Although his exertions ultimately proved unsuccessful, Wright's report on the case became an important document in the early phase of the Company's encounter with thuggee.⁵⁵ The local *darogha* was certain the murderers were thugs because of the marks from strangulation found on the naked bodies and the victims were thought to be sepoys from the fashion in which their hair was tied up. When a single shoe was found, Wright ordered that the place should be searched more carefully, and a fourth body was soon after discovered with its bowels hanging out. Enquiries were made at the different *serais* in the area, but the watchmen appeared to be afraid that suspicion should fall on them and were reluctant to pass on any information.

Wright found that the local police was not working efficiently and that certain *thanadars* were in the pocket of powerful *zamindars* and if these were harbouring thugs, no knowledge of the murders could ever reach the British authorities. He further surmised that the sepoys had been on their way home on leave of absence and had met with a party of thugs with whom they may have put up for the night at some *serai* or *chaultri*. The thugs would have woken them early in the night pretending that it was near dawn and thus tricked them into leaving. Wright made special notice of the degree of secrecy with which the deed had been executed: after being strangled, stripped, rifled and stabbed, the bodies had been thrown into a pit dug for the purpose. From the information that Wright gathered among the locals it appeared that the thugs were usually of the low class of Muslims called 'Munhars' and were protected by *zamindars*. Their gangs consisted of up to eight persons and if they lived within Company territories, they would go on expeditions into the Maratha states and *vice versa*. In the pursuit of their crimes the thugs disguised themselves as mendicants, wealthy people, Brahmins or *pundits* and they would sedate their victims with the seed of the

dathura. Once the poison had incapacitated the travellers they would be strangled to prevent them from crying out, then stabbed in the belly and thrown into a well – the bodies were stabbed on the very edge of the well so as not to spill any blood on the ground or on their clothes. Wright also referred to the local belief that the thugs had recourse to sorcery and that their success in executing their crimes could be attributed to this.

The thugs were supposed to have been more numerous and less cautious before the area was ceded to the British, but Wright still thought that their crimes were becoming more prevalent. He therefore suggested that the Nizam Adalat should arrange for all information on murders and suspects to be collected and distributed throughout the districts to all judges and magistrates. Like Steer, Wright argued that thuggee could only be defeated through equally cunning and secret measures and thus spies should be posted along roads where attacks took place. These spies should get the *thanadars* to arrest suspicious people and hold them if they were found to be in possession of poison, knives or a cord. Prostitutes would make especially good spies, Wright argued, since the thugs, like most criminals, squandered away their money and were much addicted to drinking and women.⁵⁶ Another possibility was to protect travellers with horsemen and by posting *sowars* at small intervals along the roads to discourage robbers. Wright finished his report by stating that an order should be issued to warn sepoys against thugs and advise them not to join other travellers on the road, especially not unarmed ones, not to quit the *serais* before dawn, and not to accept any food, tobacco or drink from strangers.

Wright's investigation had a remarkable resemblance to what one might describe as proper detective methods and the state of the bodies and thugs' methods and murder were presented in an almost forensic and matter-of-fact manner. It is quite exceptional for an English official at this time to put such efforts into an inquiry on the death of three unidentified Indians, which goes to show that there was an increased awareness that these crimes were important; an awareness that was not present when, for instance, Law reported on the first discovery of bodies. The information gathered about thuggee is interesting since it was provided by the local *daroghas* and villagers and, regardless of the colonial representation of Indian crime, it is indisputable that there was an indigenous perception of thuggee as a specific secret type of murder at this point of time. The mention of sorcery implies that Wright was also treated to the local account of thuggee, but the physical evidence would have convinced him of the basic veracity of what he was told.

Upon receiving Wright's report the Vice President in Council expressed his deep concern and immediately approved of the further use of spies with reference to the success with which they had been employed against dacoits in Bengal.⁵⁷ However, the spies were to be used with caution and should never be invested with any power or even with a warrant, as their job was only to obtain information and point out offenders. A regulation was also passed for the appointment of a Superintendent of Police for the division of Benares and Bareilly, whose primary object was the apprehension of 'Dacoits, Cozauks, Thugs, Buddecks and other descriptions of public robbers', in other words the exact same categories of criminals as specified in Regulation VI of 1810.⁵⁸ The Superintendent was to keep himself informed through communication with the local Magistrates, *daroghas* and *zamindars* and to report to the Government on the prevalence of violent crime. The magistrates and judges of the region were at the same time instructed to lend their full cooperation to the Superintendent. The appointment of a Superintendent of Police whose sole responsibility was to combat violent crime is a strong indication of the severity with which the British Government perceived the situation.⁵⁹ While it was not the problem of thuggee alone that prompted the establishment of this office, Wright's report became the occasion for its execution. Wright was also commended by the Government for his exertions and furthermore invested with the powers of Magistrate in the districts of Farrukhabad and Cawnpore. Accordingly, a display of vigilance and initiative when fighting violent crime could easily lead to promotion. Wright's report was later circulated to all Magistrates in the Ceded and Conquered Provinces together with a statement from the Government stressing the importance of suppressing thuggee.⁶⁰

Wright's advice eventually led to the issue of a general order from Maj. Gen. St. Leger at Cawnpore on 28 April 1810, which directed the commanding officers in the Company's regiments to warn their sepoy about thugs.⁶¹ The order contained all the details of Wright's report regarding thuggee and sepoy were warned that they were especially likely to be attacked when going on leave, as they usually carried their savings on them and furthermore were unarmed. It is worth noticing that the incentive for the issue of this order did not come from the army and it is impossible to say whether the disappearance of sepoy actually posed a problem. The protection of its sepoy was of course essential to the Company in a period of almost continuous warfare, yet, the fact that the initiative came from the civil authorities goes to show that the concept of thuggee had now become believable and plausible enough for

the army to respond as if the information had been verified. Concurrent with Wright's report and the army order, the new Magistrate in Etawah was also making progress and more detailed information about thuggee was beginning to emerge. Only a year earlier thuggee had been virtually unheard of, but was now the cause of much alarm and considerable consternation among the British authorities in Northern India.

4

Thomas Perry and the First Arrests

Having taken over from the discredited Law as Magistrate of Etawah, Perry was expected to exceed his predecessor's efforts and succeed in apprehending the murderers who infested the roads of the district. Between 1808 and 1809, a total of 67 bodies had been found in wells and along the high roads in Etawah, and in the first three months of 1810, 11 more bodies were found between Mainpuri and Agra.¹ By making inquiries with *zamindars* and other 'respectable persons' Perry found that the offenders were not 'a barbarous and savage race living in ravines and jungles' as previously thought, but said to be inhabitants of the district and protected by 'mercenary individuals'.² In view of this Perry offered a reward of Rs 1000 – a vast sum at the time – for information that could lead to the apprehension of the perpetrators. This strategy paid off and in March 1810 the *daroghas* of Shekohabad arrested eight suspected thugs, one of whom agreed to testify against his accomplices in return for a pardon.³

This prisoner was the 16-year-old Ghulam Hussain and though reluctant to disclose too much, he recounted several instances of murders committed by their gang.⁴ Hussain was by his own account a mere novice and had only been affiliated with the thugs for six months, but Perry nevertheless attached a great weight to his testimony and, accordingly, requested that he be pardoned in the hope that the information thereby obtained would eventually lead to the suppression of the offence. The pardon for Hussain was immediately granted, but Perry was still concerned about the poor prospects of getting any of the prisoners convicted.⁵ Since the crime in question was carried out with much secrecy, there seemed little chance of ever obtaining circumstantial

evidence against the thugs and so the convictions had to rest on the doubtful testimony of accomplices. Even though the law demanded solid evidence, it was Perry's firm conviction that the prisoners should not be allowed to go free merely by providing security for their future good behaviour – that would, he claimed, be an act of cruelty against the public.⁶

Once pardoned, Hussain readily disclosed what he knew, beginning with his own background when as a child he had been adopted by the thugs who had killed his father and uncle.⁷ He had not been brought up as a thug, though, but left his adoptive father when he got older and held various menial positions, before he was enticed to rejoin the thugs. Hussain claimed to have been on only one expedition, but did provide more general information, such as the existence of 1500 thugs supposedly living in Etawah, and who went on expeditions as far away as Lucknow, Jaipur and Bundelkhand. He also explained how the thugs committed their murders: 'The professed ones strangle with any part of their cloth and afterwards inflict wounds with a knife. They do not use the cords for fear of detection. Mere novices in the art administer the seeds of Dutoora which deprives their object of his senses when they plunder him.'⁸

That Perry should place so much faith in the testimony of a 16-year-old, who by his own admission had only very limited knowledge of thuggee, reflects the desperation of the authorities in obtaining information on thuggee. It was, however, the first time a thug informed extensively against his accomplices and, moreover, provided an account of thuggee as a wide-ranging phenomenon. Perry shortly afterwards obtained the depositions of the remaining seven prisoners who had been caught along with Hussain.⁹ Only one acknowledged having committed crimes within the Company's territories, but they all admitted being guilty of robbery and murder in foreign states. Yet Perry did not commit them for trial immediately, and he felt compelled to solicit the instructions of the Government with respect to the mode of prosecution which ultimately should be conducted against them. The prisoners recounted how they had been able to pay for their release when arrested by indigenous authorities and this, Perry argued, proved the necessity for the enactment of a special law for their exemplary punishment. The Government expressed its satisfaction with Perry's exertions, but rejected the idea of special legal provisions being adopted for the conviction of thugs – a position worth noticing in light of later events.¹⁰

On the basis of the information gathered from Hussain, the other prisoners and local *zamindars*, Perry issued warrants for a number of people

and had soon apprehended 70 suspected thugs. He now faced the problem of backing up his arrests with hard evidence and proving their guilt. On an earlier occasion Perry had been ordered to release a man he held against security on suspicion of being a thug, although there was no admissible evidence against this person.¹¹ Thus we find that he was holding people against whom he had no proof until they could provide security, which in reality meant that he could keep them imprisoned for an unlimited period of time without trial, as security often was impossible for suspects to procure. And Perry continued to implore the Government to take new measures to insure the imprisonment and conviction of thugs, arguing that while the: ‘class of Badhaks are in most instances robbers it does not follow that every man who has the misfortune to be born a Badhak should be by nature a Dacoit, whereas it is improbable that a person whether Hindoo or Musulman can be justly denominated a Thug without being a notorious murderer’.¹²

Perry did not specify how one could ‘justly denominate’ somebody as a thug and it is not impossible that he thought public suspicion was sufficient proof. On the other hand he made a clear distinction between thugs and Budheks, that is the former were *not* perceived as a distinct ‘ethnic’ group like the latter. The only thing that could bring about the suppression of thuggee, in Perry’s opinion, was the enactment of a regulation declaring such offenders subject to imprisonment and transportation for life. Even though he mentioned ‘conviction by fully satisfactory evidence and investigation’, Perry still side-stepped the issue of clearly defining thuggee. Although the Government found Perry’s exertions to be laudable, conviction on the sole basis of public notoriety was not considered an acceptable procedure.¹³ As far as the Government was concerned, thuggee was to be stamped out by the vigilance of the police in bringing the offenders to trial for specific crimes, and when that was not possible suspects could still be held against security. It is rather puzzling that the Government should encourage Perry to keep suspects against security, when less than a month before he had been ordered to release a person held under that very regulation. In other words, Perry was receiving conflicting orders from the courts and from the Judicial Department of Government respectively, which implies a basic tension within the administration. The Government and the courts had different legal agendas, which reflected their different responsibilities and this conflict came to the fore in the context of thuggee. In the event, the question of the legal measures to be implemented against thuggee remained unresolved – which became plainly obvious as the first thug trial with Hussain as the prime witness came under way in Mainpuri.

The trial of Ghulam Hussain

On 9 November 1810, the four prisoners, Udjbah, Dundhar, Ramzane and Dhondhee, were brought before Judge Brooke at the Session of Circuit, accused of various murders as thugs – a charge they all denied.¹⁴ Ghulam Hussain was the key witness in the trial and, before giving testimony, he was reminded that his pardon was conditional of him telling the truth and that if his testimony in court differed from that earlier given before Perry, his life would be forfeited. Hussain swore by the Koran and stated that he was 20 years old, a Sayid, born in the city of Rampur and that his name was Ghulam Rufsool and not Hussain as earlier stated. He then recounted how, at the age of six, he had travelled with his father and uncle to Lucknow to sell horses and on the way they had joined another party with whom they travelled for several days. As they set out one early morning, four of the other party fell behind with Hussain while the others went on with his father and uncle and – as he later found out – murdered them. Hussain himself was taken back to the house of one of the thugs, who adopted him. When his adoptive father died six years later, Hussain left and took up various odd jobs. At one point he met some of the thugs that he knew from previous acquaintance and he went along with Udjbah, one of the accused at the trial, with whom he had since stayed in Shekohabad. Judge Brooke interrupted Hussain several times and pointed out the discrepancies concerning the names and dates of his testimony and reminded the witness of the conditions of his pardon.

As Hussain resumed his account he gave the details of the one expedition he claimed to have taken part in along with Udjbah. On the road near Allahabad the gang had joined two Afghans and one early morning four thugs, including three of the suspects of the trial: ‘with a strip of cloth the length of a *guz* and a quarter, flung a noose about the neck of [*the two Afghans*], and drew it tight like a hatter; as soon as the travellers fell, and began to struggle, they dug out their eyes with a knife, and stabbed them in the belly’. When asked by the judge, Hussain claimed that he knew of no other persons who had been killed by the accused. Three of the suspects were subsequently allowed to question Hussain in the court and this resulted in an altercation between them. Hussain then addressed the judge and said that since the thugs were now arguing with him, he would disclose the details of a further 14 murders they had committed. From then on the trial turned into a farce as Hussain continued to change his testimony over the course of the five days the trial lasted. He was repeatedly admonished and reminded that his

pardon would stand even if he admitted to murder, but not if he lied or withheld anything.

In between changing his deposition as regards the degree of his own involvement with the thugs, Hussain also provided more general information on thuggee – he even demonstrated how the thugs strangled, using a person at the court as a model victim. Some of the questions put to him by Judge Brooke also reflected a somewhat absurd perception of the manners and habits of Indian criminals. Hussain was asked if young thugs occasionally dressed up as women in order to deceive travellers and whether the thugs shared their wives among themselves.¹⁵ Brooke was also interested in getting information on unidentified bodies that had been discovered and in one case Hussain could actually confirm that they had been strangled while he was present. Asked whether he knew anything about one specific case, where ten bodies had been found in a well, he replied: 'No[,] the thugs have killed a thousand people.'

Throughout the trial only Hussain gave testimony, repeating it over and over, and it gradually turned into a trial of him rather than of the four accused. As it eventually transpired, Hussain had been with the thugs ever since his relatives were murdered and in the end he admitted to having been on five expeditions with the thugs and witnessed 95 murders altogether. His real name was (apparently) Ghulam Hussain and he was not a Sayid, but a Pathan born at Rampur. He had been advised to lie about his real name and his family by the *darogha* who arrested him. In order to get the reward issued by Perry, the *darogha* had made Hussain swear by the Koran to make a statement in front of the Magistrate about the thugs in return for the *darogha's* help. There was furthermore an understanding between Udjbah and Hussain that the latter should conceal the involvement of the former, but after the argument in court Hussain had decided not to keep quiet. Thus it appears that Hussain's apprehension in the first place was motivated by the reward Perry had issued and not by any increased vigilance on behalf of the local police. It seems very likely that Hussain's association with the thugs had been common knowledge and that the *darogha* had only arrested him when the reward made it worthwhile to do so.

That Hussain had committed perjury and admitted to lying in the court clearly made him fall into disfavour with Brooke. When the judge asked about Hussain's family relations, for the umpteenth time he warned him that the truth would come to light and that if Hussain was still practising 'thug deception' he should admit it. When the judge questioned Hussain on the final day of the trial, he exclaimed: 'you have sought to impose on



Figure 4 Thug prisoners in the jail of Aurangabad (illustration by Alphonse de Neuville from *L'Inde des Rajahs*, 1875)

the court, and on the very Koran itself, the deception of a thug.' Accordingly, lying in court was seen as an extension of the thug's professional deception. At the conclusion of the trial, Brooke deliberated that Hussain, by lying in court, had rendered his pardon null and void and thereby forfeited his life: 'From these contradictory statements, it is impossible to know to what further extent you have pursued your diabolical trade; and how many may not have fallen a sacrifice to you in that period.'¹⁶ The judge subsequently ordered that Hussain should be committed for trial for the 95 murders he confessed to having been present at. In other words, Hussain's account of the thug expeditions and murders was never questioned. Even though he had been lying repeatedly and caught doing so, the basic veracity of his account of thuggee was not doubted. Thus we find that the belief in thuggee, even at this early stage, was such that while Brooke condemned Hussain for perjury, he accepted his account of thuggee at face value. The four original suspects were subsequently acquitted by Brooke while Hussain's case was submitted to the Nizam Adalat, where he was also acquitted along with the corrupt *darogha* from Shekohabad.¹⁷ The judgement of the Nizam Adalat in the case of Hussain ran as follows:

The deposition of the prisoner upon oath when examined as a witness before the Court of Circuit not being admissible for his own conviction, and there not appearing to be any proof of the prisoner's guilt except his own confession; the Court under the discretion given by the Futwa of their Law officer, do not judge it proper to sentence the prisoner Gholam Hossain to any specific punishment.¹⁸

In the end Perry was ordered to release the four suspects and Hussain after they had furnished 'substantial' security for their future good behaviour. In the report on the trial that Brooke submitted to the Government, he also enclosed the different examinations of Hussain, which he claimed:

are undoubtedly the most extraordinary which ever came before the court of justice; They contain the avowal of crimes which could never be presumed to have existence in any civilised country, more particularly in one placed under the protection of the British administration. They afford also abundant proof of the shocking depravity, and merciless unfeeling disposition of a great portion of the inhabitants of these provinces.¹⁹

It is evident from this that the occurrence of thuggee was thought of as a blemish on British rule in India, and furthermore, the depravity of thuggee was seen to reflect on the indigenous population more generally. It seems likely that the total failure of securing any convictions in this trial is one of the main reasons that the early campaign against thuggee never really gained impetus. Ghulam Hussain was the first captured thug ever to submit substantial information and yet, due to the legal dismissal of his testimony, nothing came of it. It thus signalled the manifest failure on part of the authorities and created a very poor precedent for future cases.

Thomas Perry and the Nizamat Adalat

The outcome of the trial also had further repercussions for Perry, who had already attracted the disapproval of his superiors over his cavalier handling of suspects held without evidence. During his bi-annual circuit of the district, Brooke pointed out that in Perry's jail there were no less than 162 suspected thugs awaiting trial, who had been apprehended solely on the basis of information furnished by *goindas* or paid spies.²⁰ Even though thuggee was horrible, Brooke did not consider denunciation by *goindas* sufficient to imprison people and the system might 'inflict more misery on the community than the evil it seeks to remedy'.²¹ During the following session of the Court of Circuit, in 1811, Judge Burges reversed most of Perry's sentences, either releasing prisoners or substantially reducing the amounts of security they were held against.²² Perry was furious at having been so thoroughly overruled, and wrote a lengthy letter of complaint to the Nizamat Adalat, in which he brought to notice: 'the evils which may arise from a stern adherence to the order of the Nizamat Adalat, and the danger of depriving the magistrates, of the exercise of a discretion, with respect to the release, and detention of persons of bad character'.²³ He argued that when no evidence existed against known criminals, it should still be allowed for the magistrates to hold them in prison against security. For Perry it was obviously a matter of keeping 'bad characters' under close watch to ensure the safety of the public at all costs, even if this entailed a breach of the regulations.

In defence of his conduct Perry could show that murders by thugs in Etawah had decreased under his administration, with only four bodies having been found since September 1810, compared with 28 in 1808 and 39 in 1809.²⁴ As a final resort he brought his complaint before Government and following yet more criticism from the Nizamat Adalat,

he repeated his former arguments:

The Court of Nizam Adalat is aware of the nature of the offence, committed by the people called 'Thugs' ... if I had released all those, who have been seized, after satisfying my own mind of the probability of their guilt, merely because perfect evidence against them was not immediately to be had, the race of thugs instead of being now greatly extinct, would still have existed for the furtherance of the most cruel, and barbarous destruction.²⁵

Perry's explanations, however, were to no avail and he was censured by the Nizam Adalat again in October 1811.²⁶ The direct cause this time was that Perry had invested a *taluqdar* with powers to seize suspected thugs in the district of Aligarh, that is outside of his jurisdiction, and furthermore instructed the *taluqdar* to do so with or without the assistance of local *daroghas*.²⁷ Even though the court found his intentions to be laudable, Perry's actions were still considered 'irregular and objectionable'.

When two bodies were found in February 1812, Perry made a point of reporting that the tranquillity, which had reigned in Etawah for more than a year and had led him to suppose that thuggee had ceased to exist, was now all but ruined.²⁸ It was suspected that the thugs who had committed these murders came from Firozabad, but as Perry had been specifically prohibited by the Nizam Adalat from communicating directly with the police officers of adjacent districts, he felt unable to do anything in this regard. Perry also reminded the Government that his arrest of numerous thugs in 1810 could not have been achieved without breaching the regulations, and yet again argued that the secret nature of these crimes warranted minor transgressions. To enable him to act more efficiently in the future Perry therefore requested to be granted more power in relation to the four neighbouring districts. This time the Governor General responded positively and expressed his satisfaction with Perry's exertions, although the latter was reminded that his actions had not been quite in accordance with the regulations and that: 'It consequently could not be sanctioned by a court bound as the Nizam Adalat of course is to exercise the control with which it is invested over the proceedings of the magistrates in strict conformity to the provisions of the existing regulations.'²⁹ To prevent such problems from arising in the future Perry was invested with joint power of Magistrate in Aligarh, Cawnpore and Farrukhabad. In other words, the Nizam Adalat's disapproval of Perry resulted in the Governor General investing him with further authority. This reflects a clear conflict of interests and, while

acknowledging that the Magistrate had broken the regulations, the Governor General merely made provisions to circumvent the problem of jurisdiction. Accordingly, there was no new legislation but only patchy solutions in the face of continued disputes between the different levels in the colonial administration. In spite of protests from two of the Magistrates, Perry was eventually invested with powers of Joint Magistrate in the three districts 'with a view to the more effectual apprehension of the class of criminals ordinarily denominated Thugs'.³⁰ In a report to the Superintendent of Police, Perry shortly afterwards expressed his view: 'Although I despair of being able to convict a thug still it is better that they should remain in jail than be allowed unmolested to carry on their system of murder & depredation.'³¹ He thus openly admitted that in the absence of the possibility of convicting thugs, he still preferred to keep them detained. This sentiment, however, was not shared by all magistrates in Northern India and disputes similar to those between Perry and the courts were also played out elsewhere.

The case of Mr Ernst

The reality of the phenomenon of thuggee was not altogether uncontested and the existing scepticism was in large part related to the measures used in apprehending criminals. In the eastern district of Hooghly the prevalence of dacoity in 1808 made the Government invest W. C. Blacquiere with powers of Joint Magistrate to deal with the problem, which deeply offended the officiating Magistrate, Ernst, who felt his superiors lacked faith in his ability to run the district.³² Ernst claimed that dacoity within his district had actually decreased during his time and he was worried that Blacquiere was sending disguised *goindas* into his district. The Government, though, ignored these complaints and directed him to cooperate with Blacquiere, while Ernst maintained that the instances of dacoity that took place within his district were actually instigated by Blacquiere's *goindas*.³³ The controversy escalated when Ernst arrested some of the *goindas* and demanded that Blacquiere handed over others to stand trial.³⁴ Not unexpectedly, Blacquiere flatly refused to do so, claiming that his use of *goindas* was in full accordance with the regulations as they were never authorised with any powers whatsoever.³⁵ The Government sided with Blacquiere in the dispute and Ernst was eventually removed from his post at Hooghly and became third judge of the Court of Circuit in Benares.³⁶ The Nizamat Adalat later pronounced that Blacquiere's *goindas* had in fact been extorting money from an innocent Brahmin, but that the use of *goindas* was a useful and

necessary means of apprehending dacoits, thereby implying that such mishaps had to be tolerated.³⁷ Ernst continued to complain, though, both about his removal and about the widespread use of *goindas* – eventually extending his criticism of the police system at the time when the concern over thuggee had reached its highpoint during the summer of 1810. Commenting on Wright’s report, Ernst said:

I have heard a good deal of late of the Thugs and some of their practices came before me during the circuit. But they fall very short of those[,] which are ascribed to them in Mr Wright’s letter to the government. I know that several instances have occurred in the district of Etawah, Allyghur and Furruckabad of the bodies of sepoy and other shaving been found in wells, but it has not been ascertained, I believe, that they were massacred with all the circumstances of barbarity described in Mr Wright’s letter, and I have reason to believe that the thugs in general do not resort to ‘poison, or the cord or the knife’ but merely employ the seeds of a narcotic, called Dhattora, in order to preclude resistance, and to escape detection.³⁸

Ernst described three cases of thuggee that had been tried by him and in which dathura had been administered to travellers merely for the purpose of robbing them. In one case the thug was an old woman, and the perpetrators in the two others were Rajputs and Bairagis.³⁹ Thus it appears that Ernst’s thug-cases were simple confidence-thefts where the victims had been rendered unconscious and robbed, but otherwise left unharmed. Ernst stressed this point because the horror caused by Wright’s report had disposed the Government to warrant the use of spies and prostitutes as informers. In Ernst’s opinion thuggee was not a serious problem and would disappear as soon as travellers learned to be more careful and not accept food from strangers. He furthermore recommended that magistrates actually be prohibited from sending out spies along the roads and to the *serais*, ‘as I should be very sorry to see the Upper Provinces subjected to the long train of evils which have been experienced in Bengal from the agency of Goeyindahs’.⁴⁰ In response, the Nizammat Adalat declared Ernst’s comments and complaint to be highly improper and a week later Ernst was dismissed from his office.⁴¹ Ernst’s observations on thuggee were also severely criticised by Dowdeswell, Secretary to the Judicial Department, who called it ‘to the last degree imperfect’.⁴² Dowdeswell referred to the depositions of the thugs captured by Perry as a ‘different and much more accurate description of this atrocious and sanguinary race of criminals’.

This case offers an interesting insight to the mechanisms and power of the official stereotype of indigenous crime and criminals. First of all, the role of the *goindas* was never very clear; sometimes they worked merely as police-agents and sometimes as *agent provocateurs* taking active part in crimes or even instigating them. Accordingly, it is quite understandable that Ernst should be less than enthusiastic about Blacquiere sending *goindas* into his district without his knowledge. The Government, however, perceived the problem of dacoity to be of an overriding importance, even though Blacquiere could not produce any material evidence to support his claims. Though it was acknowledged that Blacquiere's *goindas* had acted unlawfully, the Nizamat Adalat still considered their use an indispensable tool in procuring the apprehension of criminals. This reflects a perception of Indian crime that ignores evidence that does not comply with it. The belief in the prevalence of dacoity in the district of Hooghly was strong enough for the Government to turn its blind eye to obvious and gross violations of its own regulations. One explanation for this was that Blacquiere, by way of his *goindas*, could claim to be able to tap into a layer of Indian society otherwise inaccessible to the British. Thus Blacquiere offered an immediate remedy against the seeming lack of information on violent crime. Ernst's objections and denial of the extent of crime in that respect only proved Blacquiere's claims, as it demonstrated that the former did not possess the same access to information as the latter.

When it came to Ernst's qualification of Wright's report it actually touched upon a very central aspect of the perception of thuggee. Ernst's understanding of the term 'thug' was in full accordance with the general indigenous use of the word, meaning a cheat or confidence thief, or any criminal who robbed by deception. In the event this would also include robbers who strangled their victims, but not apply to them exclusively. Accordingly, Ernst was only pointing out that not all criminals denominated 'thugs' were murderers, but were as often harmless cheats and pickpockets – as indeed in the case where the thug was an old woman. But the Government was not at this point prepared to accept the problem of definition; on the contrary, it was so sure of the veracity of its knowledge of thuggee that any criticism was regarded as an act of insubordination and disrespect. The prospects of an information panic that went as far as the native spies and informers must also have been truly devastating to the British authorities. And any dissent from the official policy was quickly silenced, as Ernst realised when the Government went as far as to remove him from his office when he continued to criticise its policy. The whole issue of spies, informers and knowledge of thuggee

is quite important as the use of approvers gradually became *the* key to suppressing violent crime in the form of thuggee in the 1830s and dacoity in the 1840s. In 1810, however, there still remained the issue of getting a conviction at court once the suspected thugs had been arrested.

Thuggee and the courts

The early attempts to accommodate thuggee within the developing judicial system of the colonial state were characterised by a basic contradiction: the reality of the crime was not really questioned yet not a single person was ever convicted of being a thug.⁴³ Commenting on this issue, the Superintendent of Police stated that: 'although in many instances they have on these grounds been convicted and sentenced to death by the judges and the law officers of the Court of Circuit, they have in all, so far as I am informed, received sentences of acquittal and release from the Court of the Nizamut Adalat, because the Superior Court has judged their confessions of guilt, not entitled to credit'.⁴⁴ The district Magistrates on their hand were trying hard to apprehend the offenders and make them confess to the murders of travellers that occurred within their jurisdiction. However, once the suspected thugs had been committed for trial, first before a judge of the Court of Circuit and then the Nizamut Adalat, the cases were inevitably dismissed and the suspects discharged. In the case of Tuhowar Khan and his two brothers, who were apprehended on the basis of public notoriety and brought to trial in July 1812, we have one of the few accounts of such proceedings.⁴⁵ The suspects had been charged with being thugs 'or persons notoriously addicted to highway robbery and murder' and Tuhowar Khan had confessed to murdering travellers. The only witnesses in the case were an 84-year-old man and Hussain, neither of whom could testify to specific acts of murder having been committed by the suspects.⁴⁶ Since it could not be proven that Tuhowar Khan and his brothers were actually notorious, the judge of Court of Circuit ordered their unconditional release. However, as the law officer of the court declared that Tuhowar Khan was in fact liable to punishment on the basis of his own confession, the case was referred to the Nizamut Adalat. At this court the same thing occurred:

The *fatwa* of the law officers of the Nizamut Adawlut recited, that the prisoner Tuhowar Khan was convicted, on his own confession, and by the testimony of Wilayutee and Gholam Hoosein, of being a *thug*,

and that he was therefore liable to discretionary punishment by *Acoobut*. The Court (present Y. Burges and W. E. Rees), however, were not satisfied of the truth of the prisoner's confession; and as he was neither charged with, nor convicted of any specific offence, they did not judge it proper to sentence him to any punishment, but directed that he should be immediately discharged.⁴⁷

Thus the judges of both the Court of Circuit and the Nizamut Adalat had been given free hands by the law officers to convict the suspected thug according to Muslim law, and yet they chose to release him. There is little reason to think that the judges did not believe in the reality of thuggee; on the contrary, the case of Ernst shows how seriously any dissent from the official perception was taken. Why then did the judges not rally round the attempt to stamp out this type of crime which, as we have seen, was of great concern to the Government? If the attitude of Judge Brooke who resided in the trial against Hussain is anything to go by, there was no perceived inconsistency in believing in the existence of thuggee and at the same time not lending any credence to the confessions of suspected thugs and eventually ordering the release of such suspects. Brooke believed Hussain's account of how he had taken part in the murder of 95 persons, but his testimony was not considered adequate to convict the four suspects in that trial. Accordingly, if an approver or a suspect was caught lying during the trial, his testimony or confession was rendered useless as evidence – even against himself. The same inconsistent view was expressed very clearly by the Judicial Department in 1814:

We highly approve of the cautious principles acted upon by the Nizamut Adawlut, in not permitting the sentence of the law to take place on the members of that inhuman gang denominated Thugs, while convicted on no other testimony than their own confession. That association is stated in the confession of Golaum Hussein, a hardened Thug, to consist of upwards of one thousand persons, we do not place any reliance on the contradictory statement of this criminal ... but from the various other documents which have been furnished upon the subject of these Thugs we cannot but suppose that they amounted to a very considerable number.⁴⁸

Thus it appears that part of the reason for the dismissal of all thug cases was caused by the very dubious nature of the evidence. But while some of the Nizamut Adalat's criticism of Perry's misconduct, for instance, was

based on very tangible concerns for the protection of innocents, much of it was also directed at his failure to comply with the numerous rules and regulations that constituted the bureaucracy of the judicial legislation. And in spite of an increased concern for the prevalence of thuggee and violent crime, the Government refused to implement any measures that would have facilitated the conviction of thugs. As far as the policing and detection of crimes was concerned, new initiatives were implemented all the time, but very few changes were made in the procedures of trial and the rule of evidence, at least none that effected the conviction of thugs. Thus we may discern a general conservatism within the administration and among the judges of the courts regarding a strict adherence to technicalities and the upholding of regulations. Accordingly, the judges of the Court of Circuit and Nizamat Adalat may have been reacting against what they perceived to be overzealous magistrates who repeatedly breached the regulations, which the judges were charged with upholding.

It is also important to note that in the case of Tuhowar Khan, the Muslim law officers of both the Court of Circuit and the Nizamat Adalat considered the suspect to be liable to punishment, whereas the judges of both courts thought the confession was insufficient and dismissed the case altogether.⁴⁹ The judges of the courts had to comply with the *fatwa* of the law officers; the former determined the sentence according to their conviction while the latter decided whether the accused were guilty or not according to Islamic law. The only option available to the judges if they did not concur with the *fatwa* was to declare the evidence to be insufficient or grant a mitigated sentence or complete pardon – which is exactly what they seem to have done in the cases of suspected thugs.⁵⁰ The pervasive distrust of the law officers as representatives of Muslim law may therefore be the actual reason that the judges did not convict any thugs. At a trial of thugs at Bithoor both the judge and the law officer of the court actually concurred that the suspects were in fact innocent and, in the words of Judge Kerr: ‘The only evidence against the prisoners were their unconfirmed confessions which were sullied with such a degree of contamination, *that even the Mahommedan Law that seldom rejects the evidence of a prisoner’s confession* rejected them ...’ (my italics).⁵¹ This would seem to imply that the law officers were usually regarded as being far too willing to accept ‘tainted’ and ‘spurious’ confessions of prisoners, even though the testimony of a criminal was not theoretically admissible according to Muslim law. People suspected of being thugs were released, then, not because their confessions were

not believed, but because their confessions were the only evidence and dismissing it was the only way the judges could counteract the influence of Muslim law. And while the courts continued to dismiss the cases and release people apprehended on the suspicion of thuggee, the measures to fight the thugs and various robbers in the districts of the Doab continued unabated.

5

N. J. Halhed in Sindouse, October 1812

N. J. Halhed was another key character in the early operations against the thugs. Halhed was invested with the power of Joint Magistrate in Aligarh early in 1810 because of the prevalence of crime, which Ross, the Presiding Magistrate, did not have the time to deal with.¹ According to Ross, the district was far too big for the existing police establishment to patrol with any effect, and: 'the greatest part of the population consists of Goojurs, Jats and Mewatties (notorious thieves & robbers) and that the habits of all the lowest classes are so completely vicious that no consideration whatever but the fear of immediate punishment will restrain them from the commission of any crime however enormous'.² Halhed was given charge of the 15 most troublesome *thanas* in Aligarh and lost no time in aggressively pursuing the object of his assignment and in May 1810, for instance, set out with 60 troopers plus 100 native auxiliaries to apprehend the noted *kazak* Kessurree Sing.³ The *kazak* had taken refuge in the fort of Jharow and when the *zamindar* refused to give him up, Halhed laid siege to the place and bombarded it with artillery. The fire exchange lasted a whole day but during the night Kessurree Sing managed to escape along with the defenders of the fort, among them the brother of a notorious thug. Halhed was later informed that the fort was a well-known haunt of *kazaks* and thugs and that it had twice been besieged by the French General Perron.⁴ The fort had eventually been destroyed only to be rebuilt later, but Halhed destroyed it again along with several other strongholds in the area. Apart from the mention of *kazaks* and thugs, Halhed referred to the defenders of the fort as 'rebels', and his course of action was quite similar to the military operations undertaken against other refractory *zamindars*, such as the siege of Sarsney

in 1802. Accordingly, the measures used to implement the revenue system and in suppressing banditry were sometimes identical, and both entailed the forceful reduction of the local *zamindars*.

On 10 August 1810, a resolution had been passed for the establishment of a Superintendent of Police for the division of Bareilly and Benares (Western Provinces) and G. D. Guthrie was appointed to that position.⁵ The primary object of his appointment, Guthrie was informed, was the apprehension of dacoits, *kazaks* and thugs – but especially the latter:

It being an object of the highest importance to the peace and happiness of society throughout a very large portion of the Ceded and Conquered Provinces, to suppress the class of criminals ordinarily known by the appellation of Thugs, the Governor General in Council desires that you will give your earliest attention to this subject. The exertions of the Acting Magistrate of Etawah for the apprehension of offenders of that description, having been attended with considerable success it is desirable that you should take an early opportunity of communicating with Mr Perry, with a view to the final accomplishment of the object to which his efforts have been so laudably directed.⁶

These instructions clearly show just how important the Government regarded the elimination of thuggee and Guthrie was also given the Corps of Irregular Horse at his disposal. In spite of Halhed's earlier exertions in Aligarh, crime was still prevalent and Guthrie thus directed his attention towards that district.⁷ Apart from Budheks and *kazaks*, Guthrie could also report that thuggee, which had all but ceased in the district, had now recommenced in the *thanas* near the Jumna river. In one month three cases had occurred, while in August ten bodies were discovered in wells, with marks indicating that thugs had murdered them. At the same time Guthrie remained doubtful as to the usefulness of offering pardons to thugs willing to testify against their accomplices, when a single testimony would not be sufficient to obtain a conviction. Upon the receipt of this report the Government emphasised the need for Guthrie to give the problem his 'unremitted attention'.⁸

In March 1811 Halhed was made assistant to Guthrie and his first assignment was in Agra, where the Magistrate claimed that horse patrols had been inefficient against the *kazaks*.⁹ Here Halhed made use of the same heavy-handed approach which had proved successful in Aligarh, and in June he attacked a village and killed seven 'rebels' and a woman while serving a warrant for a 'refractory' *zamindar* (the bodies were afterwards gibbeted in the village).¹⁰ While crime slowly diminished in Agra,

the main problem remained the incursions made into that district by various robbers from the bordering territories of the Dowlut Rao Sindhia, the Rana of Gohad and the Raja of Bharatpur.¹¹ As mentioned earlier this was a common problem in the border areas of the Ceded and Conquered Provinces, and numerous attempts were made to get the indigenous rulers to cooperate – with varying results.¹² Halhed soon came to focus his attention on the southern *parganas* of Agra, where the border was constituted by the Chambal river, with the Maratha territories of Sindhia on the opposite side.¹³ At the bequest of Perry, Halhed was also given temporary control of the two *parganas* in the westernmost part of Etawah, where Perry claimed the *zamindars* were particularly ‘turbulent’.¹⁴ In the first half of 1812 Halhed repeatedly crossed the Chambal with troops and engaged in heavy fighting with dacoits in Sindhia’s territories, to which the latter had consented.¹⁵ Halhed eventually handed over the charge of Agra when a new Magistrate was appointed.

The area of Sindouse

Halhed had been too occupied in Agra to do anything about the *parganas* under his charge in Etawah, but now Perry reasoned that he could resume those responsibilities and the *thana* of Sindouse was added to his responsibilities in July 1812.¹⁶ *Thana* Sindouse was situated in the *pargana* of Parihara in the southernmost part of Etawah, bordering onto territory belonging to subjects of the Maratha state.¹⁷ Parihara had been attached to the British possessions in 1806–07 after it was ceded to the Company by the Nawab Vazir of Awadh.¹⁸ The *pargana*, however, had not been annexed to the British territories but farmed out to the Raja of Rampura, Madhoo Sing, who already had Parihara in his possession. The relation between the Company and Madhoo Sing was always strained as the revenue had to be coaxed out of the Raja.¹⁹ In 1809 Parihara was properly incorporated into the district of Etawah but initially no attempt was made to establish any direct control, mainly because of the hostility of the inhabitants. In March 1809, Law had reported that: ‘the inhabitants are so savage, that no attempt has been hitherto made to introduce any police amongst them; and that he has strong reason to believe, that any attempt of the kind would be attended with the massacre of the people who might be sent there’.²⁰ Law was subsequently directed to make a personal inspection of the place itself to assess the situation and in the meantime the introduction of a new system of police in Parihara was temporarily suspended.²¹ Apprehensive of the dangers of

visiting Parihara in person, Law contented himself by consulting the ruler of the neighbouring *pargana*, the friendly Raja of Sahson. The lengthy report on Parihara that Law later submitted, rather than being based on his own experience, thus reflected the views and attitudes of its neighbours who were inimical to the inhabitants of the unruly *pargana*. Law's account of Parihara certainly did nothing for the reputation of the place; it was supposedly inhabited by 'Tugs and marauders' who stored their immense loot in caves among the ravines of the area:

In short the Talooka may be considered as a great repository for stolen goods which are smuggled into different parts, as opportunities offer, and no attempt has ever yet been made by any former government, to drive these marauders and pests of society from their seemingly impenetrable strongholds. Without effecting this desirable object it would be extremely difficult to establish anything like an efficient police, and nothing I apprehend, but a strong military force could effect their expulsion from their formidable and numerous fastness. The country itself I think presents insuperable obstacles to the advance of troops and train for [how] it would be practicable to get battering guns thro' such narrow and rocked precipices is a military question which it would be presumptuous of me, to give an opinion upon.²²

In Law's opinion it would be preferable to leave the administration of the police in the hands of Raja Madhoo Sing, who had great influence over the inhabitants of Parihara and whom it would be practically impossible to dispossess.

Perry, who soon after replaced Law, strongly disagreed with the idea that Madhoo Sing should be put in charge of the police establishment in Parihara since the Raja was suspected of ignoring the 'system of plunder' that was carried out by his subjects and he was even suspected of receiving a share of the loot.²³ As it turned out, the British Government had a quite different agenda of its own; its main concern was to possess control of the right bank of the Jumna in an unbroken line from Etawah to Kalpi.²⁴ Thus Parihara had no intrinsic value to the British as it lay well to the south of the Jumna behind both the Chambal and Kunwari rivers. A British officer was eventually despatched to inspect the area and if possible trade Parihara with Madhoo Sing for any *parganas* in his possession on the right side of Jumna. But Madhoo Sing was not inclined to give up the districts, and the Government directed Perry to suspend any attempts to introduce a police establishment in Parihara until further notice.²⁵ Accordingly, it would seem that the geographical location of

Parihara at the periphery of the Company's interests made it superfluous to spend time and money on bringing it under the British rule of law. Nonetheless, Madhoo Sing must have felt the interest exhibited by the British too much for his liking and in April 1810 he evacuated the fort at Sindouse.²⁶

Yet the Government was still considering getting rid of the distant and unwanted areas and the British Resident at the Maratha court was even directed to approach Madhoo Sing while at the durbar at Gwalior and begin negotiations as to the exchange of *parganas*.²⁷ The negotiations over Parihara, though, came to nothing and a police force was eventually established in Sindouse, and soon reinforced by a company of sepoys.²⁸ The presence of the troops in Sindouse quickly improved the situation, according to Perry, who was optimistic that he could affect the reformation of: 'the licentious, turbulent, and predatory habits of the zamindars of those *pergunnahs*'.²⁹ The continued prevalence of thuggee, however, belied Perry's hopes and a year later he had to admit the impossibility of establishing a regular and efficient police in Parihara.³⁰ The situation was in fact so poor that the troops and local police hardly dared set foot outside the fort in Sindouse and thus had no way of asserting the Company's authority. In support of his request to hand over charge of the *pargana* to Halhed in the summer of 1812, Perry quoted from the reports of Lieut. Watkins who commanded the force at Sindouse.³¹ According to Watkins:

The zemeendars, though they do not actively engage in robbery and plundering, are yet the roots of the evil, and a few severe examples of them would, I think, tend more to promote the object in view, than the punishment of a greater number of those more actively employed. Each zemeendar has a distinct band of these plunderers under him, to whom he supplies money in advance while they are at home, and whose wives and families he supports, and protects, while they are abroad.³²

At the same time Watkins acknowledged the obstacles of making the inhabitants of Parihara assume an honest livelihood, as there was very little arable land and no trades in the *pargana*. By quoting Watkins, Perry made that officer's final suggestion his own: 'I think that a person on the spot, vested with authority to act promptly would be of considerable advantage.'³³ When Perry handed over to Halhed the charge of Parihara in July 1812, he was in effect passing on a problem he could not solve himself, and Halhed was given the thankless task of bringing law and order to the trouble spot of Sindouse.

Halhed in Sindouse

As the *zamindars* of Parihara refused to appear before Halhed to resolve the various issues regarding police and revenue, he had to go Sindouse in person.³⁴ Before he left, however, the Government made the explicit point that Halhed was 'not authorized to proceed against the persons described in his letter on any general suspicion or imputation of bad character and that he is to regulate his proceedings in regard to them by the provisions of the regulations'.³⁵ The Government was clearly not inclined to allow a repetition of the same breaches of the regulations which had caused the disapprobation of Perry by the Nizam Adalat on earlier occasions. Once having crossed the Chambal river, Halhed received a note from the British officer at Sindouse warning him that several of the local *zamindars*, among them one called Laljee, had assembled a large force and planned to cut him off in the ravines.³⁶ According to two thugs from Sindouse who had been interrogated by Perry earlier that year, Laljee had in fact a number of thugs living on his land as retainers.³⁷ Alarmed by this report Halhed obtained a military escort of 40 sepoys led by Lieut. Maunsell, in addition to the 16 *sowars* who acted as his bodyguard.³⁸ Leaving his records behind, Halhed proceeded with the escort plus three local guides whom the friendly Raja of Bhudowur insisted he take with him. It must have been with some apprehension that he arrived in Sindouse on 9 October and encamped in the fields just outside the town with his entourage – the fort itself was too dilapidated to offer any protection. The extent of Sindouse was quite indeterminable, situated as it was amidst the ravines with houses scattered all over the undulating landscape and even from the fort it was difficult to survey the surrounding area. Halhed's first report, written upon his arrival at Sindouse, reflects his agitated state of mind: 'I beg leave to state that I have arrived at the risk of my life which is now by no means secure ... I expect every hour to be attacked ...'.³⁹ Yet Halhed expressed the hope that he could still effect a 'reformation' of the recalcitrant population without having to proclaim martial law.

On the very same day, however, a further incident occurred, which certainly did not improve the prospects of a peaceful resolution to the introduction of law and order in Parihara. Halhed and another British officer suddenly fell violently ill and it was suspected an attempt had been made to poison them with the seeds of dathura mixed in milk they had just received from the village.⁴⁰ A doctor from Etawah was sent for and he confirmed that their symptoms indicated that some 'deleterious' drug had indeed been administered to them and that they owed 'their

lives to the strong purgative taken soon after the appearance of the unfavourable symptoms'.⁴¹ Halhed later reported that:

It has been ascertained from the Tahsildar, and others who have been in the habit of communication with the people resident in this quarter, that, it is by no means unusual for the Thugs to adopt such modes of getting rid of those inimical to them, whose situation prevents their being made away with by means more liable to discovery.⁴²

Distrust of the inhabitants of Sindouse had now been aroused and Halhed felt precautions had to be taken, 'as the people of the village were extremely assiduous in offering milk and flour to the people who came in with me ...' During the night the villagers, who had assembled nearby, sent in reconnaissance parties and Halhed was certain that they would have attacked and cut up the whole detachment had the poison worked. Though still unwell, he made a point of appearing at the parade of the troops the following morning in order to dispel any rumour that he was incapacitated. He was now informed that a large body of armed villagers under Laljee had fled into the Maratha territory and was afforded protection by Raja Madhoo Sing.

Two days later Halhed had fully recovered and was well enough to resume his work. To forestall any armed resistance and avoid bloodshed, he ordered the local *darogha* and police peons to search for arms in the neighbouring villages with help from the detachment of sepoys.⁴³ The *tahsildar* was first sent into the village of Chourella to get the inhabitants to remain quiet, but this had the opposite effect and 300 armed villagers turned out and opened fire on Halhed's troops from the nearby ravines. A small skirmish ensued before the villagers were driven back into the Maratha territory, and the village was searched for weapons while a few prisoners were taken. As the detachment was leaving Chourella, the villagers appeared again in great numbers and Halhed thought it prudent to withdraw to the camp at Sindouse. According to the prisoners, it was Laljee again who had assisted the inhabitants of Chourella and orchestrated the resistance, and Halhed decided to try to apprehend the *zamindar*. In Halhed's reporting of the event, the 'refractory' people of Parihara who opposed his measures had now become 'rebels' and thus the character of the whole operation changed dramatically. What had basically been a police operation had very quickly turned into a serious situation with the potential of open rebellion.

In the evening Halhed met with some of the local *zamindars* whom he 'endeavoured to impress ... with an idea of their duty, as subjects of

Government'.⁴⁴ He also translated several of the regulations to them, particularly Regulation VI of 1810, and suggested that some of the relatives of the *zamindars* should be attached to the local *thana* in order to strengthen the ties between the villages and the local authorities, and this was agreed upon. However, after Halhed had left, the *zamindars* held a *panchayat* where they asserted that they would be ruined if they were forced to follow the regulations. During the night most of the *zamindars* fled into the Maratha territories along with their families and belongings. This was also ascribed to Laljee's influence and Halhed tried to elicit the support of Sindhia's officials to apprehend him. Things were not turning out as planned, and on 15 October Halhed wrote to Perry asking him to come and help re-establish order in Sindouse.⁴⁵

Reporting on his proceedings and the failed attempt to make an arrangement with the *zamindars*, Halhed wrote: 'their chief revenue is realized from a participation in the spoils of a set of robberies in their pay and protected by them, whom they call Sepahies, but the rest of the world [call] Thugs'.⁴⁶ The *zamindars* would not agree on a revenue settlement, nor did they allow the land to be measured since it was the policy of the British to collect it directly from the *ryots*, thus circumventing the *zamindars*. Furthermore, the *zamindars* of the area could, in Halhed's estimate, command the support of 7500 armed men in addition to 8500 allies from within the Maratha territories. They therefore posed a direct threat to British authority: 'the power they possess under the feudal system, the whole population being armed and the face of the country adapted to their mode of fighting, renders them almost invincible ...'.⁴⁷ On the whole, Halhed's view of the state of Parihara was decidedly bleak:

Nothing like a village police exists, the whole country is one vast cantonment of a powerful army. Thefts are committed, so are murders, but these occurrences are not commonly reported to the thannah, the thefts are chiefly committed by the Thugs on the ill gotten gain of each other, the murders also from quarrels between them and the *zamindars* respecting the division of their spoil, occasionally the *zamindars* are the chief actors, and murder each other from an old grudge, or in affrays, respecting landed property.⁴⁸

Having spent nearly two weeks in Sindouse, Halhed clearly felt the situation was getting out of hand and the only effective measure he felt he could pursue was to disarm the entire population of Parihara. The concept of disarming the unruly and refractory parts of the population was a recurring feature of the British attempt to bring law and order to the

newly acquired parts of the Doab. That such a measure would leave the inhabitants unable to defend themselves against marauders from the Maratha territories, Halhed dismissed with reference to the 'intimate connections' that existed between these people. That he even contemplated to disarm a whole district, inhabited predominantly by martial Rajputs, reveals Halhed's anxiety and, perhaps, his inadequate grasp of the situation. Serious as the situation appeared then, however, it was soon to get much worse.

The attack on Halhed's party

On 22 October, Halhed, Lieut. Maunsell, and Ensign Girdlestone, with a dozen *sowars* and three guides, went for an evening ride about an hour before sunset.⁴⁹ On the way back to Sindouse they passed by the village of Bindowa near the border of the Maratha territory and took a route through the ravines, which actually marked the limits of the Company's possessions. The party followed the track down a narrow path into the ravines, when suddenly several hundred armed villagers who had lain in ambush rushed out and blocked their path. The position of Halhed's party was precarious: 'To move forward was death, to stand still to protract the period of our existence a very short time, to return was equally dangerous, for it is the custom of these villagers to rush on when the opposing or defending party retreat.' Halhed ordered the guides forward to try to dissuade the villagers as he himself and the others slowly retreated back up the path, where they could provide cover for the rearguard.

The situation quickly escalated, however, and in the ensuing confusion the villagers fell upon the guides and opened fire on the troops. Stuck on the narrow path, the party was showered by spears and bullets and Halhed had to dismount when his horse could not turn around and had a near-miss: 'a man was shot just before me by a rascal who had aimed at me, he fell, and at this moment the rebels cried out "we have killed a Feringee"'. Though wounded in the leg, Halhed made it to the top of the ravine where he learned from the rearguard that Maunsell, who had been right behind him, had fallen into the ravine and was now dead. The remaining troopers and Halhed returned fire to hold back the villagers, but eventually retreated to Bindowa with the wounded. Halhed expected the villagers at Bindowa to be hostile, but they remained quiet and at moonrise Girdlestone returned with reinforcements from Sindouse. In spite of Halhed's orders, Girdlestone refused to counterattack and revenge the murder of Maunsell as they had been

explicitly ordered not to attack any villages. Having recovered Maunsell's body, they eventually returned to camp at Sindouse where Halhed immediately wrote to Etawah requesting reinforcements including artillery.

Back in the safety of the camp at Sindouse, Halhed penned the following letter to a close friend of Maunsell's stationed at Etawah.:

My dear Sir

It is with the most heartfelt honor that it falls to my lot to communicate to you a most unfortunate circumstance, however I intreat you to compose your feelings before you turn over.

Ensign Girdlestone, Lieutenant Maunsell and myself this evening took a ride and as the country is full of every description of villainy I deemed it necessary to have an escort of horsemen with us. We proceeded to a place called Marnye [*Murnae*] and were going near it on our way home, when a party of 300 or 400 villagers arrived[,] attacked us without the least provocation, it was useless to remain and on consulting with Lieutenant Maunsell we prepared to return. Alas! too late for our road being thro' ravines it was impossible for more than one horse to go at a time[,] 7 men of the escort are wounded and one killed[,] a mounted guide wounded and another killed and also your poor friend whose horse was shot and at the same time he received a ball [*and*] a spear wound which must have reached the heart[,] In hearing that he had fallen, Ensign Girdlestone[,] myself and 2 men[,] the only two without wounds stopped and endeavoured to proceed towards the place where he lied but there were too many against us and I requested Mr Girdlestone to bring up the sepoys from camp which was about 3 miles off; on their arrival we recovered the body stripped and cut in a shocking manner.

I trust you will be able to have [a] coffin ready by the time of its arrival as Mr Girdlestone is too much affected to write either publicly or privately; he will do so both tomorrow.

The short time I have had the pleasure to be in your poor friend's company, has learned me to wish for his friendship; and has caused a regret alas! useless for my loss.

I write more circumstantially tomorrow

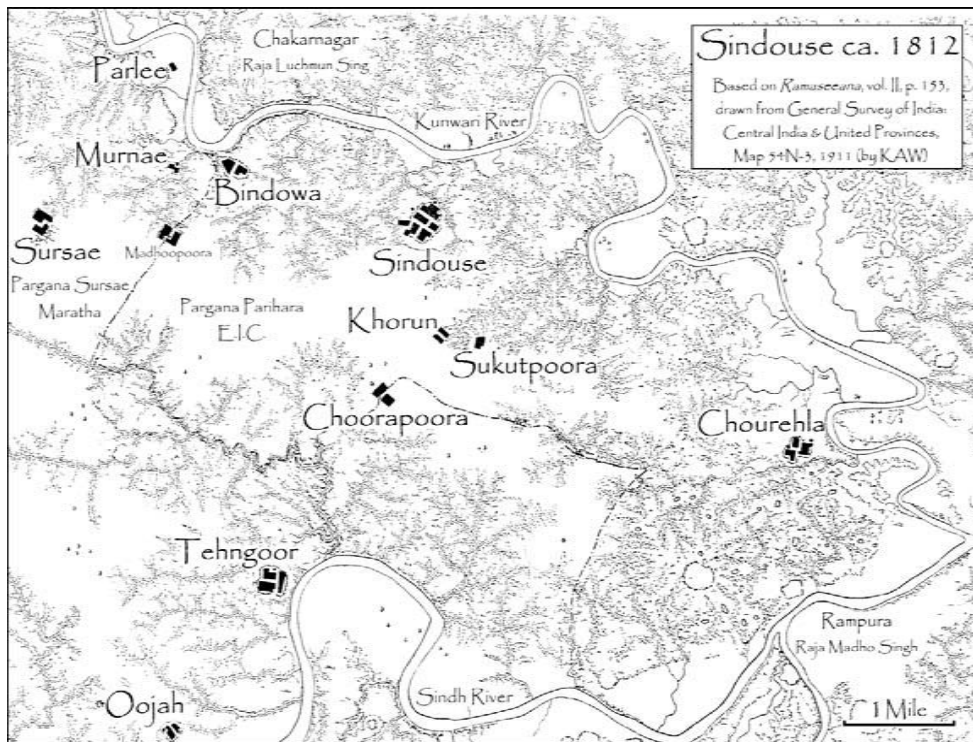
believe me

dear sir ...

Sindouse Midnight
22 October 1812⁵⁰

With the death of Lieut. Maunsell the first phase of the British operations against the thugs reached a sudden and unexpected climax. Something had gone terribly wrong. Right from the outset, Halhed's mission to Sindouse had been marred by mishaps and now a British officer had lost his life during an evening ride. But how had it come to this? How had the introduction of police in a remote *pargana* turned into open rebellion and how had Maunsell become the (reputedly) first and only white victim of the thugs?⁵¹ Why did entire villages rise in arms when in fact Halhed was primarily after the thugs and their supporters? In order to understand the full significance of this event it is necessary to halt the account and consider the history of Parihara and examine the emergence and continued existence of thuggee in that region.

Part II



Map 2 Sindouse c.1812 (based on *Ramaseeana*, vol. II, p. 153, drawn from General Survey of India: Central India and United Provinces, Map 54N-3, 1911, by KAW)

6

Sindouse

History and topography of Sindouse¹

As early as 1809 Law had described Parihara in terms that conjure an image of a veritable thieves' den:

The country is almost everywhere intersected by immense deep ravines and the paths are so very rocked, and narrow, that it not only is difficult but dangerous to make one's way either on foot or on horseback thro' many parts of them. These ravines have been inhabited by Tugs and marauders of every description for hundreds of years. They sally forth to distant places to commit their depredations (particularly into the Mahratta dominions) and if I am rightly informed the quantity of diamonds, pearls and other precious commodities which they have stored up in their dens and caverns, cut out of the highest and most inaccessible ravines, is almost beyond belief. In short the Talooka may be considered as a great repository for stolen goods which are smuggled into different parts, as opportunities offer, and no attempt has ever yet been made by any former government, to drive these marauders and pests of society from their seemingly impenetrable strongholds.²

At 26°29'N. and 79°6'E., Sindouse was situated near the confluence of the Rivers Jumna, Chambal, Kunwari, Sind and Pahuj, an area which had been known from old times as Pachnada or 'Five Rivers'.³ The small tract of land, named Parihara after the Parihar Rajputs who settled there in the eleventh century, was squeezed in between Kunwari and Sind. Sindouse was the main town in Parihara, but the two names were often used interchangeably in referring to the whole area which shared its geographic and climatic features with the rough and inhospitable

Chambal Valley region. Administratively, Parihara was part of the district of Etawah, established by the British in 1803–05, and bordering on the Maratha tributary states of Umri, Mihona and Rampura. In fact the western frontier ran right through the village of Madhoopora, rulership of the village being divided between the British and the Marathas. Adjoining Parihara to the west was the *pargana* of Sursae and though divided by the border these two areas were historically closely connected.

The dominant feature of the landscape around Sindouse was the impressive ravines that intersected the length and breadth of the tract and which were described by one official in the following words: 'The face of the country seems nothing but ravines, or like waves of agitated mud which had been suddenly consolidated.' Occasionally reaching a depth of 30 metres, the ravines had been created by the extensive scour and soil erosion along the banks of the rivers and supposedly they were so vast that '... a person might proceed by any one of them even to Gajrat [*Gujerat*]'.⁴ Furthest away from the rivers, a few narrow patches of level land were to be found in the middle of the *pargana*, surrounded by the encroaching ravines. On top of the ravines grew a 'rank kind of grass' so full of thorns that it could only be fed to cattle when green and which was instead used in thatching the houses. Shrubs and a few stunted trees covered the terrain but sparsely, and in the whole *pargana* there was only one small grove of mango trees. The climate was harsh with very little rain and extreme variations of temperature; rainfall was on average around 30 inches per annum, which fell during the rainy season from May/June till August/October, and temperatures ranged from just above 0° C in the winter to more than 45° C during summer.⁵

The town of Sindouse was situated between the ravines that extended along the banks of the Kunwari and the spate of level land, with the various villages of the *pargana* scattered all around the landscape. Sindouse was by far the biggest of the 16 villages and its small *gurhee* or fort functioned as the administrative centre of the *pargana*.⁶ The dwellings of the town were simple structures of the kind found all over rural Northern India; the *zamindars* and wealthier villagers had houses build of sun-baked clay-bricks and tiled roofs, usually consisting of a square building containing a small inner yard in the centre. Ordinary villagers lived in houses and huts with mud walls and straw-thatched roofs. The uneven terrain also influenced the layout of Sindouse, as all the houses were built among the ravines. Both in Sindouse itself and in the surrounding countryside, there were a number of smaller temples and shrines dedicated to the various Hindu deities commonly worshipped in rural Northern India.



Figure 5 The landscape of Sindouse (photo: KAW)

In 1810 the total population of Parihara was estimated at between 14,000 and 20,000, and Halhed claimed that Laljee as the head *zamindar* of Sindouse alone could turn out 2000 armed men.⁷ Nominally, Parihara was held by Parihar Rajputs and Sursae on the Maratha side of the border by Kachwaha Rajputs, but in reality Kachwaha Rajputs held four of Parihara's 16 villages including Sindouse, while the remaining 12 belonged to Parihar Rajputs.⁸ In spite of the fact that many places in this area were named after Rajput lineages and ruled by these clans, only a minority of the inhabitants were actually Rajputs.⁹ The same goes for Parihara where the Kachwaha and Parihar clans constituted only the landed elite, the so-called *thakurs*, whereas the remainder of the population lacked any caste homogeneity whatsoever. As far as can be seen from the somewhat scant references there were many Brahmins in Parihara, though the majority of the non-Rajput inhabitants seem to have been Muslims. There were also the lower castes associated with specific trades that one would expect to find in a village, such as the Lohar (blacksmith) and Kumar (tanner or shoemaker), and the low-caste agricultural communities of Lodhis and Ahirs cultivated the land.¹⁰

In Parihara there was preciously little land suitable for cultivation and it was moreover of a poor quality: 'The ravines comprise so large a proportion of the area that the little land fit for cultivation has been, for the most part, protected by terraces and embankments similar to those in Bundelkhand.'¹¹ The climate and especially the minimal amount of rain, was not conducive to agriculture; because of the low water level and composition of the subsoil, sinking a well was very expensive, and the well in the fort, for instance, had dried up by 1810.¹² In fact there was no *pucka* well in the town of Sindouse at all until 1813, and accordingly the very limited means of irrigation reflected on the variety of crops that could be cultivated. Thus: '... from the very nature of the lands excepting the Teer, every thing depends on abundant rains; and should these fail, they have no means of irrigation either for the Khureef or Rubbee, and the Rubbee lands cannot even be sown; ...'¹³

The agricultural yield of Parihara was accordingly inadequate for the maintenance of the population and the larger part of grain and the like needed for consumption had to be bought from outside the *pargana*.¹⁴ The livestock of Parihara was not extensive either: Bullocks were used for agricultural work while their milk formed an essential part of the stable diet, and sheep and goats were also kept for their wool, skin, milk and meat, as well as a few camels for transportation. Interestingly, several sources mention that some of the villagers bred horses and traded them at the Bateshar fair near Agra, but this must have been on a smaller scale.



Figure 6 Town of Sindouse, 2001 (photo: KAW)

No crafts of note existed in Parihara, except a few weavers 'of the coarsest kinds of cotton cloth and blankets ...', and certainly nothing that could be used for trade. In the whole of the *pargana*, including Sindouse, there was no bazaar and in the unlikelihood of the *ryots* having any produce to sell they had to go to the markets at Lakna or Jaggamanpur. The absence of proper roads either leading to or within Parihara, hindered more substantial trade, and communication with the outside world was limited. Due to its geographical isolation, the proximity of major trade routes and markets at Etawah and Agra had no impact on the situation in Parihara.

The region had originally been settled by various Rajput lineages dispossessed of their land during centuries of intermittent fighting with a succession of powers, and from the ravine country along the Chambal river they kept alive a tradition of rebellion. The inhabitants in the area thus acquired a proverbial reputation for violent resistance to the imposition of authority from anyone of the indigenous rulers preceding the British.¹⁵ From their mud forts the petty Rajput rulers not only opposed outside intervention but also engaged in inter-clan feuds and banditry, in keeping with the notion of *bhumeawat* – the traditional fight for land and honour.¹⁶ The history of Parihara remains obscure until the latter half of the eighteenth century, but the area was the scene of prolonged fighting and successive invasions as different lineages fought over the control of the land. Located between the Sind and Kunwari rivers, Parihara constituted a typical border area, making it extremely vulnerable to the successive incursions and subject to the changing political tide.

During the eighteenth century Northern India was subject to a spate of invasions and conquests by groups such as the Afghan Rohillas or Jats, which radically changed the political map. Thanks to the survival of tax records, we can follow these events as Parihara changed hands more than half a dozen times between 1761 and 1803 when it was formally ceded to the Company: 1761–64 – the invading Rohillas; 1765–68 – farmed by the raja of Rampura Kuleean Singh from the Marathas; 1769–72 – the Jats of Bharatpur; 1773–80 – farmed by the *amil* Seesadhur from the Maratha's; 1781–82 – held *kham*;¹⁷ 1783 – no tax paid due to scarcity; 1784–1803 – the raja of Rampura and Nawab Vazir of Awadh jointly; 1803–07 – farmed by the raja of Rampura Madhoo Sing from the British; and between 1807 and 1813 revenue was collected directly from the peasants by the British.

In Parihara the type of tenure was known as the *pattidari* or village-*zamindari* system, meaning that the land was farmed by several landholders or *pattidars*, the size of whose revenue was related to ancestral

shares.¹⁸ The land itself was cultivated by common peasants, or *ryots*, who then paid a share to the *pattidars*, of whom there were six in Sindouse – all Kachwaha *zamindars*. As the head *zamindar* of Sindouse, Laljee also held the office of *chaudhuri*, which meant that he collected the revenue on behalf of the ruler of the *pargana*, who was traditionally the Raja of Rampura, the lineage chief of the Kachwaha Rajputs in the area.¹⁹ When Madhoo Sing of Rampura was the proprietor of *taluqa* Parihara from 1803–07, he received revenue from Laljee, which he again, though somewhat reluctantly, paid to the British in the form of *kist* or instalments of revenue. Prior to the British takeover, the Raja of Rampura paid *kist* to the Maratha state, of which Rampura was a dependency. In terms of the agriculture and land tenure, Parihara was typical of such peripheral rural areas across Northern India in long-term decline. However, on one count the area stood out: neither the landowners nor the peasants subsisted by land alone.

Thuggee in Sindouse

Right from the outset, the area of Sindouse was perceived as being intimately associated with the phenomenon of thuggee.²⁰ While Sindouse later became known as the hotbed of thuggee, this association was established well before the attack on Halhed in 1812 and before an official opinion and representation of the phenomenon had been formed. In December 1810, the *darogha* of Sindouse, Ruheem Khan, was examined by Perry, and his account provides a unique example of the kind of information that the British received from their local informants. According to Ruheem Khan:

The inhabitants of Purhara support themselves, for 8 months in the year by cultivating lands[,] during the remainder they maintain themselves by committing Thuggee, and by dealing in horses. ... In Sundose Khass, the number of Thugs is very considerable, certainly about 2 or 300 families and in each family there are sometimes 10 thugs, in others 2 ... In the Company's and Maratha dominions in this quarter, there are, on the whole, about 4000 thugs. ... The Thugs are generally Brahmins, and Mussulmans – Rajpoots rarely, but people of all tribes commit Thuggee. The zemindars may be called the Thug's masters[.] They accompanying the Thugs, with 2 or 300 men for 4 or 5 days, when they commence their journey and when they hear of the Thug's return go a similar distance to meet them. The zemindars are the masters and the Thugs their tools. ... Their

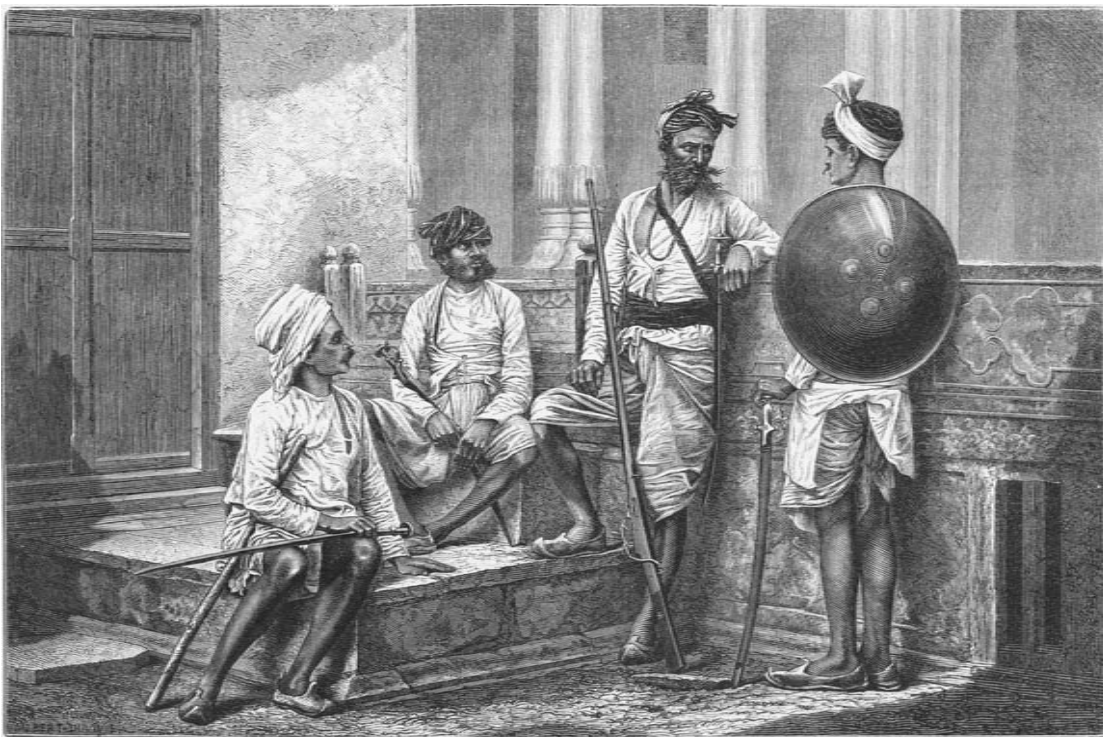


Figure 7 A nineteenth-century ethnographic depiction of Rajput types (from *L'Inde des Rajahs*, 1875)

language and conversation is most insidiously alluring, and so great are their powers of persuasive eloquence that if the most trustworthy man, and who had been 100 years in the Company's service, were to be sent to apprehend them (literally to meet them) they would so cajole and seduce him, that he could not find it in his heart to do ought but protect and assist them; and if he should be prevailed upon to accept even a rupee from them, they would have him completely in their hands.²¹

Khan's account is too early for any generalised or hegemonic colonial perception of thuggee to have influenced it, and it may thus be seen as representing the viewpoint of at least parts of the indigenous population.²² The *darogha* actually acknowledged his failure to take action against the thugs and even hinted that he had accepted bribes from them. Accordingly, he lived in Sindouse and had some contact with the thugs and his account may be regarded as a very good source concerning thuggee and its socio-economic context. In 1812 Perry also examined a *patwari*, or village accountant, from Parihara, who stated that the thugs had been living in the region for many generations and that they never cultivated any land but brought home valuable articles from their expeditions. The *zamindars* took care of the families when the men were gone and benefited from it because: '... he, who gave these Thugs, a rupee, received from them on their return, whether after 10 years or after 1 month, 2 rupees. But if the Thugs did not return, the money was lost.'²³ According to the *patwari*, the thugs were commonly called 'sepahees'.

While the testimony of the *darogha* and *patwari* might conceivably be discounted as indigenous misrepresentations, it is possible to further explore the subject of thuggee in Sindouse due to the existence of a number of other primary sources that corroborate their accounts.

Patrons and clients

In Sindouse there were six landholders having four shares in total, Laljee's being by far the largest with 78 thug families living there; the *zamindars* Chutter and Sohbut had 13, Tejun and Chundun five and Lowkee seven.²⁴ In his examination before Perry in 1812, Laljee tried to downplay his involvement with the thugs and claimed that although he had entertained them for two years, during the past year he had had nothing to do with them. Asked about details of the thugs Laljee said: 'I cannot precisely state – but they go on excursions and return with money, cloths, arms and tattoos and maintain themselves in this

manner ... I used to receive 25 or 50% on the money which I advanced to them.¹²⁵ Concerning two suspected thugs, Laljee said: 'They are independent but have no extensive occupation. The world designate them Thugs and in fact they are Thugs and reside at Sindouse.' When asked whether he also supported thugs, the *zamindar* Sohbut, on the other hand, said: 'I never did, nor had I the means of advancing money to them – but Laljee, Buj Loll and Doorjeen used to supply them with cash and to protect them.'¹²⁶ The relationship between the *zamindars* and the thugs is clearly articulated by Laljee when explaining why he had not seized some thugs returning with loot: 'They did not belong to my shares. How could I apprehend them when the other zamindars were not on terms with me.'¹²⁷

Dureao of Bindowa held an interesting middle position between the *zamindars* and the thugs as he was: 'in the habit of lending money to the Mehwateres and of residing with them. These people live by robbery and murder and repaid 125 or 150 for [every] 100 rupees ... Some called them Muwatus Thugs and they had many haunts about here'.¹²⁸ Expanding on his relationship with the thugs Dureao himself stated that:

I used to remain in villages on the march[,] they in the jungles[,] my manner of living was this[:] I used to lend them money for their expenses and they returned it to me from the profit of their excursions[,] otherwise I have [never] killed or plundered anybody ... I sometimes went along with them and sometimes remained in the intermediate places[,] we have spent two years at a time in marching – whenever we had got anything, we returned.¹²⁹

According to Dureao it was common practice for thugs to have a person like him with them on expeditions to forward money, and he did it: 'For the sake of a profit of double.' Several other inhabitants of Parihara made statements regarding the thugs and their livelihood and Laljee's brother, Amaun, said that: 'They are generally denominated *sepahees* – They travel towards the Dekhun[,] many people say that they plunder, rob and murder.'¹³⁰ Another man stated that: 'The world says that a Thug plunders and murders.'¹³¹ When asked whether he knew 'Guseeta Thug', Gungapershaud said: 'He belongs to Laljee[,] I hear that he is a Thug.'¹³² Although Perry, who conducted these examinations, at times asked about thuggee and therefore introduced the term, that is not a general feature of these statements, which refer to the thugs in rather unique terms.

The accounts of the local *darogha*, *zamindars* and other inhabitants of Parihara do not support the notion of a purely colonial construction of thuggee. The various personal angles and accounts that are voiced in

the sources indicate that thuggee – in Parihara at least – was a social phenomenon. Thus it appears that among the people who knew the thugs intimately they were perceived as following a legitimate profession. Although some knew that the thugs engaged in murder and robbery this did not stigmatise them in any way, and in fact the different designations used imply their good reputation. While Mewati might conceivably be used as a derogative (in the sense of a marauder), the appellation of *sepo*y implied a respectable martial status that distanced the thugs from common robbers and dacoits and set them aside from lowly peasants. What is less clear is what was actually meant by the word ‘thug’ and what its use signified in a wider social context.

Thugs and sepoys

Although the term ‘thug’ was used by the inhabitants of Parihara, a number of other designations applied to the thugs imply a military connection. The word most commonly used was *sepo*y, which literally means ‘soldier’ but which was also used in the meaning of ‘retainer’ or ‘subaltern’.³³ The approver Doorgha, from Sindouse, described a thug as: ‘... a sipahee of my father’ and also referred to some thugs as ‘privates’.³⁴ Perry asked another villager about the different names used: ‘Whom do they call a sepahee?’ Answer: ‘I consider them as servants’; ‘Who are called Thugs?’ Answer: ‘Those who murder men’.³⁵ A *zamindar* of Murnae claimed that two thugs after moving from Sindouse had become ‘assamies’ of *zamindars* in Bindowa, and the same word was used by Dureao to describe his position *vis-à-vis* the *zamindars*.³⁶ This word is *asami*, which simply refer to a peasant or revenue payer, that is a subservient position such as the cultivation of someone else’s land, and was originally derived from the Arabic ‘ahsham’ meaning people belonging to the train or retinue with the military implication of irregular infantry.³⁷

Both in Sindouse and Shekohabad, the thugs were also referred to as Mewatis.³⁸ The meaning of Mewati is more diffuse but was often used to describe the various groups of marauders of the Doab, and it is in this latter sense that it was used here.³⁹ In the Mughal records there are numerous references to ‘refractory’ Mewatis and districts ‘desolated through their rapacity’.⁴⁰ John Malcolm stated that the Mewatis were kept as ‘Sebundies’ or militia by the landholders of Central India, and that many of them who settled in villages became robbers:

Although usually reckoned Mahomedans, it is difficult to say whether they are Mahomedans or Hindus: they partake of both religions, and are the most desperate rogues in India. Though they are stigmatised



Figure 8 Zamindars and peasants of northern India (from *L'Inde des Rajahs*, 1875)

as robbers and assassins, they are at the same time admitted to be faithful and courageous guards and servants to those in whose service they engage.⁴¹

The Meos, which was the proper name for Mewatis, constituted one of those fluid groups, supposedly Muslim but with strong elements of Hinduism in their beliefs, that the British had difficulty in classifying, using the term 'tribe' and 'caste' interchangeably at different times.⁴² They were among the original inhabitants in parts of the Doab who were expelled by Rajput lineages and afterwards claimed Rajput descent. The use of the word 'Mewati' in connection with the thugs of Parihara was clearly devoid of any ethnic or geographic implications and instead signified a type of robber-mercenary. Accordingly, this was a pre-colonial stereotype that entailed the slippage from ethnic identity to perceived criminal category and which was readily adopted and continued by the British. The categories of thugs, Mewatis and Budheks were colonial constructions that continued, in part at least, indigenous perceptions of a correlation between ethnicity and criminality. In this regard thuggee, both in the social and constructed sense, was not an uncommon phenomenon.

Considering that the appellations of *sepoy*, *asami* and Mewati were used more or less interchangeably with the word thug, by the thugs and by others, there is strong indication that the phenomenon of thuggee was linked to the military labour market. The indigenous use of the word 'thug' also suggests that thuggee did exist, but it was merely one type of predatory lifestyle among many. It is not coincidental that the first official regulation in which thugs were mentioned, Regulation VI of 1810, referred to 'Dacoits, Cozauks, Thugs, Buddecks and other descriptions of public robbers'.⁴³ To this might be added Pindaris and Mewatis and these groups were all, in one form or another, associated with the military as mercenaries, militia, loosely associated marauders or camp followers. It is, however, important to point out that the different appellations, as descriptive and legal categories, were useless or at best contradictory. Budheks and Mewatis were sometimes ethnic distinctions, but individuals might as well be described as 'Budhek dacoits' or 'Mewati kazaks/thugs' without themselves acknowledging being either Budhek or Mewati. This is not to say that the categories were completely devoid of meaning, but that one should be conscious of the context and implications of the use of these terms.

Several of the thugs actually referred to having, at one time or another, been in an army or attached to some kind of military establishment.

Bukhut Lodha said that he used to go towards Nagpur in search of service and that he had been a sepoy in the corps of Ganor Singh, and one of the Shekohabad thugs told how he and his companions had attached themselves to the army of the Pindari chief Ameer Khan during a thug expedition.⁴⁴ According to Ghulam Hussain the thug Tahwira and his two brothers had been in the service of Col. Gardner.⁴⁵ The link between soldiery and banditry is historically well established more generally and in Northern India the conditions were remarkable at the beginning of nineteenth century.

Demobilisation and retainers

In Northern India there was a long tradition of migrant soldiers, both Hindu and Muslim, who played a decisive role in the ongoing conflicts in India from the fifteenth century onwards.⁴⁶ State building required armies, and mercenaries like the Afghans, Rajputs, Jats and Mewatis were hired by the various rulers and lineages that fought to defend or expand their territorial possessions. Thus to leave home and go in search of employment became a viable choice not only for 'martial' groups but for ordinary peasants as well. These men had profited by the political turmoil and constant wars of the eighteenth century but the expansion of the British Raj meant that the hitherto dynamic military labour market was becoming gradually constrained. The policy of the Company during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries led to the disbandment of the standing armies of the Indian rulers, who entered into alliance with the British. This had significant and far-reaching results, and in the words of one historian: "The "de-militarization" of the amil not only eroded his power but also unleashed scores of armed men across the countryside."⁴⁷

Denied the means to subsist by military employment, such men were forced to turn to other modes of employment – one option being banditry. It is in this period that the Pindaris, who had been auxiliaries in the Maratha armies, became a political power as unemployed soldiers and mercenaries swelled their ranks.⁴⁸ There was never a very clear distinction between soldiers and marauders, as many indigenous armies were only paid with loot. Thus it is wrong to imply an actual change in practice and the disbanded soldiers merely continued their predatory lifestyle – often under the aegis of *zamindars* and petty rulers. It is noteworthy that the resident Ochterlony in 1822 stated that thuggee had emerged out of the Pindaris, while Sleeman blamed the local rulers' habit of disbanding their armies all at the same time, which left scores of armed men unemployed.⁴⁹

The whole process of state-building in eighteenth-century India necessitated huge amounts of money that had to be obtained by revenue collection or other forms of accumulation.⁵⁰ For the indigenous ruler to keep control of his possessions, a constant flow of cash was needed to maintain his army and the expensive European-type infantry which was increasingly being used. Collecting the money through revenue only would ultimately undermine the ruler's own position, and the quintessential cash had to be obtained elsewhere and one alternative was plunder: 'a non-local source of revenue'.⁵¹ Accordingly, all levels of the power structure of the indigenous state, from the Peshwa down to the petty *zamindar*, were linked up with marauders or robbers for an extra-territorial source of income.⁵² As Gordon has argued, the thugs were merely the lowest category in the hierarchy of marauders playing a part in the larger process of struggle for money and power and this scenario certainly seems to fit the situation in Parihara.

It was common practice for *zamindars* of Northern India to build forts to defend their villages and keep numbers of armed retainers as it enabled them to maintain a certain level of independency. In times of political chaos the *zamindars* could defy local authorities and refuse to pay tribute and tax and withstand the onslaught of marauders and brigands. This was the case even during the Mughal period: 'The forts were the visible symbols of the armed power of the *zamindars*. They served them as strongholds, garrison-houses and bases. But their real power must have lain in the large numbers of their armed retainers.'⁵³ Armed followers were, furthermore, used as plunderers by the *zamindars* and in that capacity they constituted a source of income. The British were keenly aware of the relationship existing between the *zamindars* and various types of robbers as is evident from the following description:

The class of people who plunder and disturb the peace of the country under the countenance of the zemindars took their rise at a remote period, for if I am correctly informed the zemindars, by the regulations of the Mogul Government were held strictly responsible for all thefts and robberies committed within their zemindaries; since the fall of the Mogul Empire every chieftain and every zemindar of consequence, has according to his means maintained in his service parties of armed men for the purpose of robbing and plundering on the highway, and shared with them, in the spoils agreeably to fixed regulations. The Mahratta chiefs have to this day, their Pendaries, their Grassuahs and their Beels, and the late Hyder Ally and Tippoo Sultan had their Looties to let loose on the neighbouring countries to rob and plunder them,

while the zemindars of the Doab had their Mahwatties, Tugs and other descriptions of thieves in their pay for robbing and plundering on the roads, nor has this usage if my information is correct yet entirely ceased although they are obliged to practice it, with more caution and circumspection than formerly.⁵⁴

In the case of Parihara the thugs did act as retainers of *zamindars* and if there is one word that sums up the descriptions of the thugs used by the inhabitants of Parihara, it would be 'naukari' – retainership and military service.⁵⁵ In 1837 one thug actually stated that he had gone 'in search of service (chakuree) that is, plunder by murder'.⁵⁶ The relationship between the thugs and the *zamindars* of Sindouse was merely one variant of this kind of patronage and retainership; in other areas the *zamindars* kept mounted robbers like the *kazaks*.⁵⁷ The relationship between the thugs and the *zamindars* was reciprocal; the thugs received protection, money and food and in return the *zamindars* received a substantial share of the loot the thugs brought back from their expeditions. According to Hussain, it was necessary to apply to the local raja or *zamindar* in order to become a thug: 'The zemindars of small estates do not allow of Thugs to remain on their estates without communicating it to the Rajahs, or head zemindars, and knowing their pleasure.'⁵⁸ This obviously reflects a certain degree of locally centralised power by which marauders and mercenaries could be made 'lawful' as part of the local authority, if they went through the right channels. In Parihara the links between the local authorities and the thugs were actually fully institutionalised.

The taxation of thugs

Circulating among the thugs there were several stories of how their ancestors had originally settled in Sindouse, after being expelled from Delhi.⁵⁹ Once in the area the thugs had settled in old villages and formed new ones, and the practice of thuggee had been passed on to their new neighbours and eventually they constituted most of the population. According to Feringheea, his ancestors had arrived in Parihara seven generations before and had then been initiated into thuggee through intermarriage with the local Brahmin families.⁶⁰ From the safety of their abode among the ravines of Parihara, the thugs yearly ventured out on their plundering expeditions. In the early days the thugs had always given gifts to the *zamindars* of Parihara on whose land they lived and who protected them, but there had never been a fixed rate: 'The handsomest horse, sword or ornament, that they got in an expedition was commonly reserved for the

most powerful patron of the order.⁶¹ After having returned from one expedition, Feringheea's uncle Rae Sing offended a relative of his, Hirroulee, who got a friend to stab Rae Sing, but the latter survived and went to the Rana of Gohad and got from him the right to the customs and the revenue of *pargana* Sursae. At the instigation of Rae Sing, the Rana of Gohad later attacked Sindouse and a tax of Rs 25 every three years was imposed on all the thug families residing there.⁶² When Sursae and Sindouse came into the possession of the Marathas, the Gwalior *amil* continued to levy the tax through Laljee. According to another version, some merchants had come to Sindouse to buy jewels from the widow of Hirroulee and when they unwisely revealed that they were carrying large amounts of cash, she had them strangled to get the money. The families of the merchants complained to the Raja of Rampura who turned the widow out and fined the thugs who no longer fulfilled their part of the bargain, as they had begun to rob at home as well as abroad.

At first glance, these stories of the imposition of a tax on the thugs appear to be local tradition, but they refer to events that probably occurred as late as the second half of the eighteenth century. Rae Sing, for instance, was Feringheea's uncle and was listed as inhabiting Sindouse in 1797.⁶³ The strongest evidence, however, is the existence of a list of thugs paying tax to the Maratha state published as Appendix O in Sleeman's *Ramaseeana*.⁶⁴ The tax-list is dated November 1797, and had been made out by Laljee on the order of Sheikh Mohammed Jumma, *amil* under Dowlut Rao Sindhia. Each of the 318 houses belonging to thugs in the two *parganas* of Parihara and Sursae, were taxed at Rs 24 and 8 annas to be paid every three years. This is a very important source as it gives not only the names but also the caste of the thugs listed in the 20 villages, in addition to which Sleeman made detailed genealogies.⁶⁵ The name of the tax is only mentioned in a single source, where it is given as 'Sepahee Jumma', which translates simply as 'soldier-tax'.⁶⁶ This obvious martial reference is clearly in keeping with the above-mentioned terminology employed by the *zamindars* and other inhabitants of Sindouse. One thug from Shekohabad actually used the term 'chote' to describe the contribution paid by the thugs to the petty ruler on whose land they lived.⁶⁷ This refers to *chauth*, the share of revenue that the Marathas levied or simply extorted from the landowners, which was a quite common feature of the pre-colonial system of Northern India.⁶⁸ Indeed, the way Laljee collected the tax suggests that it was collected like any other type of tax and considered a fully legitimate part of the revenue system. The relationship between the thugs and the *zamindars* was in fact very similar to the so-called *jajmani* system or ritual ties between

zamindars and their dependants.⁶⁹ Although the term itself may not be entirely appropriate historically speaking, its connotations of ritualised fealty may be invoked to appreciate the existing system in Sindouse.

It appears that further migrations had taken place after 1800 in which the thugs had moved from the Maratha territory to Sindouse.⁷⁰ Laljee referred to some of the thugs who originally came from Sursae but during the last eight years had lived in Sindouse.⁷¹ Another *zamindar* of Sindouse stated that the Sursae thugs had been 'brought' to Sindouse by the Marathas, which might indicate that they were driven out of the Maratha territory and then settled in Sindouse.⁷² Generally the sources suggest that it was quite common to move between the villages and even within the villages. A man of the Lodha caste, Bukhut, used to live in Sindouse in the share of the *zamindar* Tejun, but the latter had beaten him and so he moved to Murnae where he lived for a year and a half. The *amil* at Murnae, however, took a mare from him without paying and then Bukhut moved to Bindowa where another *zamindar* offered him protection.⁷³ Doorjun Lodha told a similar story, as he had left Sindouse and gone to Murnae because: 'Tejun beat me and turned me out because I did not work hard enough.'⁷⁴ Both Bukhut and Doorjun eventually left Murnae for Bindowa because 'the zamindars used to annoy us' and Des, a *zamindar* of Bindowa, had encouraged them to move into his share. These two Lodhas vehemently denied being thugs and were not convicted as such; however, it appears that they held a subservient position similar to that of some of the thugs.

What distinguished the arrangements between the thugs and the *zamindars* was their transitory nature; partly the result of the general turmoil of the area. The relationship between the thugs and the local authorities on various levels was entirely institutionalised, thus making banditry in this region very 'official' indeed.⁷⁵ However, as the stories of the imposition of the tax implies, this does not mean that the relationship was necessarily a peaceful one.

Resistance and displacement

The often-cited story of how the thug Feringheea came to get his name is particularly revealing of the precarious nature of the local politics of Parihara. Feringheea's uncle, Rae Sing, had refused to pay Rs 18,000 in arrears for the customs at Murnae that he owed the Maratha state and as a consequence Perron, commanding Sindhia's army, despatched a regiment under one Blake Sahib to bring Rae Sing to submission.⁷⁶ Rae Sing entrenched himself at Murnae but the village was attacked and burned

and during the flight, Rae Sing's sister-in-law gave birth to a boy who was named Feringheea after the *feringis* or 'foreigners' who had led the attack. According to another version, the event took place around 1800 when the French Colonel De Boigne and a Captain Bulust attacked Murnae because the *zamindars* of the village were rebelling against Sindhia.⁷⁷

Although it seems unlikely that Maratha forces led by European officers should take the field merely to reduce an insignificant place such as Murnae, the accounts of Feringheea's birth may refer to actual events. In 1801, a rebellious faction within the Maratha policy was entrenched in the fortress of Seondha, less than 30 miles south of Sindouse.⁷⁸ Sindhia ordered Perron to march against the rebels to put an end to their uprising and after some months of minor skirmishes the fortress of Seondha was carried by a bloody assault. Among Perron's heavy losses at Seondha, the sources mention the young Captain Bellasis whom it is not unreasonable to identify with the 'Captain Bulust' described by one approver as having taken part in the attack on Murnae. Although there is no direct evidence of this, I find it to be plausible that the attack on Murnae was a minor part of the larger campaign to quell the rebellion against Sindhia. Rae Sing and the other *zamindars* of Murnae may thus have seized upon the opportunity presented by the weakening of a central authority and general unrest of the region and simply stopped paying revenue until the outcome was decided and one party emerged victorious. A similar story unfolded in connection with Halhed's above-mentioned attack on the fort of Jharow, a well-known haunt of *kazaks* and thugs that had previously been besieged by General Perron. This is suggestive of a remarkable degree of continuity of resistance to both indigenous and British state authority.

The stories of unrest in Parihara continued. In 1800 the *amil* Mohammed Jumma, on whose order the 1797 tax list had been written up, was dismissed and Kuleean Sing, Raja of Rampura, seized Parihara and extracted large amounts from the thugs and the *zamindars*.⁷⁹ They, accordingly, fled to the Sursae *pargana*, which was still under the Maratha state and according to one approver, Laljee and the thugs took up their residence on the other side of the Jumna and from there made incursions into Rampura where they burned and plundered.⁸⁰ The Raja of Rampura finally submitted to the pressure and invited the thugs to return to Sindouse, which they did and the arrangement of the Rs 25 tax was resumed. The feuds and raids had even continued after Parihara came under the rule of the Company, as Halhed stated in one report: 'This pergunnah has hardly acknowledged the authority of the British Government, further, than in claiming its

protection, when some time since, Jacob, a commander in Sindheea's service, sacked one or two of it's villages, and carried off the women, as slaves.⁸¹ As late as 1810 several hundred followers of Madhoo Sing attacked a *zamindar* paying revenue to the Company and killed two or three of his relations, and abducted part of his family along with his possessions.⁸²

Refusal to pay revenue was only the first step towards open rebellion and recalcitrant *zamindars* ensconced behind the ramparts of their small mud forts were a familiar aspect of the continuous power struggles throughout Northern India.⁸³ The thugs' reaction to the perceived injustice thus had clear parallels to common rebellion, especially the way in which armed peasants would turn on their own land if they were expelled or displaced, often attacking and plundering local officials. This was an expression of protest, which was either caused by or led to the severance of the ties that connected the peasants with the landowners and local authorities, that is the institutionalised arrangements that secured the rights and privileges of all involved. Violence was the only means by which such villagers could negotiate and defend their status *vis-a-vis* their patron. Thus peasants would often run off and seek refuge in areas known as being rebellious, while the indigenous authorities would retaliate by burning down the villages and carrying off the women and livestock.⁸⁴ In the various raids described in the stories of the thugs in Parihara we may also discern a clear connection with the traditional Rajput feud or *bhumeawat*. The violence and turbulence in the area thus often conformed to what was perceived as 'legitimate' practices inscribed in traditions signifying high martial status.

Thuggee as it appeared in Parihara was not an archaic primitive practice, but an aspect of the militarisation of the general population during the Mughal period in the context of overlapping and interdependent jurisdictions. The absence of a single overarching authority after the Mughals enabled emerging groups like the Marathas and Rohillas to compete for power and land, forcing the population to make alliances to secure their possessions and status. This led to the commercialisation of group rights and resources, that is the thugs became an asset, which provided them with some bargaining power. The fact that the changing rulers of Parihara honoured and continued the collection of the thug-tax suggests that in spite of the conflicts and sporadic outbreaks of violence there was no complete breakdown of order and on certain levels life went on as usual.

Having dealt with the locality in which the thugs lived, let us now turn to the actual practice of thuggee, that is the way in which they procured the loot, which enriched the *zamindars* of Parihara. The

zamindars and inhabitants displayed a fairly limited knowledge of how the thugs operated, beyond robbery and murder, and considering the variety of names used to describe the thugs, one would be excused in assuming that they were merely ordinary robbers. In the following chapter we shall look at the extent to which thuggee constituted a distinct phenomenon.

7

The Practice of Thuggee

The Surguja expedition

As examples of the thug's expeditions I have chosen those that set out from Sindouse in the fall of 1809 as described in the depositions of three approvers in the early 1830s; namely Ameer Alee, Punna and Doorgha.¹ The expeditions of this year are significant because of the number of gangs involved, making it possible to examine the thug network in greater detail.

Ameer Alee set out from Sindouse in October 1809 with 20 thugs led by the Muslim *jemadars*, or gang-leaders, Durroo and Moloo, and went to Jabalpur and further south. Later they met and joined Kosul *Jemadar*, and his band of 125 thugs and together they turned eastwards, murdering several smaller groups of travellers along the way.² At Ratanpur they met and joined Himmut Lala *Jemadar*, a Brahmin, and his band of 100 thugs, making a total of 250. At Jhada they murdered another party, after which they retraced their route and on the way met Noor Khan *Jemadar*, with his band of 50, and together they went to Takhatpur.

The expedition of 1809 was only Punna's second and he also left Sindouse in October with his brothers Bussuntee and Suddoo, and Ghasee Subadar with 200 thugs altogether. In a field outside of Sindouse they waited for the 'shugoon' or auspice, and having received a favourable one, the *jemadars* cooked and ate their dinner on the spot, after which they proceeded towards Mirzapur. Upon reaching this city they encamped on the banks of the Ganges near the temple of Vindyachal, bathed in the holy river and made an offering of Rs 10 to the goddess Bhowanee, and after that the thugs bought sweetmeats with which they feasted a dozen Brahmins. A traveller joined their camp and he was immediately strangled and thrown in the Ganges after they had

taken Rs 105 from him. Then Punna stated: 'We bought goor with five rupees of the money, and ate it, and the remaining hundred we took to the temple of Bhowanee, and gave them to the Pundas, or priests. The gun, sword, and clothes [*belonging to the victim*] we took ourselves.' From Mirzapur the band went southwards and on the way they met Pahar and Laljoo *Jemadars*, Muslims, with 100 thugs, whom they joined. Later, they met and joined Noor Khan's gang and eventually the bands reached Takakhatpur where they took up camp in the bazaar and adjoining grove, and soon after the others thug bands arrived.

Doorgha, who was a *jemadar* himself left Sindouse in October with a band of 125 thugs and was soon joined by Nathooram *Jemadar* and Natheea *Jemadar* with 50 thugs. They too went to Vindhychal and Mirzapur and then southwards and at Ratanpur, 165 thugs separated from them, leaving Doorgha with only ten or twenty. At Takhatpur, however, most of them reunited.

According to Punna, the gangs assembled at Thakatpur numbered upwards of 600 thugs. The inhabitants of the town became alarmed at their presence and the thug *jemadars* send a delegation to the governor of Thakatpur lest he should become suspicious of their presence. The thugs told the governor that they were respectable men in search of service and that some were soldiers in the Raja of Nagpur's army, and the governor gave them Rs 5 and some pawn leaves and 'dismissed them with the respect due to public servants of rank'. Nevertheless, it was thought prudent to leave quickly and the gangs broke up to go their separate ways: Himmud, Kosul and Pertaub with 300 took the road to Mirzapur, Noor Khan with 100 took the road to Nagpur, while Ghasee and Suddoo with 200 went towards Ramtek.

Shortly after Takhatpur, Himmud and 160 of the thugs met a party of 40 travellers who were going from the Deccan to the Ganges, whom they joined. The party of travellers consisted of several different families including a Brahmin officer belonging to a native regiment and a Brahmin with most of his relatives. At Ratanpur, Noor Khan and a further 160 thugs who had gone towards Nagpur joined them having heard of the large group of travellers. This was thought to be very fortunate as the original 160 would have been unable to manage the murder of 40 by themselves.³ Even more thugs joined along the way and by the time they set out from Ratanpur towards Mirzapur, there were 360 thugs accompanying the 40 travellers. Two days later they reached Choree and scouts were despatched to choose a suitable place for the murder, which they found in a *nullah* amidst extensive jungle a few miles ahead. A few hours before daylight they all set out, and when they reached the spot a *jemadar*

in the front and one in the back gave the signal. Two or three thugs seized each person and all were strangled, except a girl who was kept alive in order to be married into a thug family.⁴ The bodies of the victims were buried in the *nullah*, in batches of four or five, and the immense booty was taken to Sutrunja and divided, each thug getting Rs 50 after the leaders had had their share.⁵

Upon reaching the district of Rewa the thugs held a council and decided that it was safer to split up rather than go through the Company's territories in such a large group. Ameer Alee remained with Noor Khan's gang and the rest dispersed. During the last part of the expedition, Noor Khan and his gang bought two mares from some horse dealers whom they afterwards strangled, and upon reaching Sindouse Dureao gave a mare to Laljee. The bands returned to Sindouse in May or June after approximately eight months' absence. Doorgha came home with Rs 100 and Ameer Alee with Rs 120 after all expenses had been paid.

After Thakatpur, Punna had gone with Ghasee and Suddoo to Ramtek and on the way they were rejoined by Noor Khan's band of 100 thugs and together they fell in with seven travellers with whom they encamped for the night. During the night the thugs prepared to strangle the sleeping travellers, but had to wake them first in order to make them sit up and thus achieve their purpose more easily. The stranglers were within a few feet of the unwary travellers when an owl was heard nearby and Noor Khan interpreted this as a bad omen and the murder attempt was aborted. According to Punna, Noor Khan said to Ghasee: 'Dismiss these Bharts and in the morning we will determine what shall be done.' Ghasee was at the time sitting upon the bed of the travellers and replied: 'Goddess let the Bhurtotes (stranglers) retire. Duchuna (alms) shall be given to the Bharts in the morning.'⁶ Next day the travellers were allowed to go and the thugs continued towards Ratanpur.

While resting at a village they heard that the local dignity Atma Ram with 200 followers was coming that way and being cautious Suddoo left along with Ghasee and 150 thugs while Noor Khan and the rest remained. As it happened, Suddoo and Ghasee met with Atma Ram whose troopers tried to stop them, but after a brief fracas the thugs ran off and instead Noor Khan, who was still encamped, was seized on suspicion of being a thug. Noor Khan claimed that his party were merchants and was able to produce a *purwanna* from an officer in Ellichpur, which convinced Atma Ram and they were allowed to leave. Unfortunately, one of the thugs was seen hiding a sari in a *nullah* and Atma Ram had two Muslim boys, who accompanied the thugs, tied up and horse-whipped, and they eventually gave in and said that Pahar Khan and

Laljoo were thugs but not Noor Khan. Pahar and Laljoo were taken to the bank of the nearby river and decapitated without betraying their companions. One of Atma Ram's troopers furthermore recognised a mare in the possession of another member of the gang, Aman Sing, because the trooper was related to its former owner who had been murdered. Aman Sing had his nose cut off while his slave boy had his little finger cut off. Noor Khan and the rest of the band were then allowed to proceed and the thugs hurried home.⁷

According to the information Sleeman later collected regarding the 'Surguja affair', as the murder of the 40 travellers was called, it had taken place late in 1809 or 1810,⁸ and the rendezvous had included the following jemadars, who are probably representative of the principal bands operating out of Sindouse and the surrounding area:

Ghasee Subadar* (92)	120
Bukut <i>Jemadar</i>	40
Suddoo <i>Jemadar</i> *	40
Pahar & Laljoo* (130)	20
Noor Khan* (109)	80
Himmut Lala <i>Jemadar</i> * (6)	100
Kosul <i>Jemadar</i> * (423)	40
Heera <i>Jemadar</i> *	10
Khulleel Khan <i>Jemadar</i> * (79)	40
Doorgha* (23)	25
Pertaub	15
Total:	570 ⁹

The accounts of the expeditions of 1809–10 make reference to some of the key aspects of thuggee: the ceremonies preceding the departure, the cooperation between the gangs, the observance of omens, the sacrifice of money, the inveigling and murder of travellers, and punishment by indigenous authorities. In the following we will look closer at the significance of the various elements described in the accounts of this expedition. The caste and religious background of Ameer Alee, Punna and Doorgha and that of their associates presents a fairly confused picture, so how were the thug bands from Sindouse comprised in terms of caste and religion?

Caste and religious composition

During Perry's proceedings in Sindouse, Dureao was asked of what caste the thugs were and he said: 'Of every caste: Kuchwaha, Mooselmen,



Figure 9 Portrait of 'a notorious thug poisoner' (from *Illustrated London News*, 23 Jan. 1858)

Lodeh, Brahmin, Coormee, Aheer and Goojur.¹⁰ This statement can be substantiated by the 1797 list where the caste and religion of the listed thugs is given. In the village of Sindouse there were 101 thugs listed as inhabitants in 1797, divided into the following caste and religious categories (number given as part of all thugs in Parihara):

Ahir	3/24
Brahmin	7/57
Brahmin Khurgeea	1/1
Brahmin Kunojea	2/2
Brahmin Kusbatee	11/13
Brahmin Morea	2/2
Brahmin Pande	3/3
Brahmin Parasior	2/2
Brahmin Poorbeea	1/1
Brahmin Puchoree	1/1
Brahmin Tuhngoria	2/2
Guria	4/4
Koomar	1/3
Lodhee	1/58
Lohar	2/8
Mussulman	17/120
Mussulman Bhoot	1/1
Mussulman Bhys	3/15
Mussulman Bursote	14/23
Mussulman Delhiwald	1/1
Mussulman Dhadee	1/1
Mussulman Kaea	2/2
Mussulman Kala	1/1
Mussulman Kuthur	2/2
Mussulman Muneehar	3/11
Rajpoot	6/16
Rajpoot Dhakur	2/2
Sonar	1/1
Total:	101/440 ¹¹

From this it appears that the caste distribution of all the thugs on the 1797 list constitutes a complete cross-section of the general population of the region, indicating that virtually anybody could be a thug.¹²

It would be expected that some kind of caste division existed within the individual *zamindar*-shares in Sindouse, but that is not the case, as

the Rajput Laljee, for instance, had 31 Brahmins, 34 Muslims and just four Rajputs living in his share.¹³ Thus the organisation of the thugs and their affiliation with the *zamindars* in Sindouse was not determined by caste and religion, and yet these distinctions were hugely important in other contexts. The explanation could be that the non-Rajput part of the population, including the thugs, was more integrated across the community lines and may in some respects not even have considered themselves as being particularly distinct. The Rajput lineages on the other hand were very conscious of their status and rank and the *zamindars*, such as Laljee, would have maintained a strict code among themselves and in the interaction with their peers, while being less discriminate regarding the people who lived in their shares. When dealing with Indian society one of the most important aspects, following perhaps caste and religion, is kinship and this is also the case concerning thuggee.

Family and kinship

The case of the Surguja expedition shows that family and kinship ties constituted the nucleus of the thug gangs of Sindouse, of whom a surprisingly large number were related.¹⁴ Punna's family, for instance, were cultivators in Mainpuri and his sister married Ghasee Subadar without knowing that he was a thug.¹⁵ When the family found out, Punna's brother Gholab went to Sindouse but ended up accompanying Ghasee on an expedition, and the whole family eventually moved to the village and Punna and his brothers all became thugs. Apart from Punna and his two brothers and Laljoo and Pahar, several other close relatives took part in the Surguja expedition, among them Doorgha and his uncle Murdan, and the brothers Khuleel Khan and Godureea. Similarly, the approver Inayat and his three brothers had all been taken along on expeditions by their father.¹⁶

Thus it appears that introduction to thuggee happened primarily through the family, either close or distant, and there can be no doubt that a high number of the thugs of Sindouse were continuing in the 'line of profession' of their fathers. This is quite common in India and need not entail a natural disposition for murder the way that the British perceived and reflected it in the notion of 'hereditary criminality'. It is in fact a common trait among groups practising banditry more generally, as has been noted in connection with Greek bandits who were often shepherds: 'For many of them, banditry, like sheep-stealing, was not even an extraordinary venture but almost an unavoidable practice: they

took to robbery as they did to shepherding – they were born into it.¹⁷ The ramifications of the kinship ties among the thugs of Sindouse are also apparent if we look at the genealogical trees of thug families that Sleeman made and published in *Ramaseeana*.¹⁸ Feringheea's family, for instance, were Brahmin and lived in Murnae until 1812, and Feringheea was himself purported to be a seventh-generation thug. In the 1797 list, Feringheea's grandfather Hursing Rae is listed as the father of five heads of families, which at least supports the ramifications of the family if not the actual number of generations committed to thuggee.¹⁹ A large number of thugs were also adopted, which reflects the common habit of sparing the children of victims.²⁰ Girls were inevitably married to the sons or relatives of the thug who adopted them, who thus saved a great deal of money that would otherwise have been spent on dowry. A boy on the other hand was an object of pride and adoption thus provided a solution for childless parents during a period of time when the mortality rate of infants was high. However, not all children were spared and only well-off thugs with a relatively secure home base would add to the number of mouths that needed to be fed.

Not unexpectedly the concept of family extended well beyond actual blood ties, as is evident in the case of Ameer Alee. Several thugs used to visit his father, among them Rehmud Alee whom Ameer Alee called his uncle, and when his father died, he went to live with Rehmud Alee in Sindouse.²¹ On several occasions Ameer Alee went on expeditions with Himmud Lala *Jemadar*, and Ameer Alee actually called Himmud his cousin and brother even though they were not biologically related; in fact Himmud was a Brahmin while Ameer Alee was Muslim. This implies that associates might also be included in the family network as kinship proper, across religious boundaries, and the thug gang may have functioned as an extension of the family and vice versa.²²

In times of hardship the thugs primarily relied on the family and Ameer Alee was, for instance, obliged to seek his sister-in-law's release when she was imprisoned at Umri during the turmoil following the attack on Halhed.²³ When Doorgha and seven others were kept as hostages by a local ruler, their relatives told them that the ransom of Rs 2000 would be obtained by collecting '15 or 20 rupees a head from the thugs of our clan ...'.²⁴ This clearly indicates a heightened sense of solidarity among the thugs who were members of the same family. Sleeman later exploited this fact when he used the captured relatives and families of the thugs as bait and the often-repeated story of how Feringheea got caught is an example of this.²⁵ The approvers, who later assumed such a crucial role in the suppression of thuggee during the

1830s, were divided into factions and in Sleeman's words: 'Each party has caused the arrest, capital punishment & transportation, of many Thugs of every other party; and consequently they hate each other most cordially.'²⁶ These factions were constituted primarily by family and caste members and Feringheea's faction was entirely Brahmin, while in Inayat and Zoolfukar's factions most of the approvers were closely related. In other words, thugs who had belonged to the same gangs would later inform against each other and rather protect their own kin.

Having dwelled on the importance of the family within the thug network, let us now turn to that other significant unit, namely the gang.

Gangs of Sindouse

The members of the gangs were not necessarily living in the same village, nor were they always of the same caste or religion. At Thakatpur, Himmut *Jemadar*, who was a Brahmin and lived in Laljee's share in Sindouse, had in his gang Ameer Alee (Muslim from Sindouse), Madhoo *Jemadar* (Brahmin from Laljee's share in Sindouse), Kosul *Jemadar* (Brahmin Patuck from Paururee in Sursae), Hursing Rae *Jemadar* (Brahmin Patuck also from Paururee), and Doorgha (Muslim from Laljee's share in Sindouse). The way that Noor Khan's band joined, left and rejoined the various other bands in 1809–10 furthermore indicates the level of fluidity that prevailed between the thug gangs. On Ameer Alee's first expedition with Himmut, some travellers were murdered earlier than planned because news had reached them that Kosul *Jemadar* was encamped in a grove nearby and they did not want to share the spoils with him.²⁷ When they did meet with Kosul, Madhoo *Jemadar* left Himmut's gang to join Kosul while Laljoo left him and joined Himmut. This seems to have occurred without any friction between the principal leaders and, as in the Surguja expedition, the fluctuation of members between the gangs happened freely, probably motivated by pragmatism rather than anything else.

As opposed to Doorgha and Feringheea and the like, others were involved with thuggee on a much more peripheral level and with little or no choice themselves. Gopy and Budloo were both 25 years old and served in the house of thugs in Sindouse, the latter stating his occupation to be that of 'companion to Thugs'.²⁸ Both Gopy and Budloo claimed to have been tending to the horses when travellers were murdered and appear merely to having carried out servants' chores on the expedition and with very limited knowledge of what was going on. If we turn to Ghulam Hussain and the thugs from Shekohabad, we find a slightly

different pattern from that of Sindouse. Hussain was initially brought up by the thug who had adopted him, but later lived as a vagrant before joining another band of thugs with whom he went on expeditions.²⁹ When Hussain was apprehended in 1810, he was living with the thug *jemadar* Udjbah in Shekohabad and it appears that Hussain held a very subordinate position similar to that of Gopy and Kurhora. One of the men caught along with Hussain had initially become involved with the thugs because they made him steal a horse, after which he joined them, and several others had become thugs by necessity or through chance and had not been introduced by way of family.³⁰ This does not mean that kinship ties were of no relevance and one Shekohabad thug went on expeditions with his uncle and younger brother while two others caught in 1810 were father and son.³¹ The noticeable difference from Sindouse is that the Shekohabad thugs were a much less close-knit group with less extensive kinship ties. They were by all accounts also much fewer than the Sindouse thugs.

Even though the family and closest associates of the individual thug rarely changed, the composition of a thug band was never constant, but was based on a few core members and a number of 'occasional' members whose allegiance was determined by various ulterior aspects, such as the prospect of loot. The thug-network and kinship ties did not overrule the caste system but were coexisting systems that took precedence over each other at different times and in different contexts. The cooperation between different gangs was furthermore not limited to those belonging to Sindouse and we have numerous instances of distant associates with whom expeditions were undertaken regularly. The year after the Surguja expedition, Himmut *Jemadar's* band met a gang of 'Telingana' thugs that were 'old acquaintances' and they murdered several travellers together.³² The thug Inayat had also met and joined a number of *jemadars* from Awadh and both he and Ameer Alee worked with 'Soosea' thugs on several occasions.³³ During the expeditions it was not uncommon for the bands or members of the bands to visit and stay with acquaintances at different places and for different lengths of time. These kinds of contact could also prove useful in times of need and when the British were actively pursuing the thugs in 1826, Ameer Alee went to stay with a friend who was in the service of a European gentleman at Sehora. This all reflects an extensive knowledge concerning allies in other parts of India, often very distant, and I shall return to this further below.

When asked how one obtained the rank of *jemadar*, the approver Doorgha stated that: 'A man who has always the means of advancing a month or two's subsistence to a gang will be called so; a strong and

resolute man, whose ancestors have been for many generations Thugs, will soon get the title, or a very wise man, whose advice in difficult cases has weight with the gang; one who has influence over local authorities, or the native officers of courts of justice; a man of handsome appearance and high bearing, who can feign the man of rank well ...³⁴ Experience and expertise in all fields concerning the execution of thuggee were thus understandably key criteria, but in the case of the Sindouse thugs, the thug-lineage was also important. The use of the military denominations of *jemadar* and *subedar*, and the reference to certain thugs as 'privates', again implies a military connection in the organisation of the gangs.³⁵ When two gangs were united in 1822, the thugs 'performed the ceremony of investing [*the jemadar*] with a turban of chieftainship'.³⁶ This turban was a *nazar* – a ritual gift to acknowledge loyalty and the ceremony was in full keeping with common practice at Indian courts and so on. It could even be argued that the aptly named thug *jemadars* resembles the 'jobber-commanders' who recruited peasants and local soldiers for the indigenous armies but gradually gained a more independent status in pre-colonial India.³⁷ These military entrepreneurs could have as few as 50 men and considering the reliance on kinship-ties in the recruitment practice of the jobber-commanders and the thugs, the comparison seems plausible. A dispute arising between two *jemadars* upon their return from an expedition sheds further light on the role of the thug leader. Ghasee wanted Busunttee to make half the advance for the following expedition, but Busunttee refused stating that he did not have either the influence or the means to 'subsist followers'.³⁸ This suggests that the *jemadars* not only needed the means to raise money prior to an expedition but also had an economic obligation towards the members of their band.

In the conventional accounts of thuggee the existence of specifically named offices among the thugs pertaining to the different tasks is often elaborated at great length. Thus in *Ramaseeana* we read that the gang consisted of scouts (in thug's argot called *tilha*), inveiglers (*sotha*), stranglers (*bhurtote*), the strangler's assistants who held the victim's hands (*chumoseea*), those who carried the dead bodies away (*boj,ha*), those who cut up the dead bodies (*kuthae*), and the gravediggers who prepared the burial ground (*luhga*).³⁹ This, however, is a highly formalised view of thuggee and merely reflects the different functions that were part of the practice, rather than fixed positions within the gang. The various duties needed in the execution of thuggee necessitated only a limited degree of specialisation, although efficient stranglers would naturally hold higher positions compared to members carrying out menial duties.

A season for thuggee: the expeditions

Like banditry elsewhere, thuggee was seasonal and the thugs would usually leave in *kartick* (October–November) after the autumn harvest and return around *asarh* (June–July) before the rains set in.⁴⁰ Obviously there were variations and Ameer Alee's fifth expedition, for example, lasted only two months while his seventh lasted nine months; generally, though, the thugs would be away for a little more than half the year.⁴¹ There were very practical reasons for this, as the rainy season made it impossible to travel far for both the thugs and their prospective victims and following the autumn harvest of the *khariif*, travellers of all kinds would take to the roads. The thugs often left after the Dussehra festival, which again points to a military link. Dussehra is the ceremony that marked the end of the ten-day celebration of Rama's mythic victory over the demon Ravana in the *Ramayana*. In 1809 Thomas D. Broughton described the significance of the festival in the camp of the Marathas: 'At this period the Indian armies are accustomed to take the field; and accordingly warriors of all castes and descriptions are to be seen busily employed throughout the preceding day in bathing their horses, polishing their arms, and preparing new trappings for the exhibition of the following morning, when every one prides himself in displaying as much magnificence as he can.'⁴² The parallels between thuggee and military expeditions were due both to simple practicalities and to the fact that the thugs consciously emulated military ritual practices. Having concluded the celebration, the thugs set out with their gangs, the size of which could vary considerably from a handful to several hundred. The routes the thugs chose for their expeditions were not chosen at random, however, but reflected the prospects of plunder.

The Surguja expedition was by all accounts exceptional as the Sindouse thugs rarely went on expeditions to the north or east. Apparently there were no less than 600 or 700 thugs present at the rendezvous at Takhatpur, which was explained by the fact that in 1808–09 'all valuable traffic had taken that road from the fear of Pindaries'.⁴³ According to Doorgha:

The roads from the Duckun across the Nurbudda, had become so unsafe from the Pindaries that all travellers from Poona, Hyderabad, and Nagpore, going towards the Ganges, went by way of Surgooja and Sumbulpore; and several of our gangs that went from Bundelcund and the Dooab to that road came back with immense booty for several years. In the rains preceding this affair it was

determined that all the gangs should take that direction; and we accordingly set out.⁴⁴

During the expedition of 1814–15, Doorgha and his band benefited even more from the turmoil caused by the Pindaris.⁴⁵ On the road they murdered some silk merchants on their way to trade at a Pindari camp near Jabalpur and later the gang fell in with six *rokurrees* (treasure carriers) whom they inveigled under the pretext of protecting them from the Pindaris. It turned out that the six were silversmiths who had come from Rajasthan to pass-off forged coins at the Pindari camp. Accordingly, the thugs preyed on the myriad of traders that streamed to the large military camps to sell their goods, profiting from the war economy, while at the same time the turmoil enabled them to carry out their murders with less circumspection.⁴⁶

During the first 15 years of the nineteenth century the expeditions of the Sindouse thugs were primarily centred on Jabalpur, Nagpur, Amravati and Sagar, with various detours towards Hyderabad or Pune or places much nearer to home.⁴⁷ Going on expeditions along the roads that connected these specific cities enabled the thugs to rob and murder from among the thousands of travellers, merchants, soldiers and pilgrims who annually crossed the continent. Jabalpur was an important stop on the trade route going southwards from Benares and Mirzapur into the Deccan, which began to flourish in the late eighteenth century.⁴⁸ Accordingly, the routes chosen by the thugs were central in the overland traffic in India during this period. The thugs did not target the large-scale trade, which obviously dominated the major trade routes, but rather the petty merchants and various travellers who used the same roads. The thugs were interested in cash or valuables that could easily be realised and had no use for loads of wheat, salt or cloth. There is in fact nothing to suggest that the thugs seriously disrupted trade along the roads anywhere at any time, and hence their presence cannot be measured in terms of decreasing trade.⁴⁹

The *sepoys* of the Company were always said to be among the main targets of the thugs, yet there are also numerous cases of soldiers belonging to indigenous armies being murdered. The party of 40 murdered during the Surguja expedition, included Subedar Bodhee Sing, who served the Nawab Subedar Khan at Bhyswarra, and his family as well as two *havildars*.⁵⁰ During the expeditions of the early 1800s, the Sindouse thugs often murdered *sepoys* travelling between Pune and the western Maharashta and Lucknow and Hindustan.⁵¹ This was typical for Hindustani soldiers in service either with the Marathas or the Bombay

army and Doorgha's band even murdered some men who had been sent out to enlist soldiers in 1806–07. Increasingly, Company *sepoys* fell victim to the thugs as suggested by the identity of many of the bodies discovered around 1810, and this was naturally perceived as a much more serious threat by the British.

Another group of victims also related to the military market were merchants selling guns or horses to the various armies. During one of Ameer Alee's expeditions, four blacksmiths with 16 guns were murdered at Rewah on their way to selling them at Jabalpur, and later seven Gosains with 30 guns on their way from Jabalpur to Hoshungabad were likewise killed.⁵² This was around 1805–06, when the trade in indigenous armour and weaponry was still brisk. Horses were brought down from Rohilkand to be sold at the markets of the Deccan primarily for military use; riding horses of good quality were quite valuable and could easily be sold or bartered by the thugs.⁵³ In 1815–16 Punna's gang convinced ten horse-dealers, going from Nagpur to Pune, that they would purchase their horses if they would accompany them, and after having strangled them, two of the horses were sold at Jaferabad for Rs 400.⁵⁴ Treasure-carriers transporting cash for bankers, money traders and merchants were obviously the preferred target of the thugs and were often robbed on their way to or from Jabalpur and Nagpur, which indicates the extent of the trade in the area and may be related to the presence of a mint at Sagar.

Both Hindu and Muslim pilgrims travelled across India in huge numbers every year and were thus another prominent group among the thugs' victims. Main places of pilgrimage were along the Ganges, especially Benares, Mirzapur and Allahabad, and major religious fairs at places like Hardwar attracted pilgrims by the thousands. Other people related to the religious sphere were also targeted by the thugs and on one occasion Ameer Alee's gang murdered 16 carriers of Ganges water near Jabalpur and got property worth Rs 2000.⁵⁵ Apart from these specific groups, there were of course also numerous travellers who simply had to go from one place to another and who were unlucky to fall in with the thugs.

The various thug gangs invariably crossed paths during expeditions, which suggests that they were well acquainted with the routes being used by other gangs. Hussain stated that in order not to arouse suspicion, the thugs would go out in small groups and meet at a pre-arranged place and that formerly they held *melas* or fairs.⁵⁶ Jabalpur and Sagar were the focal points of many expeditions and the gangs often met up at the latter place while encamped at what was called the 'Company's Garden'.⁵⁷ Other popular places of rendezvous were the temple of Amba

Bhavani at Amravati and the shrine of Ghom Mahommed in Gwalior. But let us now turn to the part of the expeditions for which the thugs were best known – how they executed their robberies and murders.

Modus operandi

It has been noticed that the thugs would murder ‘even for small pickings’, but it must be obvious that robbers preferred wealthy victims, and that social status, appearance and number determined which travellers they could join and deceive.⁵⁸ While the Sindouse thugs numbering hundreds could assume a whole range of disguises, as soldiers in search of service or merchants, a handful of starved Shekohabad thugs could never convince a rich traveller to let them join him. If prospective victims were sparse, the thugs were not fastidious and Hussain recounted how one gang of 14 thugs strangled an old woman and a 10-year-old child from whom they got just five rupees.⁵⁹ The *darogha* at Sindouse described how the thugs disguised themselves during their expeditions:

They travel under various disguises, and garbs, sometime in large bodies like a regiment[,] at other times, as infantry and troops, on some occasions personating Maratha horse. And on others merchants or peons on their tours, they hire themselves as servants and destroy their employers, or they themselves hire servants and murder them, their practise are endlessly diversified.⁶⁰

Occasionally the thugs would have connections in the bazaars and serais where they stopped and Hussain’s gang, for instance, was acquainted with *bantias* and other traders in the village of Jowahir, who helped them to spot travellers that looked promising.⁶¹ A common trick was for the thugs to pretend that they were going to the same destination as the travellers and that they might as well join up for protection. When they were encamped together, the thugs would either strangle their victims during the night, or persuade them that it was almost dawn and then murder them at some secluded spot along the road.⁶² At times the thugs were forced to forego their usual secrecy and circumspection when robbing and disposing of particularly difficult or suspicious victims, treasure carriers in particular. During one of Punna’s expeditions, the gang went after seven treasure-carriers who had an escort of 40–50 armed soldiers, which obviously made any attempt to rob them extremely difficult.⁶³ The seven carriers, however, walked a hundred paces behind the soldiers and the thugs decided to make a run for it and rushed upon

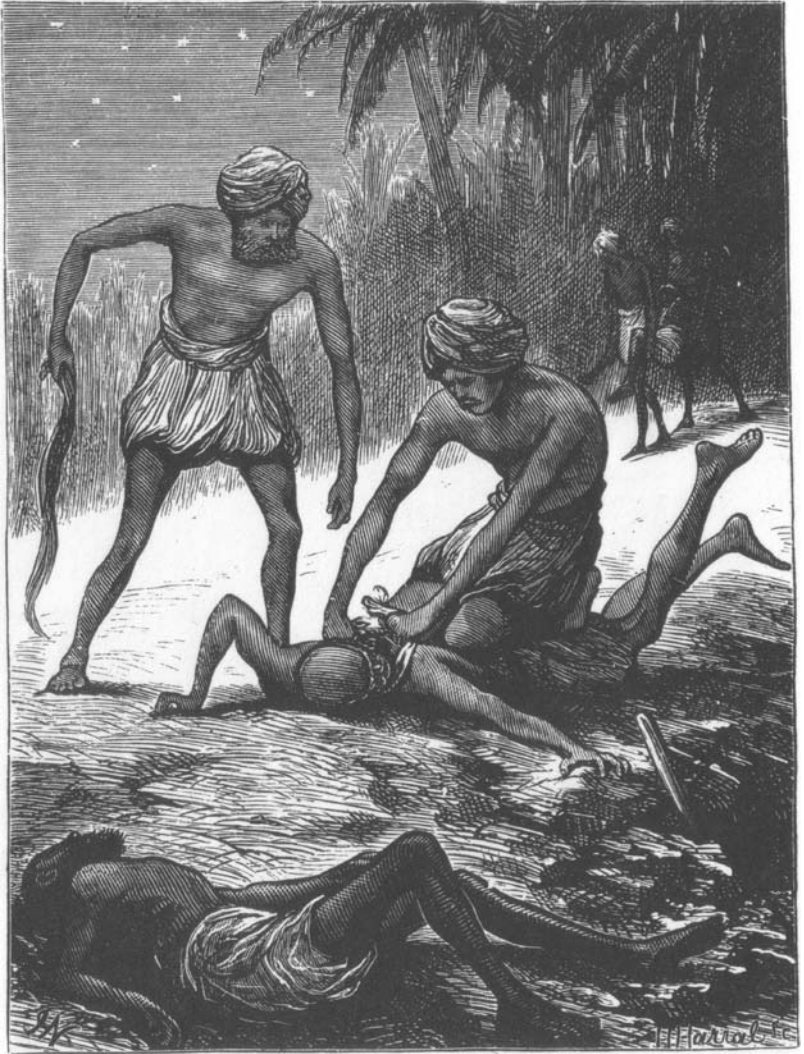


Figure 10 'My first victim' (illustration from the 1883 edition of *Confessions of a Thug*)

them, cut them down with swords and made off with the bags of money.

The autobiographical account of Subedar Sita Ram, published in 1875, contains one of the only known descriptions of an attack by thugs told by a victim.⁶⁴ In 1814 Sita Ram accompanied his uncle and three men from their village in Awadh to the garrison at Agra, and on the road they were joined by a group of itinerant musicians who entertained them for several days. One night Sita Ram's uncle observed the musicians sitting together conversing quietly in a language incomprehensible to him, and suspecting that they were thugs, he told them the following morning that they could no longer travel together. Four days later they met another groups of travellers who joined the party, even though Sita Ram thought that some of these men looked like the musicians of earlier. They encamped together, but during the night Sita Ram was awakened by the sound of a cock crowing:

I sat up, and in a short moment one or two of these men were by the side of the sleepers. I shouted loudly, and my uncle jumped up with his sword drawn, and rushed at them. Although this was the work of a moment, the fiends had managed to strangle the brother of Deonarain with a silk cord, and had rendered Tillukdaree senseless. He was just saved by my uncle who cut down the thug standing over him.⁶⁵

This is an interesting account, were it not for the fact that doubts have been raised as to the authenticity of Sita Ram's memoirs and the incident with the thugs might very well have been influenced by the work of Sleeman and others.⁶⁶ By the 1860s and 1870s thuggee had become a staple of Indian colonial lore and in that context, the account appears as being almost too typical in its inclusion of all the hallmarks of thuggee: disguises, entertainment, secret language and strangulation. On the other hand, we know that thugs did murder a number of Company *sepoys* in the Doab around this period, and accordingly it is not impossible that the incident is based on second-hand accounts.

The often-cited method of strangulation used by the thugs does seem to indicate some kind of ritualistic origins of the practice. In truth, it was merely a practical means of quickly rendering their victims senseless and the thugs did quite often use swords, knives and poison as well. Murder by strangulation was the hallmark of the thugs, but they murdered by whichever method would be most efficient. Hussain described how one *sepoys* was murdered in a particularly gruesome manner: 'Darale flung a noose about the neck of [the *sepoys*], Udjbah held his hands, and Rehuma

ripped up his belly with a knife and dug out his eyes.⁶⁷ According to Hussain, the thugs formerly used a cord or twine to strangle their victims, but since that had been identified as their 'tool' most were now using a handkerchief. During the trial, Judge Brooke actually asked Hussain to demonstrate in the court how the thugs strangled their victims:

The deponent takes a handkerchief, being a piece of guzzy cloth about 2 yards or less in length (which the natives throw over their shoulder) he twists the cloth and makes a knot at one end; a person in court is called, and he shows on this person how the cloth is passed twice round the neck of the victim – the knot remains at the back of the neck, and serves as a kind of handle by which the cloth is screwed to its utmost tightness round the neck.⁶⁸

Formerly the thugs had only strangled their victims, according to Hussain, but after one man recovered and ran away with the scarf around his neck, they always made sure the victims were really dead by stabbing them.⁶⁹ When asked by which method the thugs murdered travellers, the thug Kuhadut told Perry: 'We used to entice them away from any inhabited place and murdered them with knives or swords in the jungles. Two of us used to get upon them and finish the work.'⁷⁰ The last sentence does indicate that the victims were not always murdered straight away, but had to be finally despatched after they had been immobilised. The use of strangulation may actually have originated as a strategy on the part of caste-conscious thugs, to avoid being defiled by the blood of their victims. After the murder the bodies would either be disposed of by throwing them into a well or a *nullah*, but sometimes they were buried in a hole dug for the purpose with pickaxes (mattocks). At the trial where Hussain testified, there were three such 'spades' present and it is worth noticing that they were not ascribed any religious significance.⁷¹ The careless manner in which the bodies were sometimes hidden suggests that the purpose was merely to prevent their immediate discovery until after the thugs had left the area.

The loot

Just as the type of victims varied considerably, so did the nature of the loot the thugs obtained by their murders. During Ameer Alee's fourth expedition part of the gang murdered 19 merchants from whom they got valuables worth Rs 30,000, which meant that each member's share

was Rs 200.⁷² Such rare cases were regarded as pinnacles in the thugs' careers and became chronological markers. Usually the loot was rather more humble and a year before his arrest, Hussain and the Shekohabad thugs murdered a *sepo*y from whom they got: two swords, a jacket of black cloth, one scarlet coat, one brass plate, two brass pots, Rs 35.⁷³ On an average based on the accounts of 19 expeditions, Ameer Alee and Doorgha brought back Rs 100 after being away for six months and even if this amount is only indicative, it still suggests that the thugs made quite a good living.⁷⁴ The average pay for an infantryman around 1800 was Rs 100 per annum and for a field labourer, Rs 30 per annum.⁷⁵ It should, however, be noted that some thugs, like those of Shekohabad, made considerably less than Rs 100 a year.

As mentioned earlier, the most precious items among the loot, such as horses or fine weapons, were always set aside and given to the ruler under whose protection and with whose blessing the thugs lived and operated. After that, the loot was divided among the members of the gang, the share decreasing from the leaders downwards. The share was relative to the importance of the member and the stranglers, deceivers and gravediggers got more than those who had merely been on the lookout and so on. According to Doorgha, the loot was divided 'after deducting the prerequisites of the leaders of the gang and the office bearers'.⁷⁶ Thus the thugs regularly had to bribe native officials and this expense was deducted from the loot as a matter of course. On the lowest rung of the scale we find a man like Nidha whose share of the loot was whatever his master Khunja gave him, at times as little as Rs 2, which obviously reflects a very low status within the gang.⁷⁷

Upon returning from the expedition, part of the loot was immediately spent on paying back the *zamindar* or whoever had advanced the expenses for the expedition, with exorbitant interest as the accounts from Sindouse intimated. Loot could be sold during the expedition, but a substantial part of it had to be realised after the return and apparently fences and jewellers would turn up in Sindouse and buy the stolen property directly from the thugs.⁷⁸ The money realised from the loot would usually support the thug and his family to live comfortably throughout the rainy season and sometimes allow him to stay home a whole year. Yet many of the thugs seem to have squandered the money and Ruheem Khan stated that:

The Thugs go forth on their expeditions in the month of Kooar, and return in Asar and pass the rainy season at home. They dress expensively[,] are lavish, addicted to drinking, and fond of nautching,

when they return, there are nearly 50 sets of dancing girls collected in Sundose Khas. They wear shawls, Benares gold and silver muslins, and Goojerat dopoltahs, and both they and their women wear golden ornaments ... The zemindars take all the property they bring home, and the Thugs only obtain sufficient to afford them food. When the Thugs return to their houses in the ravines, they involve themselves in debt and drinking and nautching, and when they recommence their excursions, are compelled to apply to the zemindars for money to support themselves and their families.⁷⁹

While this description may have been biased, Hussain had also claimed that a thug *jemadar* had been amusing himself with *nautches* after returning from an expedition.⁸⁰ Accordingly, thuggee enabled people to uphold a standard of living that would have been out of reach for most villagers, albeit it was only for a very limited period and kept them constantly indebted to the *zamindars*. The relative wealth gained by thuggee rarely permitted the thugs to abandon it altogether. Apart from the *zamindars* and moneylenders, various other people also made a profit from the thugs.

Allies and parasites

The thugs relied on a whole network of allies along the routes they followed on their expeditions, to sell loot along the way and to assist them in finding promising victims. Apart from protection, influential connections could also provide proof of the good character of the thugs and enable them to keep their disguises. But quite often the thugs themselves were the 'victims' of people who extorted money from them by threatening to reveal their identity. Hussain described the *fakir* Sabit whom the thugs called 'hunter of hunter' because his main source of income came from blackmailing them, and once an expedition was aborted after Sabit had stripped the thugs of all their belongings except their cloth.⁸¹ Guards and watchmen at *serais* and city gates also had to be bribed regularly and, as mentioned above, this expense was calculated into the division of the loot.

The thugs were actually persecuted by the various indigenous authorities and most of them had been imprisoned at one time or another; Hussain spent three years in prison before he was apprehended by Perry, and Ameer Alee completed 12 years' imprisonment at Lucknow.⁸² At times the punishment was quick and brutal, as the decapitation and mutilation during the Surguja expedition was, but mostly it was surprisingly

easy for the thugs to get out of a tight spot thanks to their connections. When Ameer Alee's gang was arrested on one occasion, he managed to secure their release by obtaining a certificate of their good character from an official at the Gwalior durbar, who was an old acquaintance, and they even had their property, much of which was loot, restored.⁸³ Highway robbery was punished more harshly when it included murder, but since the meting out of punishment was left to the discretion of the individual ruler or officials, the thugs were never punished in any consistent manner. The general impression is that in certain respects thuggee was not such a secret practice after all, and connections and corruption ensured that they could usually continue to operate undisturbed. The fact that the thugs had associates in various places and along the routes they travelled was later picked up by the British, who saw in this an all-India conspiracy of criminal communities.

8

The Itinerant Underworld

The taxonomy of thugs and the '84 tribes'¹

One of the characteristics of the colonial representation of thuggee of the 1830s is the endlessly diversified ramifications of thuggee, recorded as extensive lists of thug subgroupings thought to be operating in unison all over India. In 1838 Sleeman wrote that: 'We have always had reason to believe that a great part of the Byragis, Gosaens and other religious mendicants that infest all parts of India were assassins by profession ...'.² Such claims were part of a strategy intended to bring non-sedentary communities under the control of the Company administration by extending the application of the legislation introduced in connection with thuggee. The British regarded with deep suspicion the parts of the indigenous population with no fixed abode or an obvious or legitimate source of income – as they did back in Britain in regard to vagrants and the 'idle classes'.³ Interspersed in the vast material on thuggee there are allusions to more than 40 different 'classes' of thugs, and according to Sleeman, the thugs believed that there were seven Muslim clans from whom they all originated: Bhys, Bursote, Kachunee, Huttar, Ganoo, Tundel, Bahleem and sometimes including Kathur or Ghugaros.⁴ The meaning and significance of these clans and their names has never been properly established but does deserve close attention.⁵

Sleeman's primary source on this matter was a report drawn up in 1834 by D. F. McLeod, the officer in charge of the operations against thugs in Rajputana (Rajasthan).⁶ McLeod's lengthy report is an account of the thugs' own cosmogony and is explicitly based upon the depositions of his approvers, to whom he makes several references. According to McLeod's thug informants, 'the Mahomedans are by general admission the original stock upon whom have been grafted all the subsequent

professions of Thuggee'. Shortly after having been initiated into the art of thuggee by the Hindu goddess Devi or Bhavani, the Muslim thugs associated with some of the 'Lodhee tribe' and 15 generations back they had settled around Delhi under the protection of the Mughal emperor. Apart from the Muslims and Lodhas, the thugs were also comprised of 'a portion from all the roguish and vagabond communities of Hindoostan[:] the "Chourass", 84 tribes'. At this point of time the thugs were well respected and did not commit any crimes, as they were responsible to the emperor for the tranquillity of his dominion. The relationship between these tribes was so close that two of their ancestors, 'Jhoora Nayk Mussulman and Koduck Bunwaree Lodhee', shared their spoil with the whole 'Chourass'.⁷ At one point, however, a physician belonging to the '84 tribes' obtained certain privileges by curing a royal elephant and this so infuriated his associates that they murdered him.⁸ To avoid persecution the tribes divided and fled and this event gave rise to the seven Muslim thug clans that McLeod named as: Bhyns, Bursot, Kachinee, Hutar, Kathur Gugra, Behleem and Ganoo. After the flight from Delhi, the Muslim thugs further separated and eventually formed more than a dozen different 'classes', which McLeod listed along with detailed descriptions of their peculiarities and their place of habitation.⁹ In an appendix McLeod also reproduced an 'Alphabetical list of a few of the lawless fraternities of Hindoostan usually denominated "chowras" exclusive of those entered in the report as ascertained or supposed Thugs all of whom are included under that denomination.'¹⁰

Taking the thugs' myths and the lists reported by McLeod as clues, it seems that the seven original thug clans were those of commonly known wandering communities: 'Bhyns' may either be Bhains – a subgroup of the Kanjars, or if the spelling 'Bhys' is more correct, then Bhais – a subgroup of the Nats.¹¹ It has not been possible to identify the clan of 'Bursot' with any certainty, but it could be a class of peddlers known as Bisati. 'Kachinee' is most likely Kachni, while 'Hutar' is Hatar, 'Kathur Gugra' is Katheriya and 'Behleem' is Bahlim – all being subgroups of the Banjaras. The identity of 'Ganoo' is also uncertain, but may be Gohna – a subgroup of the Nats, or Gunnar – a subgroup of the Beriya. Sleeman also included the 'Tundel', which if translated as Chandel is a very common designation of a whole range of subgroups of different castes, but more significantly, also of the Nats. The 'Lodhee tribe' referred to derive its name from 'lodh' meaning 'bullock' and is a subgroup of the Kanjars.¹² The name is also found in 'Koduck Bunwaree Lodhee', while 'Bunwaree' is a version of Banjara, among the subgroupings of which we find the Naik and, accordingly, 'Jhoora Nayk Mussulman'

also belonged to this group. This all points in the direction of transporters and wandering communities and, with this connection in mind, the names of the thug subgroupings begin to make more sense. If this interpretation is correct, then the thugs, in their myths at least, perceived themselves to have descended from, or to have been associated with, various wandering communities organised in the so-called 'Chourass' or '84 tribes'. *Chaurasi* literally means 84 in Hindi and is a commonly used designation of a territorial subdivision comprised of 84 villages or referring to the 84 subdivisions of a given caste.¹³ It should not be taken literally as meaning that they consisted of 84 tribes, but that the tribes were designated by a commonly recognised name conferring a certain degree of legitimacy to the association.

When the derivation of the thug-groupings and the 'lawless fraternities' listed by Mcleod are compared, the predominance of the Banjaras, Kanjars and Nats is obvious. The Banjaras were a nomadic community that transported goods and provisions on large herds of bullocks and had been widely employed by indigenous armies and even by the British at the beginning of the nineteenth century.¹⁴ They were supposed to have come from Marwar in Rajasthan originally, but often they had no fixed abode and during their expeditions they travelled all over the Indian subcontinent. As far as the Kanjars and Nats are concerned, the precise implication of these names is less clear, as they have been applied to a wide variety of people and tribes who had only an itinerant or nomadic lifestyle in common. The identity, origin, interrelation and hierarchy of these groups have always been obscure and debatable, which even later colonial ethnographers like Crooke had to acknowledge: 'The real fact seems to be that the name Nat is an occupational term which include a number of different clans who have been grouped together merely on account of their common occupation of dancing, prostitution, and performance of various primitive industries.'¹⁵ It is difficult to give a definition of many of the wandering communities more precise than Crooke's description of the Kanjars as 'an aggregate of vagrant tribes of a gypsy character ...'.¹⁶ British writers took particular notice of the religious uncertainty in the beliefs of the wandering communities, which often had both Hindu and Muslim features, as well as their peculiar eating habits, which supposedly included lizards, vermin and jackals.¹⁷ While some itinerant groups had detailed genealogies and ancestral myths, others simply drifted in and out of the non-sedentary networks, and thus the nomadic lifestyle was not necessarily a fixed identity, but rather a mode of living, which could be both permanent and temporal.¹⁸

Although the criminal reputation of these wandering communities has been exaggerated by contemporary European travellers, it seems certain that some of them occasionally did engage in criminal activities of some sort, varying from harmless theft and trickery to banditry and murder. The attitude of sedentary society towards the wandering groups like the Kanjars and Nats was probably characterised by the same ambiguities we find in Early Modern Europe towards gypsies.¹⁹ Their services as peddlers, entertainers, soothsayers and even genealogists were on the one hand indispensable, while at the same time their reputations as thieves and cheats made them suspicious and feared. This also goes for another important group not specifically mentioned as part of the '84 tribes', namely the religious mendicants or yogis who often travelled between temples and shrines, begging along the way. The big ascetic Hindu orders such as the Gosains and Bairagis, or Sannyasis, were important traders during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, but also a military force to be reckoned with as mercenaries and raiders. In the words of Bayly: 'When the British encountered them on one leg of their great nomadic cycles of pilgrimage and trade on the borders of Bengal, they were seen as marauders and robbers.'²⁰ Though mendicants were generally held in great reverence by the Indian population, some of them also had a reputation as proverbial rogues.²¹



Figure 11 Thugs and poisoners (from *Illustrated London News*, 14 Nov. 1857)

Thuggee and the itinerant underworld

A wide variety of itinerant and semi-itinerant people and groups travelled the roads of India, as did the thugs. Yet the question remains: was the thug's affinity with the wandering communities, as expressed in the notion of the '84 tribes', more than a myth? Or is it possible to talk of an itinerant underworld? The presence of 300 pickpockets at the rendezvous at Thakatpur in 1809–10 indicates that the thugs did in fact operate within a much wider network and this is corroborated by several other sources. The approver Sheikh Inayat mentioned conversing with the two Brahmin pickpockets 'in our own peculiar language which they understood well enough'.²² In a rather less friendly encounter, Punna's gang murdered 28 robbers of the 'Baghuree' cast, who had bragged about their loot:

These robbers were all stout and brave men, and well armed, and had they not been taken off their guard we should have had no chance against them. They were from Kusoollee and Nursinggur ... They were no acquaintances of ours but we knew them well by their being so well armed and by their language and threat, and they knew us to be Thugs from our having boys, whom Decoits never take with them on expeditions, and other signs. When they find us in the well peopled parts of the country they always extract from us a heavy fine, because we are always in danger of being hung when denounced by men who know us well, whereas they are only in danger of a fine, or limited imprisonment.²³

A final example should suffice: One thug recounted how he and his gang were resting in a grove alongside the road when 40 Hindu Bairagis came and put up their quarters nearby.²⁴ One of the thugs suspected that the Bairagis were actually a tribe of thugs and the leaders tried to communicate with the Bairagis: 'Several attempts were made by the Jemadars by passing the usual Roomoosee signal to make these people show who they were but none of them would pretend to recognise them till one of the party seeing that the Jemadars were determined on making these confers, called out: "We see you are Bhowany dopes, followers of the Goddess we worship, we do not wish to associate with such unskillful people as you are, the country stinks with the bodies you have left unburied." ' Later the thugs observed a Bairagi engaged in some activity behind a bush near their camp and the thugs afterwards discovered

what appeared to be a freshly dug hole at the spot. The inference was that the Bairagis had buried a body there on an earlier occasion and confronted with this, the Bairagi in question ‘... laughed and replied: “We true followers of the Goddess do not like you make a long grave which the wild beasts can scratch up, we dig a deep hole like this, cut up the bodies and bury them.” ’²⁵

Accordingly, the thugs’ sphere of operations overlapped with that of pickpockets, other types of highway robbers, as well as Banjaras and yogis. The names given by the thugs and eagerly recorded by Sleeman were not the names of thug tribes, clans and sects, but rather the names of various other groups, predominantly itinerant, that *sometimes* engaged in various crimes including thuggee and whom the thugs recognised as being part of their larger network. The existence of such networks should not be understood as indicative of a pan-Indian conspiracy of hereditary criminals, but may be described as an itinerant underworld or, to use the words of Bayly, ‘a “counter society” of robbers, mendicants and wandering people ...’.²⁶

The crime of thuggee as a distinct method of robbing people probably arose as a practice among wandering communities whose very lifestyle made the robbing of travellers an obvious source of income when their usual modes of gaining a livelihood proved insufficient or otherwise untenable. Over time some groups gave up crime entirely while others refined it in different ways, and thus by the 1830s Sleeman and his officers encountered a whole variety of crimes, which were all covered by the term ‘thuggee’. Sleeman’s inclusion of ascetics and mendicants in his categories of thugs was not entirely unfounded – only his personal agenda and limited understanding of the phenomenon led him to reduce all such cases to instances of thuggee with the implication of hereditary criminality. What Sleeman recorded and what he thought of as the ramifications of thuggee were really different itinerant groups, some of which *occasionally* engaged in thuggee; but to engage in thuggee did not necessarily mean that these people perceived of themselves as being thugs. It is worth noticing that Sleeman was not the first to suggest a link between religious mendicants and thuggee: as early as 1811, Perry tried to get a fakir convicted as a thug, claiming that ‘it appears that a fukeer has been found with every gang of Thugs which has been apprehended’.²⁷ Apart from the suspected attempt at poisoning Halhed in Sindouse in 1812, Shakespeare also mentioned Bairagis and Gosains as classes of thugs who poisoned their victims.²⁸

The interaction between itinerant communities is to be expected considering their mode of life and is evident from contemporary accounts, such as James Forbes's description of the groups he encountered along the roads of Northern India around 1800:

Reposing under contiguous trees, we generally saw yogeers, gasannees, Mahomedan dervises, and other religious mendicants who travel all over Hindustan, and often met with large caravans of banjarrees, or vanjarrahs, a set of merchants, who do not belong to any particular country ... The vanjarrahs are likewise followed by conjurers, astrologers, jugglers, musicians, dancing-bears, dancing-snakes, monkeys, and various entertainments; they gain a livelihood by what they receive in the camp, or pick up in the towns and villages through which they pass.²⁹

These people travelled the same roads, stopped at the same *serais* or wayside groves and they may even have shared some of the same contacts, informants and fences along the busy trading and pilgrimage routes when engaging in various types of crimes. The presence of 300 pickpockets at Thakatpur indicates that the shift to the east in travellers' routes, in this case occasioned by the incursions of the Pindaris, attracted both highway robbers like the thugs as well as petty criminals. The identity of the thugs was furthermore well known by some itinerant groups, and vice versa, either because of earlier association or due to their ability to 'read' identities through signs and appearances and recognise fellow criminals. It is worth emphasising that the itinerant underworld was not a brotherhood of criminal elements working in unison. The extent of association and level of interaction was constantly refashioned and though a sense of commonality enabled identification and communication, it seems clear that external factors determined whether encounters were friendly or hostile. And while thugs and pickpockets followed the same fluctuations in travellers' routes, their victims were unlikely to be the same and we know the thugs were generally loath to be compared to thieves. On a different note, the previously mentioned Bairagis appear to have been much more similar to the thugs who encountered them, yet obviously not inclined to acknowledge this affinity. In that particular exchange the mention of common goddess-worship and the distinction in proficiency is also worth noticing. The attitude of the thugs, who led a more sedentary life, to those of the wandering communities, could at times even be one of envy as evinced by

the approver Sahib Khan:

How can their deeds be known. They do all their work themselves. They live in the dessert and work in the dessert. We live in villages, and cannot do our work without the inconvenience and support of the farmers who hold, and the influential men who occupy them. Local authorities of all kinds and degrees must be conciliated by us; but these men are relieved from all this cost and trouble by foregoing the pleasure of other men's society, and the comforts of a fixed habitation. They are wiser men than we are!³⁰

In some cases it is clear that the type of thuggee being practiced among the wandering communities was simple confidence trickery or counterfeiting – that is thuggee in the literal sense of cheating. The Tashma-baz thugs, for example, were simply thimble-riggers who had apparently learned their tricks from an Irish soldier and who poisoned some of the gamblers they tricked.³¹ The so-called Megpunna thugs, who murdered parents in order to steal their children and sell them, included itinerant groups such as the Banjaras and Naiks, but otherwise shared many of the characteristics of the common thugs concerning their *modus operandi*, use of argot and religious beliefs and so on.³²

Life on the roads afforded plenty of opportunities for availing oneself of fellow travellers' belongings, or if it was more convenient or safer, to despatch the travellers first by whichever means available. Thus the Moltanee thugs were supposed to strangle their victims with the thongs they used to drive their bullocks, clearly suggesting that their main occupation was cattle herding and transportation, the implements of which was also used to commit the occasional thuggee.³³ The same almost casual or incidental practising of thuggee is also evident from the deposition of yogi thugs arrested in the late 1830s, one of whom stated: 'I have already stated, that, we do not start with any intention of murdering travellers, our occupation is principally selling our oils, and cheating (Thuggee) in pretending to turn less valuable into the more valuable methods, and certainly two or three "Suffurs" may pass over without our committing any murder.'³⁴ Another yogi, however, claimed that the 'Maoodekur' yogis went on thuggee expeditions as beggars or under the disguise of selling beads.³⁵ Accordingly, the notion of identity and primary occupation is decidedly unclear and the statements recorded by the British often ambiguous – as in the account of a thug who, while resting in a garden with his gang, fell into conversation with

some *pandas* or temple priests: '... and in the course of conversation [I] found that they were a tribe of Thugs who obtained a livelihood by strangling travellers whereupon I informed them that we also practised that calling.'³⁶ Some of the thugs subsequently accompanied the *pandas* on a one-month expedition during which a single traveller was strangled. It seems very unlikely that these *pandas* perceived themselves to be thugs and considered strangling people their livelihood, and yet they occasionally engaged in thuggee and on this particular occasion interacted with thugs on equal terms. The itinerant underworld was not completely separated from sedentary society or even necessarily illegal, but an open and rather flexible network that allowed for many different activities, as reflected in the following approver-account of a chance meeting:

I was one day walking with some of our party near Jeypore by an encampment of wealthy merchants from the westward, who wore very high turbans. I observed to my friend as we passed 'what enormous turbans these men wear!' using our mystick term *Aghasee*. The most respectable among them came up immediately and invited us to sit down with them, saying, 'my good friends, we are of your fraternity, though our *Aghasees* are not the same'. They told us that they were now opulent merchants, and independent of Thuggee, the trade by which they had chiefly acquired their wealth; but that they still did a little occasionally when they found in a suitable place a Bunij [literally merchandise] worth taking; but that they were now beyond speculating in trifles! We were kindly entertained, and much pleased with our new friends, but they left the same day, and I have never met any of the kind since.³⁷

The use of a single word appears to have been sufficient to facilitate identification and as a means of introduction. In fact, common to most of the accounts of encounters is the description of a secret language as the key to identification and subsequent communication between the thugs and the various itinerant groups, which is perhaps the best clue to the actual nature of the 'Ramasee' – the 'peculiar language used by the thugs'.

Secret words and secret signs: the Ramasee

Giving his main work the title of the secret language of the thugs is suggestive of the importance Sleeman attached to the 'Ramasee'.³⁸ In a

sense Sleeman perceived it as the key to uncovering thuggee, as his knowledge of the argot reflected his complete mastery and revelation of all the thugs' secrets: 'I have, I believe, entered in this vocabulary every thing to which Thugs in any part of India thought it necessary to assign a peculiar term ... I am satisfied that there is no term, no rite, no ceremony, no opinion, no omen or usage that they have intentionally concealed from me ...'.³⁹ Sleeman had originally suggested that the vocabulary alone be published by the Asiatic Society and that a committee should be formed to examine and improve the vocabulary. For that purpose fully initiated thugs from all over India should be consulted, who: 'whether from Lodhiana or Cape Comorin will be able to explain the meaning of the terms in the vocabulary'.⁴⁰ This certainty on Sleeman's part is of course symptomatic of the notion that thuggee was an all-India phenomenon, the 'Ramasee' being one of its key uniting factors, and that the British could penetrate and make known every corner of Indian society.

Sleeman, however, did not collect the vocabulary out of linguistic interest but to facilitate the suppression of thuggee and to establish the phenomenon as rigidly governed by fixed rituals, rules and omens.⁴¹ The vocabulary was pieced together from his conversations with more than a dozen different approvers, the printed conversations in *Ramaseeana* thus being the side-product. Accordingly, no single thug would ever have known all the words listed by Sleeman – in spite of his claim to the contrary. He would furthermore not have included and published any material that did not conform to his definition of thuggee, and thus the 'Ramasee' as Sleeman published it is reflective of his understanding of thuggee as much as that of the thugs themselves. As it happens, Sleeman's vocabulary is not the only existing one and as early as 1816 Dr Sherwood published an article with a list of 'slang terms and phrases' used by the *phansigars*, which was another name for thugs.⁴² Sherwood also described the secret signs and phrases that the *phansigars* used to communicate, including both hand signals and signs left along the roads to indicate their route to other members of the gang. Even though Sleeman published Sherwood's article in *Ramaseeana*, there is nothing to suggest that the short list of words included by Sherwood influenced Sleeman's lexicon. There is 20 years between the two publications and while Sleeman relied on approvers mainly from north and central India, Sherwood had based his article on prisoners in Madras. And yet there are some 20 words that appear in both lexicons and several with a similar meaning. Similarly, during the mid-1830s, part of the 'Thug language' used by the yogis arrested as thugs was also written

down along with an appropriate translation into 'Ramasee' proper.⁴³ These vocabularies and lists recorded independently, corroborate the previously mentioned accounts of the use of a secret language that was not limited to a specific region or group. The *Ramaseeana* and other vocabularies of the thug's argot belonged to a well-established European tradition of recording criminal cant, the publication of which was common throughout the seventeenth–nineteenth centuries.⁴⁴ The main exception is that the vocabularies collected in India were part of the police measures to suppress thuggee, and they are complemented by several accounts of the actual use of the argot.

First of all, the thugs' argot cannot be thought of as a language or even a fixed argot. It was not a written language and accordingly Sleeman and others' collection, translation of words and construction of vocabularies constitutes a radical change of the argot – a process quite similar to that of writing down oral histories. Second, it was not an invented language as such, but mainly based on Hindi verbal and grammatical structure. While some neologisms were used, there were also many common words that were simply ascribed a secondary meaning or pronounced slightly differently – such as 'Bindoo' for 'Hindu'. The use of the word 'tear' (Hindi: 'ansu', 'ansootore' in the 'Ramasee') as meaning 'rain'; or 'red' (Hindi: 'ranga', 'runga' in the 'Ramasee') for '*sepoy*', in reference to their red uniforms, is merely a type of slang the meaning and logic of which could be understood by anybody.⁴⁵ 'Pukka kurna' is listed as meaning 'to bury in a deep and secure grave' in reference to a victim, and as *pukka* has more or less retained its meaning even in English and 'kurna' is Hindi meaning 'to make' we can easily translate the sentence into colloquial English as quite literally: 'to do it properly'.⁴⁶

The utility of a secret language is obvious from the type of robbery that the thugs committed, as they were in close contact with their victims and would have to communicate among themselves without being understood by others. The fact that thugs were constantly traveling around, sleeping in camps or *serais*, also meant that they had little or no privacy, hence the need for a private means of communication. Many of the terms of the argot relate to the practical aspects of thuggee, deceiving and strangling travellers, as well as to the typical types of loot found, and in that respect Sleeman's description of the 'Ramasee' as a 'technical language' seems fitting.⁴⁷ Similarly, the *phansigars* of South India called their argot 'Pheraseri-ci bát' or 'language of dispatch or emergency', thus emphasising the functional aspect of its use similar to the professional vocabulary used by Early Modern European criminals.⁴⁸ Its use in front of the victims necessitated the inclusion of everyday

terminology, so as not to arise suspicion by uttering unintelligible words that implied the communication of secrecies. According to one approver, victims were strangled when the *jemadar* gave the signal, 'which of course is preconcerted but at the same time quite arbitrary[,] generally a common course expression is made use of not likely to strike the attention of the victims, such as "Tumbakoolao" (bring tobacco)'.⁴⁹ Thus the implied secondary meaning of commonly used words depended on the context. In this sense the 'Ramasee' was not so much a secret language as a jargon emerging out of a shared experience and mode of understanding.

Another equally important function of the argot was its use as a means of identification, both amongst thugs and among the various other communities of the itinerant underworld. To ascertain whether a stranger was a thug or not, they would, if he was a Muslim, greet him with the words 'Aulae Khan Salam' or if Hindu with 'Aulae Bhae Ram Ram', both common greetings with the prefix of 'Aulae' signifying a thug. When asked if the thugs had any secret signs by which they identified each other, Hussain explained that they would make a short cough, which hardly constitutes a secret language.⁵⁰ Yet, when one of the thugs communicated with the members of Hussain's gang who were incarcerated, he did so in Pushtun, which only they understood. Several of the Shekohabad thugs were Afghans and thus it appears that what was used as a secret language was sometimes merely the native language or dialect of the thugs.

Examples of argot used by the *pandas* or priests of the temples at the ghats of Varanasi have been collected in the twentieth century and surprisingly it shares some ten words with the thugs' argot collected more than a century earlier.⁵¹ This, however, does not indicate, as Van Woerkens seemed to suggest, that the twentieth-century *pandas* were somehow inheritors of a 'thug legacy'.⁵² As we have seen, some *pandas* were known to be part of the thug's network in the 1830s, if only peripherally, and it is much more likely that their modern use of argot is derived from nineteenth-century *pandas* rather than from the thugs. Where the thugs' terms refer to strangling and burying victims, the same terms used by the *pandas* refer to bringing pilgrims to the ghats and charging them money. This is a revealing aspect of the use of argot among people engaged in semi-illegal practices – the context in which a specific word was used lends it its ultimate meaning

The concept of 'thieves' latin', 'argot', 'cant' and 'rottwelsch' is well known in Early Modern Europe, where it was used by both vagrants,

itinerant traders, thieves and robbers. Writing of organised criminality in Europe, Uwe Danker states that cant:

defines a social group living outside the formal structures ... : not only bandits but also cutpurses, petty travelling thieves, beggars, trusty innkeepers, 'whores' and those treated as such. All of them were united in the use of a common secret language which marked off their existence as taking place outside proper society and indicated at least a limited contempt for dominant social norms, including those of the criminal law.⁵³

This brings us on to the third use of argot, namely in defining rank, status and identity, within the gangs and *vis-à-vis* the 'outside world'. Apart from the special terms designating the various positions and offices within the gang, the thugs also had terms assigning status and identity that were much more elaborated than mere practicalities called for. This also goes for the argot relating to rituals and omens and the like. The thugs, as well as the wandering communities of the itinerant underworld, defined their identity through the use of argot as it signified their membership and affiliation within such gangs and networks. The hierarchical structuring of a gang, with an elaborated terminology designating rank and status, ordered their world and ascribed ritual legitimacy to their practices, as did the argot referring to initiation, omens and observances. The argot on the one hand related to the *internal* structure and functioning of a thug gang, while at the same time facilitating communication *externally* with other criminals that were, however, still 'inside' the itinerant network.

It thus appears that the 'Ramasee' was not a secret language used exclusively by the thugs, but a professional vocabulary used by people who had the need to communicate in secret without anybody else being able to understand the content of their conversation.⁵⁴ Such argot was used by many different groups in nineteenth-century India, who engaged in acts of thuggee in its literal sense of cheating or deceiving. This would include the wandering communities and mendicants, confidence tricksters and pickpockets, bandits and robbers like the thugs, but also rogue traders trying to cheat their customers or priests luring money from pilgrims.⁵⁵ The 'Ramasee' and similar argots were the lingua franca of the itinerant underworld and of trading communities who needed a common language in the various distant parts of the continent. Just like the itinerant underworld, the use of argot, which was one of its defining

characteristics, varied immensely – from a simple cough to the context-determined use of words that established identity, enabled recognition and served as introduction among members of the ‘84 tribes’.

The thugs of Parihara operated within the networks of the itinerant underworld, but at the same time they were also linked to the land they inhabited through ties of patronage and service. Given this basic disparity, how did they perceive themselves and what was their moral universe?

9

The World of the Thugs

'Hereditary' and 'occasional' thugs

The following is an attempt to reconstruct the universe of the thugs, examine their mentality and understand how they perceived themselves and their practices. It thus touches upon 'certain important aspects of their lives', such as the thugs' religious beliefs, notions of honour and status, and identity. These issues are notoriously difficult to deal with, and any findings can only be tentative. Furthermore, the relevant sources cannot be examined independently of the process by which they were produced, and a narrative of the thugs' mental outlook is therefore also one of the interviews conducted by the British. Yet, the material is sufficiently rich to make such an endeavour worthwhile and not simply settle for the recognition that the material cannot be taken at face value.

Before we turn to these complicated issues, it is necessary to establish that – as appeared from the accounts relating to the itinerant underworld – thuggee was *not* a uniform phenomenon, nor were the people who practised it. Even among the Sindouse thugs, we find several different kinds of people engaging in thuggee on various levels. Apart from the *zamindars* who were privy to the actions of the thugs, there were also moneylenders like Dureao who were rather more extensively engaged in the expeditions. But the most conspicuous type was those, like Feringheea, who claimed to be 'hereditary' thugs and who were officially acknowledged as being so, as their families' presence on the 1797 tax list indicated. Although they may at one point have been itinerant, by 1812 these thugs were firmly rooted in the locality of their village, and as such led (seemingly) respectable sedentary lives. Locally, thuggee was a socially legitimate and therefore accepted vocation conducted under

organised circumstances. The 'hereditary' thugs were not hereditary in the sense that Sleeman implied, but were following what might best be perceived as a family tradition. They perceived themselves as thugs, stating that it was their profession, which their fathers and forefathers before them had followed. Even though they might at times follow a different occupation or an itinerant lifestyle, they still referred to a long tradition of thuggee. As such, they took pride in their profession and placed great emphasis on omens, rituals and rules.

Yet in Sindouse we also encounter low-caste men like Bukhut and Doorjun who occupied subservient positions and were little more than servants or slaves.¹ Similarly in Shekohabad, where Hussain and others appear to have been more indirectly involved, as they were often forced to make a living any way they could, thuggee being just one option. These 'occasional' thugs lived in the periphery of sedentary society and having no fixed abode, they occupied a precarious position between sedentary and peripatetic society, not unlike that of day-labourers in Early Modern Europe.² While both 'hereditary' and the 'occasional' thugs usually lived under the protection of *zamindars*, the 'occasional' thugs were even more vulnerable due to the less extensive network within which they operated. Kalee Khan, for instance, became a thug at the age of 31, but gave it up after a few years and settled as a cultivator.³ Eleven years later a group of Lodha's committed murders in the manner of thugs and a number of people, including Kalee Khan, were apprehended on suspicion of being the perpetrators. The local *zamindar* took Rs 25 from Kalee Khan and confiscated all his property and when he was eventually released, he took to the road with some thugs and made a living by robbery. In this case the stigma of being a criminal forced him back into thuggee.⁴ A later case is that of Khandeh Ahir, who was enticed by the promise of food and cloth to join a gang of thugs, and who claimed he was told to cover his face and go back to sleep whenever victims were despatched during the night.⁵ Khandeh appeared to have been brought along to carry out menial duties and act as scout and so on, and not to be fully initiated into the operations of the thugs. Another example is that of the cultivator Futty Khan, who was also a thug *jemadar*, and who even left his gang while on expedition because 'the season of cutting my crops had arrived ...'.⁶ Thus we find that a number of thugs drifted in and out of a sedentary livelihood as cultivators and only engaged in thuggee out of necessity.⁷

The various types of thugs tended to represent the phenomenon differently and while the 'occasional' thugs often executed their crimes in an *ad hoc* manner, the 'hereditary' thugs emphasised the importance

of rules, omens and rituals. Obviously the division of thugs into two groups is a simplified model, yet I find them to be useful in explaining the discrepancies in the material on thuggee, especially concerning Sleeman's rigid representation of the phenomenon. In order for Sleeman to be able to claim that he possessed a full knowledge of thuggee, it had to be well defined and presented as a uniform practice governed by a fixed set of rules. At the same time Orientalist tropes concerning the mechanism of caste and religion in India came into play. Since the profession of an Indian was presumed to be determined by his caste, the thugs were conceptualised as a caste-like sect or fraternity.⁸

Because the Sindouse thugs and their descendants had formerly operated within an institutionalised social framework, they represented the practice of thuggee as such before Sleeman. The stories they told during the 1830s referred to an ideal of thuggee and harked back to a lost time when they occupied several villages and carried on their trade under the aegis of the *zamindars*. The information that Sleeman was collecting was reflective of the 'hereditary' thugs' self-perception, and this is in fact comparable to the way the early British Orientalists learned of Indian culture and social norms through a minority of high-caste and predominantly Brahmin informants. In the 1830s the Sindouse thugs or their descendants placed a much greater emphasis on rules and omens than they had done earlier. According to Sleeman's approvers, a thug was initiated by a guru and had to undergo several ceremonies before he was allowed to join the expeditions. When asked whether the thugs went through a 'course of instruction', Hussain on the other hand stated that: 'No, this I never saw; we learn from practical experience.'⁹ Such obvious gaps, however, were glossed over by Sleeman and others, who regarded the approver testimonies as referring to the same fixed identity and phenomenon even when regional variations were allowed for. Later accounts of rituals and observances among the thugs excited the interest of Sleeman and Paton and made them develop the religious issues during their interviews with approvers.

Goddess-worship and religious beliefs

Apart from a few scattered references, there is no mention of religion being a significant aspect of thuggee in the material predating Sleeman's involvement in the operations to suppress the thugs.¹⁰ In the depositions of the 1830s, however, there are accounts of rituals and ceremonies that occurred during the thug expeditions of the past three decades, as well as reflections on the nature of thuggee prompted by the interests of

Sleeman and Paton. Sherwood had been the first to recount the story current among *phansigars* of how the goddess Mariatta had originally helped them, getting rid of their victims' bodies by devouring them. One of them had observed her doing so, which was forbidden, and subsequently she refused to help them any more, though she did present them with one of her teeth for a pickaxe, a rib for a knife and some of her clothing for a noose.¹¹ According to McLeod's approvers, thuggee was an 'art which they strongly believe was committed to their common ancestors by Davee or Bhowanee, the goddess of destruction on that Deity's being indeed from the invulnerability of an antagonist, to adopt the Roomal or other supplement of strangulation in preference to any other weapon'.¹² It is worth noticing that Devi is here being reduced to 'a goddess of destruction', which reveals the limited and tendentious understanding of Hinduism prevalent among the British at the time.¹³ In Sleeman's retelling of this myth, he seems to have elaborated it to the effect that 'Kalee Davey' created the first two thugs from two drops of sweat to help her fight a demon which was devouring all mankind.¹⁴ Whether the thugs believed the goddess had merely instituted the practice of thuggee or had indeed created the progenitors of all thugs is unclear. Sherwood's *phansigars* used the term 'Bhavani Puter' meaning 'sons of Bhavani' to identify each other, while the Bairagis identified the thugs as: 'Bhowany dopes, followers of the Goddess we worship'.¹⁵ Accordingly, there can be no doubt that thugs believed they stood in special relation to the goddess and that their rules also forbade them from murdering women and members of the lower castes, whom Sherwood claimed they regarded as descendants or servants of the goddess Jayi.¹⁶

The myth of the divine origins of thuggee was based on a well-known story from the *Devi-mahatmaya*, according to which Kali fought the demon Raktabija, along with a group of goddesses called Matrkas.¹⁷ In the original story Kali licked up the blood and swallowed the multiplying demons who emerged from it, and this seems to have become strangulation in the thug's version, where they had also taken the role of the Matrkas. Remnants of the origin of the myth, though, are discernable in the statement of one of Paton's approvers, who stated that 'Bhowanee' was 'the chief of the trade – she digests all the murders (huzum Kurta) and takes the responsibility from us ...'.¹⁸ The same goes for the belief that Bhavani fed on blood, which was mentioned by several approvers when describing how they stabbed the bodies of their victims: 'Bhowanee (the goddess of destruction) whom we worship, is displeased when we do not shed the blood of our victims!'¹⁹ At first glance, this seems to confirm the colonial perception of thuggee as being a particularly

depraved form of human sacrifice,²⁰ and these issues were further elaborated by Paton's approvers in a very fascinating exegesis of the thug's religious beliefs:

Sheodeen: It is god, who kills, but Bhowanee has the name of. If Bhowanee had her will, she would kill every human being upon the earth in one day! blood is her food.

Futeh Khan: She thirsts for blood!

Sheodeen: God has appointed blood for her food – saying 'Khoon tu Kao! feed thou upon blood!' In my opinion, this is very bad, but what can she do, being ordered to subsist upon blood.

Futteh Khan: We love her (Bhowanee) because she patronizes our trade of Thuggie, and forgives us.

Allayar: Bhowanee must be fed, and since the British Government has been suppressing our trade of murder, Bhowanee has begun with her own hands to devastate the country with disease, and death; men are everywhere propitiating her, people in the villages are dying by twenties and forties, within these last five years of the suppression of Thugs, there certainly has been more disease.

Futteh Khan: This idea of Allayar's is not correct.

Sheodeen: What! Did the few people killed by the thugs suffice to fill Bhowanee's belly ('pait bhurut ruha?') she requires more extensive food! ...²¹

It is quite clear from the existing accounts that the thugs did not in fact set out on expeditions and murder and rob in order to avert disease and famine, yet that is how they described it in this specific instance. This is a retrospective conflation of common goddess-worship and animal sacrifice with the practice of thuggee, which imbued the latter with the religious merit and legitimacy of the former – but it is also worth noticing that the thugs were not in complete agreement on these issues. Allayar was the only approver ever to make the rather interesting connection between the suppression of thuggee and the prevalence of disease. By equating the stabbing of their victims with the sacrifice of goats at temples dedicated to the goddess, the approvers ascribed all their deeds a semblance of religious significance, which could be seen to sanction and redeem their murders.²² The notion of forgiveness expressed by Futteh Khan, implies that the thugs did feel that their acts needed forgiveness,

and in spite of the claim of divine sanction the morality of their murders was perceived to be unequivocal.

At the same time the context of these statements must be remembered. The reflections on 'Bhowanee' and her lust for blood were prompted by a set of rather revealing questions from Paton:

Paton: 'Who is this Bhowany whom you worship? and what is the extent of her powers? do you suppose that she wards off evil or bestows good upon her worshippers? do her powers extend beyond the grave? or are they limited only to this world? do you suppose that she herself, is happy or miserable?'²³

Obviously the approver's statements were not spontaneous but elicited under specific circumstances and the response to such loaded questions as these can hardly reflect how thugs would ordinarily talk or think about these matters amongst themselves – if they ever did so. Paton's questions reveal what the British thought about the religiosity of their Indian subjects and the unique situation of approver interviews allowed him to explore issues that would otherwise be impossible to address. The Christian rationale of Paton's questions is hard to overlook and he seems to have been completely oblivious to the possibility that the approvers might interpret notions of good and evil, not to say afterlife, in rather different terms. It may be possible that he felt the Muslim approvers would be more receptive to Christian thought, yet Paton must have had a Western readership in mind when he tried to convince his approvers that they were really serving Satan.²⁴

In spite of Sleeman's claims, the thugs appear to have maintained no more intimate relations with the established institutions of Hindu goddess-worship than ordinary people.²⁵ Feringheea, for instance, told Sleeman that the thugs never made any offerings at the temples of Devi, nor consulted the Brahmins, but when asked whether they worshipped at the temples, he replied: 'Yes, of course, all men worship at her temple.'²⁶ Sleeman's Muslim officers objected to this claim, but eventually had to admit that even Muslims would go to the temple of the goddess when the smallpox was raging.²⁷ This incident, which Sleeman recorded and published in *Ramaseeana*, touches upon one of the aspects of thuggee, which has attracted the most attention – namely that Muslim thugs took part in the worship of a Hindu goddess. In his report on the thugs' myths, McLeod made the following observation on the issue: 'It is a notable fact that not only amongst the Thugs, but in an especial manner amongst all lawless fraternities, and to a certain extent throughout the uneducated

population of Central India, the Mussulmans vie with the Hindoos in a devotion of this sanguinary Deity [*Devi* or *Bhavani*] far exceeding that they pay to any other.²⁸ Even when Mcleod's obvious prejudice is taken into account, this statement is corroborated by many accounts as far the Muslim worship of Hindu deities is concerned. The British made much of the fact that both Hindus and Muslims worshipped Kali, but the syncretism of popular religion in India is too well known to offer any amazement today. For ordinary villagers, with the possible exception of the *pandit* and the *mullah*, the divisions between castes and religions were in reality much more fluid, and while some rules were rigorously upheld others were ignored or subservient to practicalities.²⁹ According to Hussain, the Hindu and Muslim thugs would, when united on expeditions, eat separately but drink and smoke together.³⁰ The disguises used by the thugs could also at times transcend the religious boundaries, as one of Paton's approvers explained: 'I used sometimes to put on the dress of a Hindoo (he is a Mahomedan) and pretend to be a Hindoo, when inveigling a Hindoo traveller – pretending to pooja, and bathe, and to use all the forms that the Hindoo's use.'³¹ It is only if one assumes that thuggee was a religious sect, that the cooperation of Hindus and Muslims becomes at all remarkable.

Paton's Muslim approvers also discussed their worship of 'Bhowanee', whom they had disowned after being captured and becoming approvers. The Muslim thugs had constructed a religious universe in which the Hindu goddess had been assimilated as no more than a spirit subservient to the one true god (Allah). Thus the approver Mugdooma stated that 'In my heart, I take the name of God, when I strangle a man – saying "thou God and Ruler!" "Alla, toomee Malik!" I do not pray to Bhowanee, but I worship her (poojakur).'³² On a similar note, some of Sleeman's Muslim approvers identified 'Bhowanee' with Fatima, Mohammed's daughter, and claimed that it was Fatima who had fought the demon Raktabija and instituted thuggee.³³ From this it appears that there was no clear cosmology and that the thugs' perception of divine sanction depended on the circumstances. To Paton's Muslim approvers, the worship of 'Bhowanee' was exclusively associated with the practice of thuggee and thus very much functionalised, while they retained their Muslim faith in a single god: 'Bhowanee is only for Thugie.'³⁴ However, they did not disavow the goddess entirely and implied that they would worship her again if they were to take up thuggee anew.

Having inscribed themselves in the myths of the goddess also made it possible for the approvers to explain the decline of thuggee and make sense of their present situation as prisoners of the British. Prompted by

Sleeman and Paton as to how the belief in divine sanction could be maintained in light of the suppression of thuggee, the approvers attributed the downfall to their non-observance of the requisite omens and rules. In the 'ideal' past when the thugs had adhered to the omens and were selective in their choice of victims, their deity had protected them and some of the stories told by the approvers related to the punishment inflicted by the goddess upon native rulers who persecuted the thugs.³⁵ In his article from 1816, Sherwood commented on the functional aspect of the religious beliefs of the thugs:

Ridiculous as their superstitions must appear, they are not devoid of effect. They serve the important purposes of cementing the union of the gang; of kindling courage and confidence; and, by an appeal to religious texts deemed infallible, of imparting to their atrocities the semblance of divine sanction.³⁶

By complying with the rules and observances associated with a strict adherence to the ideal image of thuggee, the thugs could in effect pursue their 'trade of murder' with complete impunity, both in terms of prosecution and moral responsibility. One of Paton's approvers expressed the belief in the goddess' absolution of the thugs' blame in no uncertain terms: 'She pardons our murders – it is not I, who murder, but Bhowanee, she is responsible!'³⁷ The very practical aspect of these beliefs was also reflected in one approvers' perception of death and corpses:

If a man dies a natural death we fear to go near him; but when we murder them, we have no fear, and though many murdered bodies were there, we would lie down amongst them without fear, except indeed lest passengers should come. Why should we fear the corpse we have ourselves murdered? it is our trade, we are gratified to see the body, and to think, we have got plenty of money from the corpse ('roopea khoob paya!').³⁸

An intimate experience of murder, death and dead bodies necessitated a framework which allowed the thugs to carry out the grisly business of thuggee with a clear conscience. There can be no doubt that some of the thugs regarded thuggee with professional pride and had developed a certain 'culture' where coolness and dexterity in strangling was highly valued. Considering that many of the thugs either witnessed or actively participated in scores of murders, their phlegmatic attitude or even pride

in recounting their exploits cannot surprise and may in part also have been a strategy to numb feelings of guilt and remorse.

Comparisons made by the approvers between thugs and tigers accentuated the way some thugs regarded thuggee as an undertaking akin to hunting, yet it also implied a lack of responsibility on the part of the thugs, who were merely following their nature.³⁹ Regarding the fatalism of the *phansigars* Sherwood stated that: 'By an application of the same doctrine, they have compared themselves, not inaptly, to tigers; maintaining, that as these ferocious beasts are impelled by irresistible necessity, and fulfil the designs of nature in preying on other animals, so the appropriate victims of the *Phánsigárs* are men; and that the destiny of those whom they kill, "was written on their foreheads".'⁴⁰ At the same time, though, it should be remembered that Sleeman and especially Paton relished in the blood-curdling tales of murders and that the undisguised fascination of their captors may have spurred on the approvers. Paton was famously described by one contemporary traveller as having made 'positive pets' of some of his approvers and his interest in the more macabre aspects of their deeds is unlikely to have passed unnoticed by the thugs.⁴¹

The accounts of the approvers thus worked within the context of a moral universe that could account for all aspects of their tumultuous lives. The thugs' world was one of constantly changing fortunes; they acquired huge sums and lost them again, were imprisoned and released, and had to migrate and resettle throughout their lives. By presenting thuggee within a legitimate religious framework they could rationalise and make sense of the different events, both to themselves and each other but also to outsiders. Indeed, it seems likely that what had probably never been more than a vague or loose set of beliefs among the thugs, regarding the role of their tutelary deity, assumed the appearance of doctrinal articles of faith and was attributed an undue significance when elicited and recorded by Sleeman and Paton. In that regard the extent of the material relating to these issues may be slightly misleading, in that the religious beliefs of the thugs have received a disproportionate degree of attention.

Identity of the thugs

The thugs' religious beliefs reveal the importance they attached to religious legitimacy, and the same concern is also apparent in relation to notions of identity and status. On one occasion a Muslim approver of Sleeman's described the interaction between various thug-groups and

mentioned that the thugs of the south:

will never intermarry with our families – saying we once drove bullocks and were itinerant tradesmen, and consequently of lower cast. They trace back the trade of Thuggee in their families to more generations than we can, and they are more skilful and observant of rules and omens than we are ...⁴²

The Brahmin approvers present interposed and argued that the Muslim thugs had in fact descended from: ‘... *Kanjars*, or vagrant Muslims, who followed armies and lived in suburbs of cities, and in the wild wastes, and that their pretensions to higher descent was all nonsense.’ This dispute continued through several interviews and when the marriage ceremonies of the Muslim thugs were cited as evidence of their itinerant background, the Muslim approver replied:

It only indicates that our ancestors after their captivity at Delhi, were obliged to adopt these disguises to effect their escape. Some pretended to have dancing bears and monkeys; some to have herds of cattle, and to be wandering *Khunjurs*, (*Gypsies*); but they were not really so; they were high cast *Musulmans*.⁴³

There is a distinct element of social mobility at the core of this dispute. Explaining away the low status of their ancestors as no more than a disguise, enabled the Muslim approvers to assume a higher social status, and thuggee might in that context be regarded as a kind of social leveller.⁴⁴ It is virtually impossible to discern between actual identity and a disguise, and low-caste people may thus readily have assumed the ‘non-identity’ of a thug, which could encompass almost any social status. The extensive use of disguises and aliases obviously complicates the issue of the thugs’ identity. Asked whether the thugs disguised themselves, Hussain stated that: ‘They do sometimes as *Sepoys*, some times as *Berkundauzes*; sometimes as *Fuckers*, some times as cultivators, or travellers; they always disguise themselves and are always changing their dress – the *Lodeh* caste of thugs, from *Dutteah*[,] appears as *koits*, *Brahmins*, *Kitteries*, and other *Hindoo* characters.’⁴⁵ In 1810, one of Perry’s informants mentioned some thugs of the *Lodha* caste who wore the ‘*gunnoo*’, but professed themselves as ‘*Kaits*’ and dressed as ‘*Telingahs*’. *Lodhas* were low-caste while *Kaits* were of much higher status and a ‘*telinga*’ in Northern India meant a *sepo*y, which implies that the thugs in question were invoking a higher martial status.⁴⁶ Likewise, when the thugs were stopped by *Atma Ram* during the

Surguja expedition, the two boys who gave them up also divulged that even though the members of the gangs pretended to be Muslims they were in fact Sengar Rajputs.⁴⁷ Thus it is clear that the disguises sometimes served a purpose other than merely to deceive travellers in the execution of thuggee.

In connection with the profession of the thugs, the darogha-report from 1810 claimed that the Sindouse thugs not only lived by plunder but also as horse dealers.⁴⁸ This is a curious statement as none of the depositions refer to any such activity, but may perhaps be explained by the fact that the thugs often took horses as loot and either sold them or brought them back as presents to their patrons. As mentioned above, both the Multan thugs and the Megpunnas were said to strangle with the thongs or reins by which they drove their pack animals, which hints at the possibility that thuggee evolved from itinerant trade. Having murdered some merchants near Jaipur, Hussain's gang once brought the plundered merchandise to the city and sold it in the guise of 'Soodaghurs and travelling peddlers', that is for a while they assumed the identity of their victims.⁴⁹ When we consider the multitude of different groups to varying degrees involved in the itinerant underworld and the widespread use of disguises and aliases, the notion of permanent identities is in many instances no longer meaningful. Many thugs were supposed to disguise themselves as mendicants, while yogis caught during the 1830s stated that they travelled the roads to beg and sell beads and pearls, but occasionally committed thuggee as well. Thus it becomes quite impossible to distinguish between identity and disguise and primary and secondary profession or livelihood. Concerning the fluid identities of the peasant-mercenaries of Northern India, Kolff states that:

These identities, and others like them, took, in different places and periods, many forms and names according to social, economic, political, and social events. Men were not restricted to only one of them and in the course of their lives found themselves activating other designations that gave expression to other roles in society.⁵⁰

In a similar manner it seems likely that being a thug was fully compatible with a whole range of identities, and that religious, ethnic, caste and thug identities took precedence over each other in different situations. The point of view and sphere of understanding one finds in the approver depositions collected by Sleeman and Paton actually belonged to men from very different social and geographic backgrounds. The precondition for their becoming approvers was that they acknowledged

being thugs, regardless of whether they considered themselves as such or not. Under the direction of Sleeman, thuggee assumed the appearance of a coherent socio-religious identity, where differences were smoothed over as mere variances of the same essence. The approvers had been reduced to a homogenous entity irrespective of their social background and standing, and the conversations were therefore not only between Sleeman and the approvers, but also between the approvers themselves, trying to work out a coherent narrative which could accommodate them all. The discussion of the possible itinerant background of the Muslim thugs was one such example of negotiation of identity among the approvers. With that in mind it is not surprising that the interviews conducted by the British elicited information that in part at least conformed to the colonial stereotype of thuggee.⁵¹

Honour among thugs

Permeating every aspect of the practices of the thugs a particular emphasis on honour and legitimacy is discernable. The thugs did not regard their murders as dishonourable in any sense, and instead they often took pride in their skill and proficiency when strangling people. The sense of honour was also related to an extreme sensitivity as far as injustice was concerned, and the thug Puchoree was supposed to have cut his throat after having quarrelled with another thug over the division of some loot.⁵² Punna also mentioned one thug who shot himself because of a disrespectful remark from his wife, while on one expedition Aman quarrelled with Feringheea because the latter had disgraced himself by visiting a dancing girl.⁵³ These occurrences were not uncommon and all in full keeping with the martial concept of honour.⁵⁴ The same concern about status is also reflected in one approvers' reference to a thug who had allowed all kinds of 'ragamuffins' into his gang but who was eventually captured by the British: 'It indicates the danger of scraping together such a set of fellows for Thuggee. They killed all people indiscriminately, women and men, of all casts and professions, and knew so little about omens that they entered upon expeditions and killed people, in spite of such as the most ignorant ought to have known were prohibitive.'⁵⁵ Similarly, when discussing the precise manner in which omens were to be observed, the approvers from Telingana and Sindouse strongly disagreed, and one of the former exclaimed: 'This is one of your Hindostanee heresies.'⁵⁶ While the word 'heresy' is obviously an English translation, its implications are clear enough considering the context of a dispute between thugs from different regions. A number of argot terms

used by the thugs also referred to experienced well-bred thugs with a respectable pedigree, as opposed to tyros, the uninitiated and riff-raff.⁵⁷ While discussing the other types of criminals who, like the thugs, had a secret language, Paton's approvers emphasised their own status:

Futteh Khan: As for dacoits they are men of force and violence, having no language peculiar to themselves – they have no 'science!' 'Ilm' [signs and Language] as the thieves, Dhuttooreea's and Oothaigeens – whose proceedings are all secret, and never known.

Buhram: (With animation) The Thug is the Badshah! King of all these classes!⁵⁸

Part of the distinction seem to have been made in relation to the *modus operandi* and practices associated with thuggee, which were perceived to be more elaborate and therefore of a higher status than those of 'common' robbers. Stressing the difference of thuggee from other types of crime also reflected an ideal situation, according to which engaging in thuggee was not forced upon the thug by circumstances but a deliberately chosen livelihood or the honourable trade of one's forefathers. Paton's approvers were particularly loath to be compared to thieves, claiming that they knew not how to thieve and would never take any amount of money without first 'thugging' the victim.⁵⁹ The approver Buhram made a great show of imparting this upon Paton, and summed up the virtues and aspirations of the thugs:

Buhram: (A notorious Jamadar or leader of Thugs of 65) with his usual great animation, 'a chor! a thief! (here he imitated a skulking thief) but a Thug! (rising with animation) rides his horse! wears his dagger! And shews affront! 'choree na! Kubbee nyhen!' thieving! never! never! If a bankers' treasure were before me, and entrusted to my care, though in hunger, and dying, I would spurn to steal! but let a banker go on a journey, and I would certainly, ('albutta') murder him! but not a Mahajun whom I knew; (indignantly) I despise a Dacoit! a robber! ('pajee!') contemptible! let him come before me! 'our Keea!' (what else!)⁶⁰

It is hard to imagine a type of record other than the interviews which could have reflected the self-perception of thugs with such clarity – the thugs perceived themselves, and wanted to be perceived, as

warrior-gentlemen. Their 'code of honour', as expressed by Buhram, bears more than a passing resemblance to that of the traditional *varna* or order of Kshatriya, that is that of rulers and warriors within the formalised social scheme of Hinduism. Foremost among the various groups who adopted the Kshatriya ideal were the Rajputs and Jats, who often constituted the landholding elite and therefore, in Parihara for instance, were the patrons of the thugs, thus making it more or less inevitable that the thugs should aspire towards their status.⁶¹ In this respect the thugs were no different from many other so-called 'Rajputised' groups of peasants and pastoralists who aspired towards Rajput status, giving rise to the notion of 'spurious Rajputs'. Being Rajput was in fact not so much related to birth or ethnic background, but to a martial and ritual tradition which emerged out of a history of military service, migration and settlement, during the late Mughal period.⁶² The *dharma* of the Kshatriya was to uphold the order of the world through martial valour and piety, and this combination of attributes was also manifest in the thugs' self-representation. The thug Doorgha, for instance, described the murder of some travellers during his first expedition in the following terms: 'We murdered them within a holy temple, and beside a religious tank after which we of course did not fail to perform all such sacred duties and to offer up all such fervent prayers as devotion and every solemn feeling demanded of us *as good and pious men*' [my italics].⁶³ The use of military terminology and observance of rituals and similar practices prevalent among the thugs, can all to a greater or lesser extent be traced back to the ideal of the traditional martial ethos. Discussing the state of Indian society, Sleeman also touched upon this issue:

In India, the difference between the army of the prince and the gang of a robber was, in the general estimation of the people, only in *degree* – they were both driving an *imperial trade*, a 'padshahi kam'. Both took the auspices, and set out on their expedition after the Dasahra, when the autumn crops were ripening; and both thought the Deity propitiated as soon as they found the omens favourable; one attacked palaces and capitals, the other villages and merchants' store-rooms. The members of the army of the prince thought as little of the justice or injustice of his cause as of the gang of the robber; the people of his capital hailed the return of the victorious prince who had contributed so much to their wealth, to his booty, and to his self-love by his victory. The village community received back the robber and his gang with the same feelings, by their skill and daring they had come back loaded with wealth, which they were always disposed to spend

liberally among their neighbours. There was no more truth in the prince and his army in their relations with the princes and people of neighbouring principalities, than in the robber and his gang in their relation with the people robbed.⁶⁴

The Orientalist tropes aside, Sleeman provides a meaningful description of the notions of legitimacy, banditry and kingship within the martial tradition. And it was in the context of this tradition that the thugs perceived themselves. The question, though, remains as to what extent the thugs' self-perception extended beyond their own ranks? Were they successful in presenting their practices as legitimate and was this view shared by the Indian population more generally? The distinction made by the approvers between thugs and dacoits is very similar to that made by dacoits in the Chambal Valley area, who would use the word *baghi* meaning rebel in referring to themselves. While a dacoit was merely a common criminal, invoking the status of a *baghi* implied that one was engaged in a legitimate and noble act and fighting a righteous cause.⁶⁵ In a similar manner dacoity could be legitimised by invoking the concept of *bhumeawat* or honourable fight for land and lineage.⁶⁶ In this sense the distinction made between thugs and dacoits, and *baghis* and dacoits, more or less reflects the distinction made by the bandits themselves on the one hand and by various authorities on the other. According to Kasturi, the British understanding of Rajput banditry was:

devoid of specifications of time, place, and linkages to politics, society, and the economy. For the lineages under study, brigandage constituted merely one strategy of self-expression in the language of violence, rebellion and lineage identity; its complexity slipped through most colonial records in which bandits were primarily viewed as criminals.⁶⁷

This may be a rather romanticised view of Rajput banditry, where elements such as economic gain or deprivation are ignored, but it emphasises the incompatibly different perceptions of these phenomena.⁶⁸ This is also the basic *leitmotif* of Hobsbawm's concept of social banditry, namely that while bandits were criminalised by the authorities, they were regarded as noble fighters for justice by the local population.⁶⁹ Yet there is nothing to suggest that the inhabitants of Parihara perceived the thugs in a particularly heroic light, and the 'Robin Hood' imagery can therefore be disregarded. Still, the thugs were part of the population, lived under the patronage of the Rajput *zamindars* and had generally conformed to local notions of martial status and honour. The thugs'

neighbours did after all share in the wealth they brought into the community, directly or indirectly. Furthermore, thuggee was never practised close to the homes of the thugs and accordingly the inhabitants of their villages were not alienated. The thugs were probably regarded on a par with the other kinds of robbers kept as retainers by the local *zamindars*; as men who followed the respectable martial tradition and earned their legitimate livelihood by plunder as did so many others during this period. The patronage of the local elite was not limited to Parihara and it appears from the various accounts that the thugs had no shortage of supporters among the local elites in other parts of India.⁷⁰

To the relatives of the murdered victims and the bankers and merchants who had their property plundered, the thugs were most likely no more than common murderers and robbers. There are some hints that the *sepoys* of the Company harboured a particular hatred for the thugs and when the thug Inayat was arrested by *sepoys*, he states that: 'the European officers found it difficult to prevent the Sipahes from bayoneting me on the spot'.⁷¹ One reference to an article on thuggee in an Indian newspaper suggests that among the educated elite and those in close contact with the British, the perception of thuggee was very similar to, if not directly derived from, the colonial one.⁷² But we must remember the prevalence of large-scale banditry and brigandage during the period, and it remains unclear whether there was any moral distinction made by the victims between dacoits and thugs. As the people living in the same villages as the thugs did not really distinguish, there is little reason why it should be different as far as the rest of the population was concerned. The thugs did not loom large in the popular imagination of the rural population and insofar as there was a myth of thuggee, it was a British one.⁷³ The reason why there are so few traces of them in Indian local tradition today, may be due to the fact that the thugs did not challenge the authorities, did not fight for specific beliefs or express social or religious discontent.⁷⁴

The invention of tradition

As is apparent from the accounts of the Surguja expedition and elsewhere, the thugs did actually perform rituals and follow certain omens, the description of which can hardly be attributed to the British construction of thuggee. Mention was made of ritual preparations prior to setting out on expeditions and before Sheikh Inayat's first expedition, his father consulted an astrologer, while Doorga's father: 'as a preparation to making a thug of me, took me to the temple of Debee, whom he implored to bless my incipient adventures, and to grant some omen propitious to my

future career'.⁷⁵ Leaving Sindouse, Punna's gang would go with the *jemadar*: 'at our head a little before sunrise, bearing in his hands a brass Lotah full of water and reaching the appointed place in a neighbouring field, we all stood still and he said: "Oh mighty Goddess Bhowanee of Binda Chul if in this expedition we are to prosper and acquire riches, vouchsafe as the Thibaw and Pilaw"'.⁷⁶ If the auspice was good some men would be sent back to get flour and cow dung for fire and the gang would cook and eat a dinner in the field before the expedition commenced. Punna also explained that they would not shave or eat pawn until the first victim had been killed, and part of the loot taken from that victim would be spent on *goor* or coarse sugar, which was eaten in the name of Bhavani. Subsequent to a murder which resulted in particularly rich loot, the thugs would likewise eat *goor* in the name of Bhavani or Devi and if there was a temple nearby part of the loot would be donated to the priests.

But none of these practices fall outside the realm of common religious observances and rituals in India and were by no means exclusive to the thugs. The thugs were not engaged in Tantric worship or human sacrifice and there was nothing esoteric about their rituals and observances. Their rituals and sacrifice of goats before an image of the goddess was virtually identical to the sacrifices that occurred in all temples across India. Ordinary dacoits in nineteenth-century India, who were never assumed to be motivated by religious fervour, also held a *puja* before and after robberies and made votive offerings to a deity; yet nobody would suggest that they were religious fanatics who robbed and plundered as a means of worship to the goddess.⁷⁷ The association between criminals and wrathful aspects of the goddess is well known and established already in the Puranic *Bhagavata-purana* where Kali is depicted as the patron of a band of thieves.⁷⁸ The thugs worshipped different manifestations of the Devi or goddess, with the common attribute of protecting against diseases and misfortune as well as conferring power. Bhavani, which is the goddess most often referred to by the thugs, was the patron of martial groups like the Marathas as well as the family deity of several Rajput lineages.⁷⁹ The invocation of Bhavani by the thugs prior to their execution, which was interpreted by Sleeman as an admission of guilt, was in fact the war cry of Marathas and Rajputs.⁸⁰ Given the various different goddesses named by the thugs, it must also be obvious that we are not talking about *one* specific religious tradition and the thugs' goddess-worship cannot be reduced simply to Kali-worship.⁸¹ The reliance on omens was equally widespread in India and the eating of consecrated sweetmeats was a common practice at certain religious

festivals.⁸² It was also common to worship the tool that signified specific castes and professions, and apparently the Pokharna Brahmins worshipped the *kudali* (mattock), which Sleeman called a pickaxe, just like the thugs.⁸³ According to Paton's approvers, thieves would worship and consecrate the iron instrument they used for housebreaking, just like the thugs did with their 'instrument' – the *rumal*.⁸⁴

In their myths the thugs were writing their own origin into established legends, lending their version, and ultimately their own identity, more legitimacy. Sleeman also recorded that the thugs claimed the Sufi saint, Nizamuddin, and Balmeek, the author of the *Ramayana*, among their predecessors.⁸⁵ It is interesting to note that practically all the elements that were attributed to thuggee, and which today would be considered as colonial constructions, were actually derived from the approvers themselves; the ancient origin of thuggee being one example. When Hussain was asked when the system of thuggee was introduced, he answered: 'It is stated of old date; Amongst ourselves we talk of the establishment from the time of Alexander the Great.'⁸⁶ Thus it appears that the thugs were appropriating various legends, rituals and practices that conferred a higher status to them and their acts. This was all part of a strategy aimed to improve their status, but through the interpretation of Sleeman and Paton, it also came to play a significant role in the colonial construction of thuggee as an ancient, ritualised and religious phenomenon. This is not to say that the thugs did not believe these things themselves; however, influenced by the incessant questioning, these elements assumed a degree of importance that they may never have had before. The thugs did perform rituals and observe omens that to some extent guided their behaviour while engaged in thuggee, but this was not exceptional and shows that the thugs were really quite ordinary. Robbers, who did not worship a tutelary deity, perform *pujas* or entertain certain beliefs concerning the moral sanction of their acts would have been truly exceptional in an Indian context.⁸⁷ Furthermore, that the thugs believed their acts to be sanctioned by the goddess does not mean that the murders and robberies were carried out for an explicitly religious purpose. Most likely the incentive for thuggee had nothing to do with religion, but the thugs, as a means of legitimising their acts, ascribed them a ritual and religious meaning. In practical terms it is virtually impossible to make a distinction between religious and non-religious acts carried out by religious people.

Accordingly, I am arguing that many of the aspects of thuggee that attracted the attention of the British, the aspects that made thuggee stand out as a singular phenomenon, can be written down to the thugs'

pursuit of legitimacy. This argument is not wholly dissimilar from Anton Blok's work on honour and violence, but while it is true that 'actual brigandage expresses a man's pursuit of honour and power', the very basic need for maintaining a tolerable livelihood should not be forgotten either.⁸⁸ The shape that banditry assumed in any specific instance was related to the social aspirations of the bandit, but as far as motivation is concerned, it seems impossible to make an absolute distinction between pursuit of honour and power, and pursuit of the next meal. Budloo, who lived in Laljee's share in Sindouse, stated that: 'If we have nothing to eat, [*Laljee*] feeds us in lieu of which, he takes a horse, or money or any thing else; whatever he finds he takes.'⁸⁹ During his proceedings in 1813 Perry also examined the middle-aged Birj Lal from Sindouse, who was not himself a thug but confirmed that they lived in the area:

Question: Of what tribe were they?

Answer: Of all tribes. He who was hungry became a thug.

Question: What was their occupation?

Answer: They used to travel to distant parts and I have heard cut purses [literally 'knots'] in the corners of cummerbunds[,] turbans or dopultas [the customary mode of carrying money among the natives] or murder people and rob them of their property.

Question: In the Hindee tongue, what person are called 'Thugs'?

...

Answer: They who inveigle people and murder and rob them, or who cut purses [literally 'knots'] are denominated Thugs.⁹⁰

Similarly, during his first examination, Hussain said that the thugs 'go out whenever they have nothing to live from'.⁹¹ Hunger and physical need is here emphasised as the main reasons for committing thuggee, but obviously not all the inhabitants of Sindouse were on the verge of starvation. It does, however, indicate the level of pragmatism as regarding the motivation for committing robbery and murder. Even Paton's approvers, who certainly did not play down the religious aspects of their beliefs, also emphasised the purely practical reasons behind thuggee. Asked whether they were sad or cheerful when they left on their expeditions, one approver replied: 'We go readily, because our stomachs must be filled', while another stated that a rogue approver 'will kill, to feed himself!'.⁹²

The importance attached here to filling one's stomach is not quite consistent with the same approvers' comments on the religious rationale

for thuggee. But all the various aspects of the thugs' practices could be regarded either in terms of a pragmatic rationale or ritual significance. The stabbing of the strangled victims could thus be explained both as a precaution, that is disfiguring the bodies to prevent identification and ensure that no life remained, or it could conversely be explained purely in terms of the goddess' thirst for blood. It must remain unclear whether the thugs themselves ever made any such distinction or simply answered differently depending on the interest exhibited by the British officer who examined them – be it Perry, Sleeman or Paton or others. On the whole, it seems most plausible to me that the practice of thuggee was motivated by rather more profane factors, but that the thugs subsequently ascribed their actions with a ritually legitimate significance. One of Paton's approvers acknowledged that the thugs sometimes felt pity for their victims, '... but the belly does not care for pity, we must live'.⁹³ Paton's following question is typical of him, while the answer is revealing of the thugs' attitude to their deeds:

Paton: Do you ever feel any compunction of conscience, for the murder you have committed?

Mugdooma: I grieve when we killed a man, who had no money! as he had lost his life without any benefit! But when we get money, why should I grieve, as our hearts are cheered by the money?⁹⁴

The settlement in Sindouse

In the context of the thugs' self-perception and links with the itinerant underworld, the stories of their predecessors' expulsion from Delhi and settlement in Sindouse can be examined to much greater advantage. According to Feringheea, the Brahmins in the village of Tehngoor in Parihara were household priests of the Meo rajas and had once accompanied them to Delhi where they were initiated into thuggee, which they in turn introduced among their friends in Murnae and the surrounding area.⁹⁵ Seven generations before, his two progenitors came to Murnae and intermarried with the local Brahmin families, and thus they and their descendants became thugs. Feringheea furthermore recounted how the third son of a Kachwaha raja later invited all the local Meo chiefs to a feast and then killed them and took over Parihara. According to another approver, the Bursotes and other original Muslim thug clan had first tried to establish themselves at Agra, and from there came on to 'Akoopore' in

the Doab where they were protected by the Gour Raja for 40 years.⁹⁶ When he demanded a greater share of their booty they left and went to Himmutpur where they settled under the protection of the Sengur Raja Juggumun Sa. He in time also became too demanding regarding his share in their booty, so they left again and finally settled in Parihara. Here they settled in old villages and formed new ones, and eventually they made up most of the population, and went on expeditions every year. Wherever they had settled, the original Muslim clans passed on the practice of thuggee to Hindus, Brahmins, Rajputs, Lodhis and Ahirs. Asked about their origins, one of the Shekohabad thugs had told Perry that:

Ever since the caste of Afghans, Mewatties and Sheikhs have existed their class of people used formerly to resort to the habitations of those of the Munhar caste, who seeing the immense property that was acquired by them, followed their example and became thugs.⁹⁷

It is obvious that the function of these stories was to provide a certain legitimacy for the various thug lineages, and that they should not simply be taken at face value. The thugs by whom these stories were told were both of high and low status, but noticeably none of them were, or claimed to be, Rajputs. Feringheea's story of the Kachwaha raja's son is simply a version of a common type of legend, describing how Rajput lineages established themselves in an area by ousting the original inhabitants, and has nothing to do with thuggee as such.⁹⁸ The thugs were accordingly writing their own origin into the established Rajput legends, thus lending their version, and ultimately their own identity, more legitimacy. Across the community boundaries these Brahmins, Muslims and low-caste thugs were 'inventing tradition' by appropriating Rajput high-status myths of lineage origins.⁹⁹ This not only assigned significance to their origin but also established a connection and hierarchy between the various groups, namely Afghans, Mewatis and Brahmins and so on. It was during this period furthermore that, broadly speaking, caste formation occurred in connection with the movements and migrations caused by political change across north and central India. As nomadic warrior people settled or were attached to newly established kingdoms, caste designations were adopted as a means of gaining higher social status and tying retainers to their patrons. The mechanisms of state-building influenced the formation of castes and in that regard the stories of the origin of the thugs might be seen as part of this process of classification of status aimed at bringing order into a changing society.¹⁰⁰ What we have here might actually be a 'little tradition' in which

Muslims were naturalised and religious differences reduced, which was certainly not specific to the thugs but common throughout India in this period. It is noticeable that all the stories include the actual introduction of thuggee in Sindouse by either the 'original' Muslim clans or the Brahmins returning from Delhi.¹⁰¹ And while one should beware of trying to uncover 'a kernel of truth' in such myths, it does seem likely that the thug families who lived in Parihara around 1812 had settled there within the past few hundred years.

The theme of expulsion, forced migration and subsequent settlement is well known in the myths and history of lineages of Rajputs and other groups, and the thugs may simply have appropriated this theme in their stories. However, the previously mentioned biography of the Muslim emperor Firoz Shah Tughlaq, referred to the expulsion from Delhi of a thousand 'thags' in 1290. To be sure this source cannot be taken as evidence of the existence of thuggee in the thirteenth century and there is no proof of the 'thags' mentioned being identical to those that were encountered by the British some 500 years later. But in the light of the story of the '84 tribes' and their flight from Delhi, it seems that the thirteenth-century biography does have a bearing on the thugs' myths. Thuggee as a distinct practice of highway robbery may not have existed in the thirteenth century, but a distinct group called 'thags' engaged in some sort of criminal activity and part of a larger network most likely did. The myth of the expulsion of the seven 'original' thug clans from Delhi may therefore reflect to some degree actual events as well as being conflated with the myths of the Rajput lineages of the Chambal Valley region.¹⁰²

The stories of the thug's background suggests that the whole notion of the original thug clans is at least in part related to the migration of primarily Muslim mobile warrior people and thus reflect patterns of long-distance migration, characteristic of large parts of the population of the Doab. At the same time they are also the story of how itinerant groups were absorbed into sedentary society, and adopted the habits and usages of the people among whom they came to live – in the case of the Sindouse thugs, it was predominantly Rajputs. In order to understand the phenomenon of thuggee, one has to take account of the locality where it emerged at certain periods and places, and in that respect the significance of the topography and history of Sindouse cannot be stressed enough.

Thugs and ravines

The first and probably the most important source of bandits is in those forms of rural economy or rural environment which have

relatively small labour demands, or which are too poor to employ all their able-bodied men; in other words, in the rural surplus population. Pastoral economies and areas of mountain and poor soil, which often go together, provide a permanent surplus of this kind, which tends to develop its own institutionalised outlets in traditional societies: seasonal emigration ..., the supply of soldiers ..., raiding or banditry¹⁰³

An account of Parihara reads like a virtual transcript of the typical bandit territory as traditionally described by historians: located on a narrow tract of land between two rivers and intersected by labyrinthine ravines, Parihara was in a remote and inaccessible area, at the intersection of natural and state borders and therefore politically peripheral. The area was furthermore inhabited by warlike Rajput lineages with a history of resistance to the various authorities, Indian and British alike, and the changing fate of Parihara, at the hands of different rulers in the latter half of the eighteenth century, reflects the political turmoil of the region following the decline of the Mughal Empire. The first British officer to visit Sindouse in 1812 wrote that it:

produces nothing that is fit for trade; possess not a road fit for a wheeled carriage; and the very small proportion of arable land can require only a few hands to cultivate it. [A] great part of the grain consumed by the inhabitants is brought from other parts of the country, and sold at an advanced price.¹⁰⁴

During the period under discussion, Northern India suffered a number of severe droughts and famines in 1770, 1783, 1803–04, and 1812–13 and so on.¹⁰⁵ In 1803 the spring harvest in Etawah was ruined by hailstorms, the summer harvest failed and the rain season set in very late and lasted only from August to September.¹⁰⁶ Maratha raids and various disturbances added to the gravity of the situation, and by spring 1804 emigration by the poorest parts of the population began. In Parihara a life based solely on agricultural pursuit was simply not sustainable. This desolate state of affairs meant that an inflow of cash from an outside source was vital for the basic survival of the communities, while at the same time the insufficient size of cultivable land resulted in a surplus of young men.¹⁰⁷ Add to this the martial ethos of the Rajput lineages, and the prevalence of banditry in the area is almost inevitable. The ravines, which yielded so little, provided excellent cover and hiding places and being a border region, Parihara was very suitable for bandits who could

pursue their depredations on foreign territory, and subsequently retreat to the safety of their home.¹⁰⁸ The inhabitants of the area had always been considered outside the bounds of law, and the refusal to pay revenue and the subsequent extortion of contributions by the local authorities was a common aspect of the history of Parihara. Feuds were frequent among the Rajput clans and their retainers and it seems the entire population was armed, as one villager stated: 'It is the custom of the country. If a man goes only to his field he carries arms.'¹⁰⁹

Work on thuggee tends to explain the emergence of the phenomenon exclusively in terms of the disruption to Indian society and its economy caused by the expansion of the East India Company's possessions.¹¹⁰ The existence of thuggee in Parihara, however, predated the implementation and long-term results of the British rule and its policies.¹¹¹ We know for certain that thuggee existed in Parihara before 1797 when the tax list was made and the area only came under direct British control in 1809. Indeed, the revenue settlement, which often had a detrimental effect on large parts of the rural population, was introduced in Parihara after 1812, and it follows thuggee could not have emerged as the result of that. This is not to say that the presence of the British in the Doab did not make itself felt prior to their takeover of the specific localities, but it is simply not possible to make a direct link between the emergence of thuggee and the expansion of the British possessions at this point.¹¹²

I would argue that the existence of thuggee in Sindouse was related to rather pragmatic factors; the military labour market, which had earlier been able to accommodate limitless numbers of men, was no longer a viable option, and lack of alternative opportunities of obtaining a livelihood made parts of the male population revert to banditry. Even if there had been enough land for all to cultivate, the poor quality of the soil made peasantry an thankless choice. The economic attraction of banditry, by which common villagers could earn several times more than by manual labour and hard work, should thus be taken into account, especially considering that it was considered degrading for Rajputs to till the land.¹¹³ Banditry enabled families that were reasonably well-off to make an even better living, while poorer villagers could survive and even indulge in occasional luxuries. Thus thuggee was not an anomaly, but a socially legitimate way of making a livelihood, and it operated within fully institutionalised patterns under the patronage of the *zamindars*. Hobsbawm considers banditry as a symptom of change, as a stage in a process rather than a quotidian phenomenon. In Parihara this was not so; thuggee was a customary practice and did not necessarily imply weakness on the part of the authorities who in a sense controlled the

thugs and benefited from their acts. Banditry was not incompatible with state power in eighteenth–nineteenth-century India; and at times it constituted a much-needed source of extraterritorial income. The thugs were an integrated part of rural society in Parihara, but at the same time they were absent on their expeditions for long periods every year and their lifestyle constituted a combination of sedentary and non-sedentary aspects – of seasonal expeditions and return to the village base. Although some of the thugs considered themselves to have been hereditary, few of them ever lived exclusively by plunder. For many, it was an alternative mode of income that could be reverted to in times of need; there was in fact no sharp division between farming and occasionally going on expeditions.¹¹⁴ Different strategies were available to the rural population of Northern India and one would do well to remember that being a bandit was never a fixed unchangeable identity.

Given that Parihara was a traditional bandit area and ordinary dacoits shared many of the characteristics of the thugs, it may be questionable whether one can actually distinguish thuggee from other types of banditry. I would argue that the combination of secrecy, deception and murder of the victims made thuggee a distinctive category. Compared to most other types of robbery, thuggee was very close to being the ‘perfect crime’. As opposed to the Pindaris and *kazaks*, thuggee did not necessitate any expensive armour, weaponry or horses, which made it a viable option for a much wider range of people. The use of disguises and the inclusion of old men and boys in the gangs enabled the thugs to travel in both small and large numbers along any road that promised plentiful plunder, and with little regard to the level of policing. Furthermore, few skills were needed in the execution of thuggee and anybody could deceive travellers, hold the hands of a victim, discard the bodies or act as a scout. Much has been made of the specialisation of the thugs, but in reality only the stranglers seems to have needed any physical skills and even these were negligible. The thugs were not particularly fearsome fighters, and to strangle a defenceless person, either drugged or held down by several accomplices, hardly constituted a great martial exploit. Unlike retainers elsewhere, the thugs did not act as bodyguards or strong-men, they did not patrol land or collect tax and they could not be used in feuds or unleashed upon an opponent’s territory. In fact, the secrecy and method practised by the thugs had the explicit purpose of reducing the chances of an open encounter with a stronger opponent. As the victims were often travellers far from their homes, there was a minimal chance of discovery and the murder of all victims meant that there were no witnesses to the

crime. However, it should be remembered that there were variants to the practice, and so any clear distinction between thugs and dacoits would at times be meaningless. Why, then, would a man compelled to gain his livelihood by plunder commit thuggee rather than, for instance, ordinary dacoity? The thug Kalee Khan mentioned one associate whose younger brother had been a *kazak*, but after having lost his horse he became a thug.¹¹⁵ This indicates that the type of crime to which people reverted depended on the means available to the individual, that is one's socio-economic position determined which types of livelihood could be pursued, including which types of banditry. In a period where plunder by mercenary armies and banditry had been rampant, thuggee was sometimes merely the continuation of a predatory lifestyle under well-regulated circumstances by men thus deprived of their means for open plunder. According to Blok:

What united people behind banditry were kinship, friendship and patronage – not class. What animated banditry was the quest for honour and respect. What often motivated it was revenge – bandits invariably started their careers to avenge personal wrongs.¹¹⁶

In the case of thuggee the first statement is correct, the second only partly so and the third entirely incorrect. First, one cannot speak of class in the Indian context, at least not in the sense that Hobsbawm used it, and it was therefore precisely ties of kinship, friendship and patronage that were at the core of thug gangs. As a highly institutionalised type of banditry, the common slang, rituals and myths and wide network of associates strengthened the sense of unity among the thugs and their associates. Second, the importance of honour and respect, in other words the pursuit of status and legitimacy, is noteworthy in connection with thuggee, but can hardly be considered the prime motives. Deceiving and strangling people was not honourable or even martially respectable, which is why the thugs had to construct a ritual and mythic superstructure to imbue their activities with some sort of legitimacy. Third, those who practised thuggee, either as a tradition or as a last resort, were not motivated by revenge as the practice was not 'directed' against anybody in particular. To the 'hereditary' thugs, thuggee was their profession and thus it makes little sense to talk of a starting point of their career and while 'occasional' thugs might take up banditry in reaction to changing socio-economic conditions, it did not necessarily form a disjuncture in their life in terms of a change from law-abiding to

criminal. On a whole range of points the thugs of Sindouse did conform quite perfectly to the classical bandit model, but thuggee was entirely devoid of any trace of social protest. The thugs killed quite indiscriminately, they had no grudges, no scores to settle, no wrongs to avenge *vis-à-vis* their victims. Thuggee was a strategy to ensure survival and economic gain, and not simply an expression of discontent.

While some of the more ideological implications of Hobsbawm's use of 'social' in connection with banditry remain problematic, the term is still useful when considered along the lines of Blok's argument:

In a sense, all bandits are 'social' in so far as they, like all human beings, are linked to other people by various ties – of protection, support and collaboration. We cannot understand the practices of bandits without reference to other groups, classes or networks with which bandits form specific configurations of interdependent individuals.¹¹⁷

That is to say the phenomenon of thuggee only makes sense when examined in the context of the socio-economic background of the locality where it emerged. Furthermore, my analysis has emphasised the importance of social connections and of links inside and outside the local community in the development and shaping of the specific type of banditry called thuggee. Examining the social conditions of thuggee is the only way of understanding this type – and indeed any type – of banditry.

Considering thuggee to be a sect, tribe or fraternity, the way many colonial writers have done, is obviously misleading given the loose nature of the networks and often tenuous character of alliances. Yet, the accounts of cooperation and encounters between different bands of thugs and groups belonging to the itinerant underworld indicate a sense of affiliation, such as that reflected in the notion of the '84 tribes'. While it is only to be expected that there was a heightened solidarity among the Sindouse thugs, the actual nature of thuggee as a wide-ranging network is hard to gauge. Paton's approvers stated that while they would strangle a 'King's evidence', they would never strangle each other: 'Are not thugs 'Bhaees' [i.e.] brothers?'¹¹⁸ This idea can perhaps best be related to the concept of *bhaibandh* or 'brotherhood' among the Rajput lineages, which defined status and honour and delineated the extent of loyalties, support and dependency in times of feuds and conflict.¹¹⁹ Dacoits of the Chambal Valley likewise operated with the

concept of *bhaibandh ki baghi* or 'brotherhood of rebels', which worked on the same principles as the lineage *bhaibandh*, but applied to the members of the gangs, their supporters and informants instead of ordinary family and lineage ties.¹²⁰ As such it cut across caste and religious boundaries and could include a wide variety of persons and networks. On the symbolic level, the phenomenon of thuggee was constituted by notions akin to those of *bhaibandhi*: fictive and ritual kinship ties that enabled association and defined boundaries within the loose networks of bandits and the itinerant underworld. The key characteristics were the use of argot and other signs that facilitated identification and communication, and a shared tradition of goddess-worship and myths of origin. The '*bhaiband ki thagi*',¹²¹ as it might be described, could in its broadest meaning include complete strangers whose only affinity might be little more than the ability to be recognised as part of the itinerant underworld; or it could, as was the case with the approver factions, be as narrow as to apply only to the closest of kin – in which case it was no longer effective. Like the thugs' identities, the extent of their network and the support they could depend on was open to negotiation, depending on the circumstances. And while thuggee was not a fraternity in any strict sense, the material does seem to indicate that it was, at times, a rather more structured phenomenon than some historians have allowed for.¹²²

Perhaps the British officer Lieut. Moodie came very close to a functional definition of thugs when he talked of 'persons who are in the habit of uniting in gangs to commit Thuggees.'¹²³ Were the thugs a distinctive category of criminals? The Sindouse thugs certainly were and perceived themselves as such, while others may merely have drifted between various modes of livelihood. A distinct element of *naukari* often connected these men, but not all necessarily invoked and assumed the social identity of a thug. The close-knit gangs of Sindouse thugs, with a shared past and well-established *modus operandi*, were connected to the area and the land they inhabited through the patronage of the local *zamindars*. Thuggee thrived in Sindouse because the thugs conformed to the existing ethos of the martial Rajput values through the use of military terminology and designations and ritual practices. The thugs' relationship with the local *zamindars* resembled the established systems of ritualised fealty, which were also at the base of Rajput dacoity, and as such were perceived to be honourable and socially acceptable.¹²⁴ In Sindouse thuggee assumed characteristics sanctioned by tradition and the thug's aspirations in terms of status were legitimised by the attitude of the *zamindars*.¹²⁵ Various layers of

dependency and symbolic implications thus interpenetrated, which in part explains why the British perceived the attack on Halhed's party as an act of rebellion by recalcitrant *zamindars* and thugs. However, in light of the socio-economic background of Sindouse and the nature of thuggee, the event itself assumes a quite different significance and provides us with a rare glimpse of the world of thugs, retainers and landlords in nineteenth-century rural India.

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Part III

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10

Halhed in Sindouse – A Second Look

Apart from Halhed's account of his mission to Sindouse and the subsequent attack, there are also the thugs and villagers' version(s) of what took place, which set the events in a different light.¹ Not surprisingly there was a whole sequence of events surrounding the affair, of which the British were only partially aware. In the late summer of 1812 the thug Ghasee Ram returned to Sindouse from an expedition and fell out with Tejun, in whose share he lived, and Ghasee Ram subsequently left with his family and moved to Laljee's tenement.² This constituted an economic loss to Tejun who, in turn, accused Laljee of taking his tenants and he eventually made a complaint about Laljee before Halhed and gave information about the thugs in Sindouse. As a result Halhed requested Laljee to answer to the accusations, which the *zamindar* naturally refused to do, claiming that Halhed's informant had spoken falsely to serve his own purposes. Shortly afterwards Halhed went to Sindouse with his military escort. We know that Halhed's mission to Sindouse was not prompted merely by Tejun's information, but the fact that Halhed had been specifically warned against Laljee does lend some credibility to this account.³ Apart from Laljee, Halhed had also been warned against Sohbut and Chutter, the two other shareholders of Sindouse, and if the information did indeed come from Tejun, this might indicate that he was trying to get rid of all the competition.⁴ This adds a further significance to the events that followed, infusing the British hunt for the thugs and the implementation of revenue and police, with local *zamindari* feuds over land and retainers.

By October 1812 it would appear that news of Perry's operations against the Shekohabad thugs on the other side of the Jumna river, had reached

the inhabitants of Parihara.⁵ Earlier in 1812 the *darogha* of Sindouse had also apprehended two suspected thugs who had been sent to Mainpuri for trial and thus the *zamindars* and their thug retainers in Sindouse would have been expecting the worst from Halhed's presence in the area.⁶ According to his own deposition, Laljee fled from Sindouse when people said that Halhed was coming for him because he harboured thugs: 'they called me chief of the village and the sirdar of the thugs, which made me run away'.⁷ Laljee's brother also fled from Sindouse along with 15 or 20 others, and later stated that: 'We were alarmed – we had heard that Halhed had come to destroy us'.⁸ Laljee first took refuge with Raja Madhoo Sing of Rampura who, however, turned him out when Halhed issued a warrant for him.⁹ Many of the *zamindars* of the area were protecting thugs but since Laljee ran away, he alone got the blame and when he subsequently went to Murnae, he was turned away because the inhabitants were afraid of being associated with him.¹⁰ Instead, Laljee was allowed to hide in the village of Khera where the *zamindars* were Kachwaha Rajputs like he was.¹¹ The *zamindars* of Murnae were also Kachwaha Rajputs, but the earlier migrations of the thugs between the villages across the border might have given rise to discord amongst the *zamindars*, and the inhabitants of Murnae would have been averse to getting involved with a fugitive on the run from the British. Khera, on the other hand, was located within the Company jurisdiction and faced a similar situation to that of Sindouse respecting Halhed's visit and the *zamindars'* patronage of thugs. Thus the significance of the clan divisions among the Rajput landholders came to the fore when the community was under threat but so too did kinship and local solidarity.

When Laljee fled, he took with him his family and dependants and this turned into a full-scale panic and many villagers, expecting to be attacked, fled the area. The people who were tied to Laljee through kinship and service profited from his protection in times of peace but when his position crumbled most of them were dragged down along with him. Other issues also had a bearing on the turn of events and the *zamindar* Sohbut Rae, who had 1/8 share of Tejun's division of Sindouse, fled along with Laljee, but he did so because Tejun had raised his rent by Rs 25. This suggests that the general confusion and turmoil caused by the coming of Halhed was seized by some as an opportunity to avoid common unpleasantness such as an increase in rent – which did not make the affair any less complicated. A further and not insignificant feature of the conflict, of which the British only later became aware, was the role of the local *tahsildar*. When the British took possession of Parihara in 1809, they put a *tahsildar* named Ahmed Hussain in charge of collecting revenue, and by all accounts he abused his position and

extorted money from the *zamindars* and *patwaris*, thereby antagonising the local landholders.¹² As a result the *zamindars* refused the British revenue settlement, which was inextricably linked with the introduction of law and order, and they furthermore ‘opposed the measurement of their lands, turned out the Shaunus [lien] placed over their crops’.¹³ The British therefore tried to ‘realize the revenue by Khaum Tuhseel’, which meant that they collected the revenue directly from the peasants who cultivated the land, and thus circumvented the power of the Rajput lineages hitherto dominating both tenancy and revenue collection in Parihara.¹⁴ This was the standard policy of the Company as it established its control over the newly acquired territories and enforced its monopoly of authority.¹⁵ Even though the *zamindars* of Parihara derived the larger part of their income from the thugs and not the land, it nonetheless constituted a major transformation of the political economy of the area – with the *zamindars* as the losers.

Although the British perceived the introduction of law and order and revenue settlements in Parihara to be closely related, the issues became hopelessly entangled as the encounter between the colonial state and the local elite was distorted by the pre-existing enmity between the *tahsildar* and the landholders. Sohbut, one of the Sindouse *zamindars*, explained that he did not meet with Halhed when the latter came to the area out of fear that the *tahsildar* would demand money from him.¹⁶ It was also the *tahsildar* who had entered the village of Chourella before Halhed’s troops to ensure the inhabitants’ compliance, but this had had the opposite effect as the villagers put up a strong resistance.¹⁷ Thus a pattern emerges, which is even more significant when it is considered that much of Halhed’s information on Sindouse was derived from the very same *tahsildar*. It was, for instance, the *tahsildar* who told Halhed that poisoning by dathura was a favoured practice of the thugs, thus confirming the former’s impression that the ordinary villagers of Sindouse were themselves assassins or at least in league with the thugs. The *tahsildar* was feathering his own nest throughout and Halhed had somewhat naively relied on his advice and support without any thought of the *tahsildar*’s partisanship and position in the local politics of the area. This ignorance on the part of Halhed aggravated the already tenuous situation and in the end proved fatal.

The attack

According to Doorgha, Halhed had learned that Des Chaudhuri, a *zamindar* of Bindowa, was associated with the thugs and ‘accordingly when one watch of the day remained [Halhed] made an attack upon the

place with the troops'.¹⁸ Des fled from Bindowa and went to Khera where he informed Laljee of Halhed's approach and together they went to Murnae.¹⁹ Here several hundred armed villagers from Sindouse, Bindowa, Khera, Parlee and Murnae had gathered and they went to the ravines determined to resist Halhed. The *zamindar* Gunesh later claimed that Halhed had actually been warned by the *zamindars* of Bindowa not to go closer to Murnae on the evening of the 22nd, but Halhed ignored this advice – and shortly afterwards he was ambushed in the ravines.²⁰

On that fateful evening of 22 October, Halhed was accompanied by Koor Boodh Sing, the younger brother of Raja Luchmun Sing, *taludkar* of Chakarnagar. Koor Boodh Sing was *zamindar* of the village of Phusseea situated between the Kunwari and Cambal rivers and according to Halhed his crops were 'usually much diminished by the predatory incursions of the subjects of the Mahratta sovereign residing in the village of Parlee who have been for ages past the natural enemies of the villagers of Phusseea'.²¹ Accordingly, there was longstanding animosity between Halhed's guide and the inhabitants of the Sindouse area, which in the event tipped the balance as Halhed ordered the guides forward to calm down the villagers. This is supported by the fact that Humaun, a *zamindar* of Murnae, went forward and said to Koor Boodh Sing: 'You have taken away the land which you gave us to cultivate and now you bring Mr Halhed upon us.'²² Thus the villagers associated Koor Boodh Sing's appearance in the company of Halhed with their earlier land dispute and thought that the former had led the troops to attack them. Indeed, after the attack Ghunsookh, the main *zamindar* of Murnae, was reported by a servant of the *tahsildar* to have said:

That if [*the tahsildar*] moonshee Ahmud Hoosyn would not molest him and would come to Murnae[,] he would seize those who were concerned in the attack and that he would enter the service of the Sircar. That if the village of Murnae should be burnt that he would set fire to every village belonging to Raja Luchmun Singh.²³

Apart from offering to submit to the authority of the British, Ghunsookh's statement reveals that Raja Luchmun Sing of Chakarnagar was considered to be responsible for bringing the British to the area and therefore responsible for any future attack on the villages. This was obviously a serious misreading of the situation on the part of the alienated *zamindars*. Furthermore, it appears that the response of the *zamindars* to the burning of their villages would assume a similar form, that is Luchmun Sing's



Figure 12 The ravines near the spot where Maunsell was killed (photo: KAW)

villages would be put to the fire, and these events were perceived within the framework of traditional feuds.

The inhabitants of Chakarnagar were Kachwaha, Bhadauriya, Tomar and Chauhan Rajputs, while those of Sindouse were predominantly Kachwaha and Parihar Rajputs. Longstanding feuds between and within Rajput clans, factions and villages were an integral part of Rajput

identity in Northern India during this period. The origins of such feuds were often long forgotten but the necessity of revenge perpetuated them and they furthermore edified the status and identity among the Rajputs.²⁴ The river running between the two *parganas* constituted a natural border, but did not prevent the inhabitants from pursuing their feuds, which became significant in the clash with the British. It is worth noticing that, as was the case with the *tahsildar*, Halhed seemed completely oblivious to the possible implications of the partisanship of his guides.

According to Koor Boodh Sing, Halhed blamed him and the other guide for having chosen the route through the ravines and ordered them to go ahead down the path and make the villagers give up their hostile intentions.²⁵ Koor Boodh Sing tried without success to impress upon the armed villagers that Halhed was only out to take the air, but they insisted that they would not let the party through and that they would fight if necessary. The situation was getting out of hand, and some of the villagers made motions as if to draw their swords, when Halhed called out to the guides not to provoke the villagers (*sic*). Suddenly both guides were set upon and the villagers opened fire on the rest of the party on the path. The other guide was killed but Koor Boodh Sing miraculously survived in spite of multiple wounds and escaped on foot when his horse was shot beneath him.

The villager Murdun, who was amongst the attackers, is the only eyewitness who gave a detailed description of Lieut. Maunsell's death.²⁶ Maunsell, who was further down the path behind Halhed, was hit in the thigh by a shot and lost control of his horse and fell into the ravine. Though wounded, he managed to retreat a little with the rearguard, but was soon struck down from behind with a sword. As Maunsell went down the villagers fell upon him, striking him several more times. Murdun continues: 'In my presence Gunesh (son of Des), at the time when the gentleman was sitting down with his legs stretched out struck him from before his face a deep wound[,] the sahib uttered a few words which I did not understand. From the wounds inflicted by Gunesh the sahib fell on his back.'²⁷ After the attack, the villagers who had taken part fled into the Maratha territory bringing with them their families and belongings. They were, however, still in high spirits after their victory and several men boasted that they had dealt the final blow to Lieut. Maunsell. The weapons and horses taken after the attack were divided as spoils of war and Gungapershaud of Murnae separated the silver-star (regimental badge) from Maunsell's light infantry cap and sported it as an ornament tied to his arm.²⁸

Misunderstandings

With its implications of inter-clan feuds between the villages of the area and rivalry among the *zamindars* of Sindouse, the events surrounding the attack on Halhed do take on the appearance of *bhumeawat* – the traditional Rajput feud for land and honour. A further detail indicates that this was in fact the case: While in hiding within the Maratha territory, Laljee and armed followers crossed the border on 28 October and attempted a raid on Bindowa, but succeeded only in carrying off some cattle.²⁹ That Laljee should engage in such typical feud activities while he was being hunted by both British and Maratha officials lends strong credence to the notion that the event was being perceived in the context of legitimate and even honourable ideals of Rajput behaviour by the participants.³⁰ At the same time, the *zamindars'* refusal to accept the establishment of British control over the area could also suggest that the attack might be seen as a case of what has been termed 'primary resistance'.³¹ This type of resistance to the initial imposition of British authority, which typically resulted in the loss of power, land and privileges of the landed elite, was common across Northern India during the early decades of the nineteenth century, and in this respect the situation in Parihara followed a well-known pattern. Without the existing tension between the various factions and loyalties in the wider area, preceding the coming of the British, it seems unlikely that the situation would have escalated the way it did. In the event the internal conflicts between the landowners were intermingled with a staunch resistance against the introduction of police and revenue settlement, and thus the inhabitants of Parihara were also fighting to keep the *status quo*.³² It should, however, be noted that the elements that may be interpreted as anti-colonial resistance cannot be extended to explain the practice of thuggee as well. The attack on Halhed was not an act of thuggee and the thugs themselves constituted only a minority of the villagers involved.

Halhed appears to have been more or less oblivious to the existence of local conflicts or the way they played out as he tried to introduce law and order. His reliance on Koor Boodh Sing and the *tahsildar* meant that he became part of the local politics – of which he was entirely unaware. Halhed had landed himself in a hopeless situation where he was in effect manoeuvring blind and every move he made served to further antagonise the very people he was supposed to bring under the aegis of the East India Company. In this case all parties involved misconstrued the situation, which therefore unfolded on the basis of misunderstandings, panic and (over)reactions. Quite by chance, Halhed's arrival in Parihara coincided

with the preparations of the ten days of religious ceremonies of the Dassehra – one of the most important festivals in Northern India, which in 1812 ended on 15 October.³³ Among martial groups, such as the Marathas and Rajputs, the ninth day of the festival especially is dedicated to the worship of weaponry and in that light Halhed's attempt to disarm the population was particular unfortunate. The timing of the festival is not mentioned at all in the sources and any inferences can only be conjectural. However, given the precariousness of the over-all situation and the turmoil that Halhed's visit entailed more generally, the coincidence of the arrival of what was perceived as a foreign invader and a key Hindu festival assume an almost symbolic significance as yet another misfortune.³⁴ The events of the 22nd were also later said to have been preceded by the omen of a *Chirreya* or small owl chirping, which 'indicated some great calamity at hand'.³⁵ Basically there were as many misunderstandings as possible and in the end the situation escalated. Halhed thought that he was being ambushed while taking a leisurely ride, while the villagers thought they were about to be attacked and therefore tried to defend themselves. The attack on Halhed's party that resulted in the death of Lieut. Maunsell was thus precipitated by a long sequence of misunderstandings, which in the end had far-reaching consequences for all involved.

11

Sindouse – The Aftermath

Retaliation

As soon as news of the attack spread, the British resident at Gwalior induced Sindhia to send a detachment of horse to support Halhed as well as ordering his officials to cooperate in the pursuit of the attackers.¹ Halhed was even allowed to attack any village within Sindhia's territories that offered refuge to Laljee and his followers, which implies an unusual willingness on the part the Maratha leader to assist the British.² Correspondence between Sindouse to Calcutta, however, was very slow, and the Government's reply to Halhed's initial reports was written on 31 October before news of the attack had reached the presidency. The Governor General approved of Halhed's zeal, and also authorised him to withdraw from the area should the situation become untenable – by which time the damage had already been done.³ When the attack became known, the detachment Halhed had requested was duly despatched under the command of Capt. Popham and a reward of Rs 5000 for the capture of Laljee was warranted.⁴

Once the contingent under Popham arrived from Mainpuri, preparations were made to retaliate and once and for all establish law and order in Parihara. Upon receiving information that Laljee's son Suntoke was in the village of Sunnowree with some adherents, Popham moved out from Sindouse with his troops early in the morning of 8 December.⁵ Just before daybreak they reached the village, situated among the ravines on the banks of the Sind river, and Popham divided his forces and surrounded the village where everybody was still asleep. The *sepoys* noticed some people waking up and immediately opened fire, which caused the whole village to panic and flea *en masse*. Some fled into the ravines, but those who tried to escape across the river came under fire and several villagers were

killed and many more wounded – Suntoke was not among them though. Popham later suggested that Sindhia should be induced to let his own troops burn and plunder the village of Murnae, which was just inside Maratha territory and near the spot of the attack on Halhed, and which was specifically marked out as its residents were supposed to have aided Laljee.⁶ The Military Command supported this, and on 14 November 1812, Captain Popham burned and destroyed Murnae without meeting any resistance and furthermore making sure Maunsell's murder would not be forgotten:

I have employed people to level every house wall with the ground and shall cause the site of the village to be ploughed over with jackasses in the plough, which has been generally supposed to deter people from building near the spot again. I have warned the zemindars of the neighbouring Maratha villages that it is my intention to destroy every village that shall give refuge to the rebel Laljee or any one individual of his party.⁷

Thus the destruction of Murnae, and the obliteration of any trace of its existence, was a highly symbolic act demonstrating the military power of the Company and the fate, which befell its enemies. The Commander in Chief, however, became worried about the possible backlash Popham's actions might have on the relationship with Sindhia and ordered that: '... from various considerations it will be necessary to set bounds to these severe but just and indispensable measures of retribution and punishment'.⁸ Popham was also severely admonished by the Governor General for the indiscriminate attack on Sunnowree: 'Vengeance, as distinct from the ends, and unrestrained by the rules of justice, however natural and well-founded the resentment may be, is not an allowable principle of method.'⁹ Popham's general execution of his duties in Sindouse was nevertheless applauded by the Government.

Though exemplary on the face of it, the cooperation between the British and Sindhia did not go down well with the local Maratha officials. Murnae had been situated within the *pargana* of Umri, the *amil* of which retaliated by burning the nearby village of Madhoopoor within the Company's territories.¹⁰ Thus, in spite of Sindhia's manifest cooperation with the British, his control over local officials was limited and Ramchun, the *amil* of Umri, acted as any ruler would to such an infringement of his possessions. It is possible that the *amil* seized the occasion to pursue his own strategies *vis-à-vis* Sindhia and that the burning of Madhoopoor really was part of an internal dispute within the Maratha policy.¹¹ In any

case, military operations continued in the area, involving significant numbers of Company troops. With many of the villages in the area being deserted, the situation soon calmed down, but Popham's detachment remained in Sindouse for the time being.¹²

At the beginning of December, Laljee and several others accused of having taken part in the murder of Lieut. Maunsell, were arrested.¹³ Supposedly Tejun contacted Laljee, who was in hiding in the Maratha state and said that he had to give himself up but offered to intercede on his behalf.¹⁴ Laljee agreed and came to Sindouse where Tejun gave him food in his house while at the same time informing Popham. In the end, then, Tejun succeeded to get his rival apprehended and for that he received the reward of Rps 5000, a huge sum at that time.¹⁵ Sindhia's officials had also caught several other suspects, including Gungapershaud, who was said to be Maunsell's actual killer, while Laljee's son was handed over by a local ruler. Perry prepared the trial by collecting witness testimonies and examining the prisoners and in late February held his own proceedings at Sindouse.¹⁶ The Nizamat Adalat eventually sentenced Laljee and four others to imprisonment with hard labour for life.¹⁷ In the passing of sentence the Court stressed the fact that the attack had been unpremeditated and carried out under the impression that Halhed was bringing troops to attack the villages. Considering the upheaval and widespread destruction that had followed in the wake of the attack on Halhed, the sentences were comparatively mild. One of Sleeman's approvers told that Gungapershaud escaped from jail and when he was later seized, he killed several *sepoys* before being severely wounded himself. On the way back to the jail, Gungapershaud was placed in a boat to cross the Ganges and when he learned that it was the holy river, he tore open his wound saying that 'he could not go to a better place[;] and he died on the spot'.¹⁸ Thus in the approver's retelling of the story, the brave Gungapershaud committed what amounted to a ritual suicide akin to the legendary *jauhar* of Rajput tradition.¹⁹

The expulsion

During the general exodus from Parihara, scores of the fleeing villagers and thugs were taken up by various local authorities of the bordering states.²⁰ According to Dureao, he and the thugs were seized because of the enmity of the *amil* of Umri, who took all their goods and by late December 1812 their women were still held in confinement.²¹ Years later one approver stated that the thugs fled to Nodha in the Maratha state because: 'Mr Halhed attacked our villages, and after Lieutenant

Monsell had been killed, we did not think ourselves any longer safe. Aman Sing, called Raw Sahib, was the chief of Nodha, and he would have protected us, as there had been a compact between us and his family; but he had been removed, and Rae Sing sent us the Amil.²² Apparently, 133 thugs were apprehended by the local authorities at Nodha and kept in confinement for 13 months, during which time they were beaten and maltreated in order to extract money from them: 'those who could not pay were beaten in the hopes that their friends would in time pay; and those who paid, were beaten in the hopes that their friends would be made in time to pay more'.²³ Having paid a total of Rs 16,000, they were finally released, but by that time 40 of them had died in prison.²⁴ Rae Sing was later summoned to Gwalior where he offered the money he had extorted to Dowlut Rao Sindhia, but the ruler was warned that his predecessor had died because of the 'execution of some of these strange people at Muthura'.²⁵ Accordingly, Sindhia ought not to take the money, which was tainted, and Rae Sing was told to give it away to charity and release the prisoners, but it was too late and he died soon after. This account assumes the characteristics of a morality tale, showing that Devi punished the enemies of the thugs, but also reveals how the expulsion from Sindouse and its aftermath became a defining moment in the thugs' history. Be it as it may, it is quite clear that during the turmoil following the attack on Halhed, the thugs were ruthlessly exploited by the indigenous rulers and officials, who saw it in their immediate interest to do so. Yet the well-established links of patronage were not entirely broken.

As the situation in Sindouse had become untenable for many of the thugs, they eventually settled in various villages within the Maratha state: 'After the attack of Mr Halhed we thought that part of the country very unsafe, and a great many came off to Bundelcund, and the Bhopaul and Nurbudda districts.'²⁶ The thug Inayat was living near Sindouse at the time, but moved to Hamirpur with his mother and his wife 'as the ... Scindheea's minister began a strict search after Thugs, and I was obliged to get out of his reach'.²⁷ According to the information gathered by the spies Perry sent out, many of the thugs had moved to villages just within the Maratha territory, a few miles from Sindouse.²⁸ Doorgha recounted how he moved to Jagamanpur with his uncle and relatives after the attack, and this corresponds with the information obtained by Stockwell in 1815, which enabled him to make a list of the new villages where the Sindouse thugs had resettled.²⁹ These were either in Jalaun, Jagamanpur or Umri, all neighbouring districts to

Parihara. According to Stockwell:

There can no doubt that such persons are allowed to reside in Jugumunpore, as in April last, when in Camp near to that place the Umlah of my Court visited the place, and the houses of the Thugs situated close under the Raja's Fort were pointed out to them among the other curiosities. Nothing like concealment was attempted, they being told 'there are so many of this cast, and so many of that, and there you see *one hundred houses of Thugs*'.³⁰

Thus it appears that not all thugs fared as badly as those imprisoned at Nodha, and that a substantial number quickly established new relationships with *zamindars* and rulers and were able to resume their former lifestyle. This is indicative of both the extent of the network of contacts the thugs could rely on and the fact that, among the local elite, some were ready and willing to take them on as retainers. The different reception the thugs received at Nodha and Juggumunpur, respectively, may reflect larger political issues such as the level of influence yielded by the central power of the Maratha state. It should be noted that the thugs did not move very far from Sindouse, in some cases just across the border, and hence remained within a fairly localised sphere. Although some bonds were definitively cut, and the British possessions were henceforth closed to them as a place of habitation, the move from Sindouse may to a certain extent have been rather similar to the thug's earlier migrations within the area. Nevertheless, the expulsion from Sindouse still became a signifying moment in the thug's stories.³¹

The revenue settlement

Meanwhile, Halhed's appointment in Sindouse had come to an end and before handing over to Perry, he submitted an extensive report in December 1812, concerning the state of the *pargana* and his views on thuggee more generally.³² In Halhed's opinion the absence of a permanent settlement was the main reason for the 'depravity' of the *zamindars* of Parihara, and presently they had no interest in their land but turned to the more profitable option of harbouring thugs. The *ryots*, on the other hand, could not survive by merely cultivating the land and therefore became thugs, paying for the protection of the *zamindars* with a share of the loot. The result was that the inhabitants of the *pargana* were united in opposition to the introduction of a system of policing that

would put an end to their economic arrangements. Halhed accordingly suggested that a light settlement should be made, so that the profits derived from the land would be sufficient to keep the inhabitants from pursuing a criminal livelihood. The prerequisite for the *zamindars* to be included in the settlement was that they should refrain from keeping armed men or known thugs as retainers and from having any contact with inhabitants of the Maratha territories. The *ryots* would have to live off the land exclusively, no one could bear arms or assemble in large bodies and finally, all crimes had to be reported to the local *darogha* to whom cooperation should be offered at all times. This, Halhed argued, would effect the reform of Parihara, but the military detachment ought to stay until a settlement had been made, '... the inhabitants of the pargana being more afraid of a gun than of anything else'. He then turned to the subject of the thugs in a memorable paragraph:

It has been said that these people compose a regularly organized and secretly tho' extensively connected society similar to that of the Illuminati or other bodies of that description, the influence of which is widely felt tho' the society itself and its members were concealed by a veil of mystery which none but the initiated can draw aside. This is not exactly the case[,] their depredations are widely and severely felt and the perpetrators from the systematic murder of their victims are in general unknown, so far only are they similar to the Illuminati. They are no more than a species of robber whose policy consists in murdering the person they rob and can seldom be convicted from want of evidence to corroborate their confessions which they in general will make before a magistrate because they themselves attach no idea of dishonour to this their profession.³³

Whereas all *zamindars* and most judicial officers recognised the reality of the thugs and their system, it had furthermore come to Halhed's attention that some people 'positively denied' their existence. This 'infatuation', as he termed it, was caused by lack of local experience and a 'determination not to be convinced by analogous reasoning'. According to Halhed, the sceptics influenced the judgment of certain superior officers who, not having the same information as the district magistrates, gave little credence to the confessions of arrested thugs. The argument had also been made that many robberies perpetrated by other types of criminals were wrongfully attributed the thugs, to which Halhed's sarcastic comment was: 'poor calumniated Thugs! Slandered race of beings'. He continued: 'In the like manner and with equal plausibility may a man

stand forward in defence of the injured character of those innocent people the Buddeks by boldly stating that because every Decoity and every theft is not committed by them they the Buddeks are not and have not been by profession from father to son from time immemorial Thieves and Decoits, although the notoriety of their being so cannot be denied even by the declaimers themselves.' Halhed acknowledged that not everybody who robbed and murdered by strangulation were thugs, but denied that this proved the non-existence of the thugs who in that manner alone 'obtain their daily bread'. According to him, anyone who spent a week in Sindouse would quickly be convinced of the reality of thuggee, and furthermore there would not be a term for the crime in the *Hidaya* or Muslim law-book, if it did not exist.³⁴ Every *zamindar* in Aligarh and Etawah could attest to this and Halhed strongly urged Perry to combat this prejudice, which could only lead to an increase in thuggee. Since he was leaving the office and area altogether, Halhed argued, he had no ulterior motive in stating that thuggee was becoming more frequent, other than his 'sense of duty'.

This report touches upon nearly all the elements in regards of thuggee that have been debated ever since. By making the settlement of revenue a prerequisite for stamping out thuggee in Parihara, Halhed clearly acknowledged the intrinsic relationship between socio-economic factors and violent crime. While the correlation between increased grain prices and the prevalence of theft and burglary was well known, the eradication of highway robbery was rarely associated with matters like taxation and the living conditions of peasants.³⁵ At the same time, Halhed's comments on Budheks and the restrictive conditions for the settlement of the revenue in Parihara reveal that the perceived criminal habits and inclinations of certain groups within Indian society were also seen to be at the root of the problem. The comparison of thuggee with the Illuminati suggests that the concept of the former as a secret fraternity was very much in existence even at this early point, which is surely indicative of the fear of, and fascination with, secret societies so prevalent in Europe in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. It is worth noticing that Halhed made no mention whatsoever of thuggee as a religious practice, and thus the connection between the thugs and a secret society had been made entirely independent of any notion of Kali-worship and ritual murder.

In describing thuggee as 'no more than a species of robber', Halhed expressed the predominant understanding of the phenomenon among British officials who had been dealing with thugs. His long discussion and criticism of the 'declaimers' or sceptics regarding the reality of

thuggee shows that the same historiographical discrepancies we find today also existed then. By 1812, there seems to have been at least three different perspectives: a sensationalised one, which saw thuggee as a secret society; a sceptic one, which denied its existence; and a more pragmatic one, exemplified by Halhed, according to which thuggee was merely a type of robbery. Halhed did not specify who these 'declaimers' were, but they are likely to have been minor officials, such as Ernst, who reacted against an exaggerated representation of thuggee and who were provoked by what they perceived to be overzealous colleagues exceeding their authority. What the 'declaimers' seem to have objected against in particular, was the concept of thuggee as a widespread phenomenon to which all murders along highroads could be attributed. At any rate, it is clear that Ernst was not the only sceptic in the Company administration and that colonial 'knowledge' of thuggee was neither hegemonic nor undisputed.

Perry immediately took on board Halhed's suggestions and proposed to the Government that a settlement should be made in Parihara, but that it should be for Rs 9000 per annum instead of the 12,000 Halhed had suggested.³⁶ If the sum was too high, Perry argued, it would not constitute an inducement to abandon crime, and hence it was better for the Government to slacken its demands. All the thugs had fled and thanks to the continued presence of the military, the law-abiding inhabitants were now returning to Parihara, which Perry regarded as an indication of the general improvement of the area. The Government agreed and the British collector of Etawah was ordered to make a revenue settlement along the lines of Perry's suggestions.³⁷ The collector's offer of a settlement was, however, turned down by what he termed the 'contumacious' *zamindars*, which was attributed to the leniency Perry had previously shown them.³⁸ But now the *tahsildar* Ahmed Hussain's role in the whole affair came to light and it appeared that he had accompanied the collector and induced him to offer a settlement which was Rs 500 more than the previous year, and Rs 1000 more than Perry had suggested.³⁹ As the *tahsildar* must have expected, the *zamindars* flatly refused such a settlement and they personally approached Captain Popham at Sindouse and complained about the *tahsildar* and his involvement in the settlement:

... as they knew him to be inimically disposed to most of them, but to two or three in particular who had been instrumental, by their personal communication with me, in seizing Lolljee and restoring the peace and quiet of this district, which of all things, was most at variance with the private interests of the Tehsildar, as must also be any kind of settlement

with the zamindars, because he can no longer squeeze and bully those who have hitherto submitted to his rapacity, or drive to desperation and consequent flight (the invariable source I may safely aver of every disturbance in the Upper Provinces) those whose spirit will not succumb to unwarrantable arrogance and oppression.⁴⁰

This letter gives a good impression of the duplicity of the *tahsildar's* role in Parihara, but also shows that some *zamindars* managed to stay on in Sindouse and eventually made the settlement with the Company, in spite of their former close ties with the thugs. In the end, Perry succeeded in convincing the Government that it would be cheaper to make a mild settlement rather than keeping the military detachment in Sindouse, and the revenue settlement was finally concluded as he had suggested in May 1813.⁴¹ On the same occasion the *tahsildar* Ahmed Hussain was removed from his office. A further reason why the Government was willing to make a light settlement may also have been that the disorderly state of Parihara was obstructing trade in the area, in particular the annual fair of Batesar at Agra.⁴² Perry left Sindouse in January 1813, and W. Wright was given authority as Joint Magistrate of Parihara as well as all the troublesome *parganas* in both Agra and Etawah, that had earlier been under Halhed's control.⁴³ Wright had previously been assigned various districts where crime was rampant, similar to Halhed, and was thus an obvious choice for the thankless task of keeping Parihara peaceful and quiet.

12

Continued Measures against Thugs

In November 1812, Perry submitted the depositions of two Sindouse thugs to the Judicial Department, stressing that he would not commit them for trial unless they were considered amenable to the law.¹ In light of Perry's former conduct this seems almost sarcastic and considering that the depositions had been taken in July 1812, it cannot be coincidental that he submitted them right after the attack on Halhed, when concern for thuggee was at its highest. But the two suspects had only admitted to having committed crimes in the Maratha territories and the Government doubted that they would be convicted if brought to trial.² Attempts were made to find a native authority to convict them, but in the end the resident at Sagar was ordered to escort them 'beyond the limits of the British territories and there release them'.³ Thus in spite of the murder of Maunsell and the huge amount of information available concerning the thugs in Sindouse, little had changed and no new measures were introduced to secure the conviction of suspected thugs.

In a report written in August 1813, Perry described the thugs as being divided into three classes 'entirely unconnected with each other' – a statement in glaring contrast to the later notions of a centrally organised all-Indian conspiracy.⁴ The first class was living under the protection of various *zamindars*, in Aligarh, Shekohabad and Bowsa, and most of them were Muslims, as Perry put it, 'if such criminals can be supposed to have any religion'. The second class consisted of Hindus of the Lodha caste, who lived in the eastern parts of Etawah, and lived as ordinary *ryots* as a cover for the more profitable trade of thuggee. The third class was more numerous than the first two, and covered a wider area: 'It includes the desperate association of men of both religions and of all casts, which

grew up under the fostering protection of the zemindars of Pureeaha, and the villages contiguous thereto in the Maratha country.' These were of course the Sindouse thugs who had been disbursed by Halhed, but since then, Perry claimed, they had gradually returned and were now living in the area between the Kunwari river and Datia. The new Superintendent of Police, Blunt, likewise observed that thuggee still occurred frequently and he requested the magistrates to suggest measures by which the offence might be successfully extirpated.⁵ According to Blunt, thuggee had decreased in Etawah, Aligarh and Cawnpore, only to increase in Allahabad and the Bundelkhand.⁶ Thuggee was observed only to occur in areas intersected by ravines, with little cultivation and sparsely populated as 'These circumstances are favourable to the perpetration of such crimes and the ravines afford the means of ready concealment both of the criminals and of the bodies of the persons murdered.' In Blunt's view, the periodic cessation of thuggee proved that the establishment of *chaukis* and police patrols along the most frequented highroads did have an effect and was the most efficient way of protecting travellers. But reports of murders kept coming in from Allahabad and Cawnpore and Blunt despaired of apprehending the perpetrators: 'It is difficult from the disguises they assume to discover these offenders except by means of their accomplices or female associates; and though such persons are easily induced by hopes of reward to give information, it must always be received with distrust ...'.⁷

Blunt was shortly afterwards succeeded by J. Shakespeare, whose first report of 1814 confirmed what appeared to have been a shift in the range of the thugs' expeditions – away from the central Doab and to the south and eastwards.⁸ Cases classified as thuggee in Mirzapur and Juanpur, however, often concerned pilgrims who were poisoned and robbed by Bairagis or fakirs, and did not necessarily entail the death of the victims. Accordingly, there was a slide in the legal terminology since murder by strangulation and the drugging of victims was entered under the same heading of thuggee when it occurred under similar circumstances.⁹ Shakespeare also referred to rolls from the Military Department that showed that 107 native officers and *sepoys* had not returned from leave of absence during 1813–14, and even though he acknowledged that not all missing soldiers could be ascribed to the thugs, he was convinced that many murders were never known to the British authorities.¹⁰ As on previous occasions, the Government was concerned over the apparent increase in thuggee and urged both Shakespeare and the magistrates of the Western Provinces to display 'an unremitted vigilance' on the matter.¹¹

Shakespeare's report

Wright, who had been in charge of the police establishment in Sindouse, left in November 1813 and six months later, Perry complained that without the supervision of a European officer the inhabitants were reverting to their former habits.¹² According to Perry's informants, the thugs who resided within the Maratha territory were communicating with the local police in Sindouse, planning to recommence their depredations inside Company territory. Furthermore, he stated, 'I have cause to apprehend that the ryots on the other hand plundered by extortion of the whole profits of their industry and seeing no prospect of redress will be driven by necessity to the commission of crimes to satisfy the rapacity of their landholders.'¹³ Stockwell was subsequently made Joint Magistrate of Sindouse and having made inquiries in the town, he could report that the thugs who had fled from the area had changed their names, their place of residence and even their caste.¹⁴ He also exchanged information with various residents and magistrates, and at one point despatched two officers from Sindouse to identify a group of thugs held at Sagar – most thugs caught in the Bundelkhand were thought to originate from Sindouse.¹⁵ Several cases of thuggee occurred in Etawah in 1815 and with the assistance of a thug-prisoner sent from Farruckabad, 11 thugs were later apprehended; at one point it seemed like Stockwell might succeed where Perry had failed, but in the end the thugs were released by the native authorities who held them.¹⁶ Thus thug-prisoners were being circulated among the magistrates and used in much the same way as the approvers of the 1830s, although this did not meet with any degree of success.

In his yearly report for 1815, Shakespeare began his discussion of thuggee stating that: 'Much scepticism still prevails regarding the existence of any distinct class of people who are designated T'hegs.'¹⁷ Accordingly, the situation was such that in an official report, the scepticism of the 'declaimers' had to be addressed, and while Shakespeare admitted that nobody had ever been convicted, he had no doubts as to the existence of 'regular societies' of thugs. Shakespeare was perfectly aware of the broader usage of the word in describing merely a 'knave' or a 'cheat' but, he argued, in the Western Provinces, 'thug' was generally used to describe robbers who murdered travellers.¹⁸ In the Western Provinces, he stated, there were five different classes of robbers of the description of thugs, the first three being those of Perry's report of 7 August 1813. Shakespeare's fourth and fifth classes were Bairagi and Gosain mendicants who drugged and plundered travellers and pilgrims in the

eastern districts. The murders of the last two groups were: 'not ... committed by persons termed T'hegs – as poisoning would appear to be the only means of destruction used by these robbers'. Nevertheless, Shakespeare still thought there was reason to believe that the poisoners were established in some association similar to that of the thugs, and he therefore included them under that heading. The extracts of the report dealing with thuggee were subsequently circulated among the magistrates of the various districts where robbery was prevalent.¹⁹ The same extracts were subsequently published in *Asiatic Researches* (vol. XIII) in 1820, and seen as a whole the text is remarkably sober and free of the kind of moralising found in much of the later writings on thuggee.²⁰ Shakespeare's definition of thuggee was very broad, acknowledging the opacity of the term, and the inclusion of poisoners in the five classes of thugs was fully compatible with the indigenous use of the word 'thug' as meaning any criminal who perpetrated crime by deceit. According to Shakespeare, the word 'thug' was usually applied in the Western Provinces 'to persons who rob and murder travellers on the highways, either by poison, or the application of the cord or knife.'

At first it would appear the latter part of the 1810s witnessed a lull in the British activities against thuggee, but rather it seems that events like the third Maratha War 1817–18 overshadowed what was by then becoming a quite common issue. In 1817, the judge of the Bareilly Court of Circuit reported that there had been only one or two cases of thuggee in the Western Provinces, but he feared that the actual number of murders was much higher – in Sikandra, for instance, he had been told that more than 30 bodies had been found in wells.²¹ The judge argued that the murder of *sepoys* on leave often went unnoticed for a considerable length of time, as their families thought they had returned to the army while the army assumed they were with their families. Elliot's concern for the safety of the Company's *sepoys* is reminiscent of Miller and Wright's warnings and the resulting order of 1810, though it does not appear that any specific order was issued this time.²²

Regulation VIII of 1818

By 1818 the overall situation in regard to thuggee was seen to have vastly improved and the decrease in the number of cases led the Superintendent of Police, Ewer, to state that 'I do not know a more convincing proof of the improved state of the police in these provinces, than is afforded by the suppression of this crime, which has been accomplished almost entirely by preventive measures.'²³ The use of statistics to demonstrate improvement,

however, also raised the continuing problem of defining thuggee as a specific type of crime. Ewer argued that two cases from Aligarh, which had been listed as thuggee, could not be properly called so, as the victims had merely been drugged and robbed but recovered soon after. Yet in Allahabad, where travellers had also been drugged but subsequently died, the cases were classified as thuggee by Ewer, which means that robbery by deception was only legally defined as thuggee if it entailed the death of the victim. Accordingly, when not all the victims of poisoning necessarily died, it could be purely coincidental whether a crime was classified as thuggee or not.

The same year Regulation VIII was introduced, making it possible to hold *only* notorious dacoits against security for an indefinite period of time.²⁴ As might be expected, Perry complained that no provision had been made for thugs in the regulation, and argued that it was not: 'reasonable to expect that the men, who shall be released under the rules of Regulation VIII of 1818, will voluntarily leave the Company's territory. ... In such favourable and propitious circumstances ... it is most likely that they will prefer an unmolested residence on British grounds, and invite their fugitive companions to rejoin the general society'.²⁵ Here Perry gave vent to his frustration in failing to convict any thugs and furthermore played on a rhetoric concerning the British possessions as a haven for criminals that he knew would resonate with the Government – not unlike the strategy later pursued by Sleeman. Perry's assistant, Stockwell, made an even stronger case in pointing out the inadequacy of the regulation and claimed that the decrease in murders by thugs, of which there had been none in Etawah in 1818, was due to the fact that the thugs had become more secretive and many murders therefore remained undetected.²⁶ If dacoity warranted special legislature, Stockwell argued, then so did thuggee:

Of its wanton cruelty we cannot doubt, knowing that tho' plunder be the object, the first and invariable mode of obtaining it is the murder of the unfortunate victim. Whether he resist or comply without in any way ascertaining whether he have any valuable or merely the clothes on his back, they murder him and then take what he may have, let it be much or little. They spare neither age nor caste, and strangle a Brahmin with as little compunction as they would a sweeper.²⁷

This is the beginning of a distinctly discursive depiction of thuggee as a particularly gruesome crime that inevitably included murder. Stockwell's

description of the thug's lack of distinction in victims is particularly telling during a period when Indian society was regarded as ruled by the strict hierarchy of caste – the thugs were perceived as an anomaly even by Indian standards. Compared to thuggee, dacoity was 'open and bold', Stockwell argued, and if the victims made no resistance they were not hurt and thus the owners of stolen property would be available to recognise it if it was found. The thugs on the other hand did not murder: 'from the pressure of hunger, or from an accidental association with a bad character; but professionally, by concert[;] by design, and firm compact, entered into with each other previous to quitting their villages; after having worshipped and sacrificed a kid to obtain the auspicious protection of their deity'.

Stockwell's representation of thuggee contains the key elements of the later institutionalised stereotype: they were not driven by any rational motivation such as hunger, their murders were not coincidental occurrences but part of their profession, they were premeditated, and their execution was carefully planned in cooperation with accomplices. The last reference to a sacrifice and their deity appears to be the first time in Northern India that thuggee was described as having a religious element. The thugs were also supposed to shun hard work and to be unable to make an honest living; instead, they preferred to commit crime, which enabled them to live a life of debauchery. This is an interesting explanation of thuggee and one that goes somewhat further than merely underlining the economic gains of robbery and murder. Stockwell actually described the thugs as being naturally disinclined to manual labour and having a lazy disposition, that is particularly anti-social behaviour, which was the mirror-image of the British ideal of an honest hard-working person.²⁸ This representation deprived the thugs of any manly or martial qualities that would otherwise be associated with Rajputs, Marathas or even *kazaks*. Stockwell was in effect evoking a stereotypical image of the thug completely devoid of positive qualities, which may in part have been influenced by the perception of thuggee as a shifty and cowardly crime. The only effective measure against the thugs was to keep them in detention against security and, accordingly, he suggested that Regulation VIII of 1818 was extended to cover 'notorious' thugs as well.

The Government complied with these requests and passed Regulation III of 1819 extending the provisions of Regulation VIII of 1818: 'not merely to gang robbers (*dukyts*), but also to other notorious robbers of whatever denomination, being of desperate or dangerous character, whom it would be unsafe to set at liberty without substantial security for their future good behaviour'.²⁹ Although it is not apparent from the

legislation itself, it *was* passed specifically to enable the indefinite detention of thugs against security for their future good behaviour. Hence there was some willingness on the part of the British Government to introduce legislation, albeit on a limited scale, in order to facilitate the detention of specific criminal groups irrespectively of the evidence available.

The following year, a revision was made of all sentences based on Reg. VIII 1818, and Ghulam Hussain along with the four other suspects from the trial of 1810 were among the prisoners held in Etawah whose cases were taken up.³⁰ Although they had all been acquitted by the Nizamat Adalat, Perry had been ordered to release them against security and this he had set so high that it was impossible for them to pay. Perry had required Rs 800 from Udjbah, the main suspect, and Rs 500 for each of the remaining prisoners – sums that can only be considered ludicrous when the average annual income for a peasant at the time was around Rs 30. The final orders passed after the revision simply approved the amounts set by Perry, adding that the cases should be reviewed after a further three years.³¹ In Hussain's case, the order was even more severe: 'This prisoner being a notorious Thug and clearly coming within provisions of Section 10 Regulation 8 – 1818, it has been ordered that he shall be detained in confinement, until he shall furnish sureties who shall each engage to be responsible in the sum of 500 rupees for his good behaviour for the period of three years, and to deliver him up again to the magistrate at the end of that period.'³²

What later happened to Hussain is not known, but it seems unlikely that he was in a position to obtain the necessary sureties to pay for his release. By 1818, Ghulam Hussain was 28 years old and had languished in jail for almost a decade, alongside numerous suspected thugs, none of whom had ever been convicted of a crime. Accordingly, the claim that no single thug had ever been convicted, as made by Perry and others, concealed the fact that many suspects were actually kept imprisoned for years without trial. No formal regulations or legal changes were introduced to facilitate the conviction of thugs, but instead the discretionary powers of the magistrates were invoked. This was in all but name an extra-legal measure, which appears to have been widely used and, on some levels of the administration, accepted. The number of prisoners released after the revision suggests that the Nizamat Adalat did not generally approve of the measure, yet the orders regarding Hussain reflect an acceptance of its use in certain cases. It should be remembered that the Government had originally encouraged Perry to hold suspected thugs against security and it is also in this context that the apparent failure of the early operations against the thugs should be

seen. No thug was ever convicted during the early period but, it seems, hundreds were kept imprisoned.

The 1820s

Smaller groups of thugs were apprehended in various parts of north-central India during these years, but there was no real attempt to organise the efforts.³³ In October 1820, a gang was caught in the district of Jabalpur and the Commissioner, Molony, managed to get one of their *jemadars*, Kuleean Sing, to provide information relating to the thugs in Bundelkhand.³⁴ According to Kuleean Sing, there were about 1200 thugs still living in the Parihara area and he furnished a list of thugs who had been implicated in crimes around Jabalpur and Sagar.³⁵ In 1822, a gang of 103 thugs were arrested by Molony after being denounced by another approver, but as there was not sufficient evidence to convict them, their trial was delayed.³⁶ Soon after, Molony died and in the ensuing administrative chaos, the hapless prisoners were forgotten and languished in prison until 1830 when they were finally 'discovered' and put on trial.

During this period, the British increasingly made use of allies among the native rulers to punish or incarcerate thugs who could not be convicted in the Company's courts, that is punishment *by proxy*. In 1822 the Raj Rana of Kota requested the instructions of the British Government as to how he should deal with 44 men he had apprehended; the Raj Rana would usually have put such criminals to death without much further ado, so this move reflects his awareness of the attitude of the British in such matters.³⁷ Even though there was no evidence, the British resident at Delhi, Ochterlony, was in no doubt as to the criminal intentions of the thugs and the Raj Rana was therefore asked to keep them in confinement with hard labour as a suitable punishment – the 44 prisoners were eventually put to work on the roads in the vicinity of Kota.

In 1823, the agent in Bundelkhand, Moodie, arrested another gang along with four *shroffs* (money-changers) who had purchased stolen goods from the thugs at Jagamanpur.³⁸ The loot included pearls robbed from merchants from Hyderabad, and Moodie suggested that the thugs be sent to that city in the hope that the resident there would be able to establish their guilt and punish them.³⁹ Faced with the impossibility of punishing thugs, Moodie later suggested that thug *jemadars* should be detained for life by the local chieftains in the area of their residence, 'even should no sufficient evidence of their having been guilty of the perpetration of a particular murder or robbery be obtained'.⁴⁰ Only those regarded as 'ringleaders' should be punished in this way, argued

Moodie, while the common members of the gangs could be released without any harm. He even suggested that by imprisoning the leaders, the British might actually induce the remaining members to 'honest callings', a sentiment which is obviously quite incompatible with the later perception of the thugs as hereditary criminals. As the police alone could only force the thugs to extend their excursions elsewhere, Moodie called for 'the adoption of some plan for obtaining knowledge of the movements, if not an effectual control, over the proceedings of these miscreants appears to be extremely desirable'. This plan consisted of a register being made of all known and suspected thugs, including their place of residence and under which *zamindars* they lived.

In the event, the Government proved unwilling to pass a formal sentence of perpetual imprisonment against the thug *jemadars*, but Moodie was authorised to 'exercise a discretion on this point' and either send the prisoners to the southern part of Bundelkhand or have the native chieftains keep them imprisoned 'until otherwise instructed'.⁴¹ Permission was also given for the preparation of a register of thugs and the Governor General commented on the benefits likely to result from Moodie's activities against the thugs and his attempts 'to establish control over the highly mischievous and daring class of the community to which they belong'. The construction of a list of known thugs, complete with information on habitation and patrons, is a precedent to Sleeman's lists and genealogies and might even have constituted the model for the later thug-taxonomies. It was later formally pronounced by the Superintendent of Police that the thugs could not legally be detained at a Faujdari court 'when charged only with notoriety', and it appears that they were simply kept imprisoned by local chiefs.⁴²

Accordingly, the Government was not prepared to compromise its own regulations concerning evidence and jurisdiction in any direct way. But as Bundelkhand was a 'protected' area, not under the immediate jurisdiction of the Faujdari courts, a certain amount of procedural laxity as far as thuggee was concerned was allowed. The Government therefore authorised the imprisonment of prisoners for an unspecified period by the local authorities in cases where there was no evidence against the suspects relating to specific crimes.⁴³ Thus the British were quite willing to circumvent the spirit of their own regulations with the help of friendly indigenous rulers. British 'rule of law' was supposed to replace discretionary and barbaric methods of punishment, which was a key element in the colonial stereotype of native despotism. In these cases, however, the necessity of punishing thugs took precedence over such moral niceties, which is itself characteristic of the measures to suppress

thuggee. Hence it is not an exaggeration to talk of 'double standards' in the administration of the criminal cases. Some thugs became approvers and the British learned more of their habits and methods, but suspected thugs were kept imprisoned only through the use of ambiguous legal measures or with the assistance of indigenous allies. Generally, proceedings were of a rather sporadic nature with little direct involvement on the part of the Government.

On a different note, the proceedings of Moodie revealed the continued association between the Raja of Jagamanpur and the thugs of Parihara, which had also been noticed by Stockwell in 1815. These connections were longstanding as indicated by the role of the Raja in the thugs' own myths and suggest that in many ways little had changed since 1812. The way in which Moodie and the Government dealt with this case indicates that they were very aware of the specific context and circumstances of thuggee in Bundelkhand. The major trading route between the Doab and Deccan went through Bundelkhand and the involvement of both the Raja of Jagamanpur and the *shroffs* shows that the phenomenon of thuggee was not simply peripheral, but that they were engaged in a much wider competition for resources. The Raja's manager, who was held responsible for the protection of thugs, was eventually made over to the ruler of Jalaun for punishment, while the Raja himself was fined Rs 2500 for having harboured thugs and obstructed their apprehension.⁴⁴

Early accounts of thuggee

During the early 1820s, the first published accounts of thuggee appeared in articles or as brief references in larger works. When part of Shakespeare's report from 1816 was published in *Asiatic Researches* in 1820, it was preceded by an article called 'Of the Murderers Called Phansigars' by Dr Sherwood, working in the Madras presidency.⁴⁵ According to Sherwood, the 'Phánsigárs' of Southern India were 'villains as subtle, rapacious, and cruel, as any who are to be met with in the records of human depravity,' and took their name from the Hindi word 'phansi' meaning noose while in the north they were known as 'T'hegs' meaning deceivers.⁴⁶ This was the first time the existence of a phenomenon similar to the thugs was made known in Northern India and the Bengal Presidency. The 'discovery' of thugs and *phansigars* had happened almost simultaneously, in 1809 and 1807 respectively, but there had never been any official exchange of information between the presidencies.⁴⁷ The article contained key elements of what would later become the institutionalised colonial representation of thuggee and



Figure 13 A fanciful depiction of a thug in disguise, replete with pickaxe and knotted scarf, as imagined by a Victorian artist (from *Illustrated London News*, 18 Feb. 1843)

Sherwood was the first to mention any religious connection with the phenomenon or to discuss the participation of both Hindus and Muslims. While religion had not yet been linked to thuggee in Northern India, the *phansigars* were, according to Sherwood, highly superstitious and placed great importance on observing various omens and, though some of them were Muslims, their tutelary deity was the Hindu goddess 'Cali or Mariatta'. Sherwood also mentioned the supposed existence of *phansigars* in Arabia and Persia, which can only be a reference to the Assassins and the Old Man on the Mountain – an unsubstantiated link, which still attract scholars.⁴⁸ The implication was that the *phansigars* and thugs were not related to a specific locality, but were part of a much wider and almost global phenomenon. But like Shakespeare's article, Sherwood's is in fact rather balanced and, considering the time it was written, really undeserving of the criticism it has received.⁴⁹

Sherwood does describe the *phansigars* as 'hereditary murderers and plunderers' but explains this with their upbringing, and their lack of compassion and ruthless acts of murder are ascribed not to some inherent evil, but the simple fact that they have never known an alternative. Although

this may be a very simplified explanation, it nonetheless reflects a less biased approach compared with the later representation of thuggee. Sherwood also acknowledged that political turmoil and wars had enabled the *phansigars* to operate more freely and he thereby recognised some of the wider implications behind the phenomenon.⁵⁰ Sherwood was not trying to facilitate the administrative institutionalisation of operations against thuggee, but was reporting on a subject considered to be of interest to the readers of *Asiatic Researches*. The very disparate nature of his and Shakespeare's articles shows that this was not an attempt to advocate a specific and homogenous colonial stereotype, although they were both later put to that use. These two texts had been produced early in the operations against thuggee, before the stereotype had been fully institutionalised and before Sleeman's efforts had created an atmosphere of self-generating accounts among approvers and officials.

Sherwood's article was based on different kinds of material, but it also appears from his references that he had direct access to actual *phansigar* informers.⁵¹ Even a cursory reading of the few existing documents shows that the early measures to combat the *phansigars* in the Madras Presidency had more than a passing similarity with those of Northern India. Approvers were considered the only effective means of obtaining information and testimony, but the courts refused to accept their depositions and acquitted most of the prisoners. Similarly to the Ceded and Conquered Provinces, the magistrates in the south had to deal with authorities, who on the one hand approved of their exertions and on the other hand rendered their efforts futile because of judicial regulations. In the proceedings from the Madras Presidency, as well as in Sherwood's article, the term *phansigar* was used rather than 'thug', and it is clear that they were interchangeable in implying highway robbers who murdered travellers.⁵² The publication of the two articles does not appear to have received much attention at the time, but Sherwood was later incorporated in the colonial representation of thuggee of the 1830s.

The Governor of Bombay, J. Malcolm, also mentioned 'that singular association called Thugs' in his memoir from 1823, and supposedly they included all castes but were mostly Hindus and Brahmins inhabiting the area between the Chambal and Kunwari rivers, which must be a reference to Sindouse.⁵³ In Malcolm's opinion, their depredations were made possible only because of the state of the land, especially the native states through which the thugs travelled. The Marquess of Hastings likewise referred to the thugs in a written account, according to which the different gangs living in the Maratha territories were able to operate in unison: 'Though personally unacquainted, ... had signs and tokens by

which each recognised the other as of the brotherhood; and their object being understood, without the necessity of verbal communication, they shunned all speech with each other till the utterance of a mystical term or two announced the favourable moment, and claimed common effort.⁵⁴ It is noticeable that both Malcolm and Hastings were primarily concerned with the governance of India, and similarly to Sherwood, they ascribed the existence of thuggee to the lawlessness of the native states. Malcolm also made reference to the *phansigars* of Southern India, which suggests that he was familiar with Sherwood's article, and it seems that by the early 1820s, thuggee was being perceived as a phenomenon with much larger ramifications, not limited solely to the Maratha territories. On a similar note, Hastings's description of the secrecy of the thugs reads like a predecessor to the exaggerated notion of their secret association so prevalent during the following decade. In this regard Hastings's account goes further than the information collected by men like Perry and Shakespeare would seem to warrant, and he too may have been familiar with Sheerwood's article. By 1820 there was a general acceptance of caste as the main organising principle of Indian society, which is also evident from Malcolm's description of thuggee in such terms. Thuggee had not yet become the all-India conspiracy propagated in the 1830s, but the germ of the concept was certainly there.⁵⁵ And yet it should be emphasised that there was still no consensus as to the actual nature of thuggee; even the meaning of the term was disputed, as the following excerpt from a despatch from the Board of Directors of 1820 demonstrates:

The term Thug is not commonly applied to signify a criminal who first stabs, strangles, or poisons, then strips and plunder his victim, and finally throws the body into a well. But when we read ... of the existence of villages of Thugs consisting of men, women & children, and when we consider in connection with this, the remark of Mr. Leycester that 'the word Thug is a local cant term, and consequently little understood in any uniform way'; it is at least manifest that the term is not one of very restricted application.⁵⁶

As far as the 1820s are concerned, the notion of a hegemonic colonial discourse on thuggee does not stand up to scrutiny, and even later the response of the colonial state was not the result of a consistent policy.

13

The Operations Commence

As the operations to suppress thuggee gradually progressed, the marked disparities between procedures in the different regions became more apparent. In 1826, Fraser, the agent at Sagar, held proceedings over a gang of suspected thugs, and as most of the prisoners confessed to murders, and stolen property was recognised as well as bodies exhumed, the truth of their depositions was considered proven.¹ Fraser committed them for trial and the Government soon passed sentences on these thugs, the first ever to be formally convicted and punished by the British authorities: Two were sentenced to death by hanging, 29 were deemed guilty of being accomplices to robbery and murder and were sentenced to transportation for life. Three of the prisoners, who had provided information or not participated in the crimes of the gang, were kept in confinement against security for their future good conduct.² Obviously a significant change had taken place since a gang of thugs could now be convicted almost exclusively on their own confessions, which in spite of numerous attempts had not been feasible in the preceding decade and a half. Sagar and Narbada were established as 'Non-Regulation Territories' in 1818, which meant that the regulations usually governing the Company's possessions were not in force and instead the agent, that is Fraser, was invested with virtually unlimited powers and referred directly to the Government. The reason for this arrangement was that the situation in the areas designated non-regulatory was considered to be too chaotic and disorderly for normal legal procedures to work efficiently. It is worth noticing that it was not the change of regulations that enabled the successful conviction of thugs, but rather the extraordinary arrangement of areas in which the regulations did not apply.

The following year the Magistrate of Sarun in the Lower Provinces, Pringle, arrested several thugs after two of his servants had been murdered

on the road to Calcutta.³ During his investigations it emerged that there were several large gangs operating in Gorakhpur, some of whom had been arrested on earlier occasions but released for lack of evidence.⁴ Pringle hoped to be able to bring the criminals to justice and even though there was no evidence against them apart from their notoriety, he committed six of the prisoners for the murder of his servants. But the judge of the Court of Circuit did not share Pringle's view, and when the wife of one of the murdered servants failed to identify his possessions during the trial, no further evidence remained than the testimony of approvers. The thugs were accordingly released and the approvers were sentenced to 15 lashes and five years' imprisonment for giving false evidence, and they were furthermore paraded around the town mounted on an ass.⁵ Thus in an area where the problem of using informers was acknowledged in connection with dacoity and where thuggee was not a well-known phenomenon, the courts proved unwilling to confine thugs on suspicion alone. The punishment of the approvers also suggests that the legal procedure was very different from the Western Provinces, especially considering that the dismissal of Pringle's case occurred at the same time that the first convictions of thugs were made at Sagar – both on the sole basis of approver testimonies.

In the Bombay presidency the situation was again slightly different. In February 1829, six men carrying valuables worth more than Rs 100,000 from Bombay to Jaipur were murdered and plundered in the Dholebaree Pass.⁶ Suspicion immediately fell on a party of 22 men who had been seen following the treasure carriers and subsequently 13 of them were rounded up and swords with bloodstains and some cash was found on them. They all denied being implicated in the robbery and even pretended that they did not know each other, but some of them were recognised by the local troopers and items in their possession were also identified by one of the treasure-carriers who survived. Hodges, the Magistrate, tried in vain to convince any of the prisoners to become 'King's evidence', but in the end they were convicted anyway: Two were sentenced to hanging, six were transported overseas, one was imprisoned for life and four were acquitted.⁷ Thus it was possible to convict thugs without having recourse to judicial loop-holes, although this was admittedly an exceptional case. Due to the large amount of money involved, the local authorities acted with speed and efficiency, and the surviving treasure-carrier could identify property and so on. The owners of the valuables also had very good reason to assist the authorities and they had even submitted a petition to the Police Magistrate in Bombay.⁸ Cases that involved the loss of considerable amounts were dealt with quite differently as compared to the murder of

unidentified travellers, and in the Dholeebaree affair the authorities were not presented with vague rumours of thuggee, but a solid case and tangible evidence.

Borthwick's arrest of thugs

By 1829 the turn of events quickened pace and in April Capt. Borthwick, political agent at Malwa, was informed of the discovery of five bodies south of Ratlam and of a large group of suspicious travellers who had passed the same spot two days before.⁹ Horsemen were despatched and caught up with a group matching the description, and all 74 were arrested on suspicion of being thugs and *phansigars*. One of the prisoners immediately confessed and offered to inform against his accomplices and he was subsequently kept separate from the others.¹⁰ It is noticeable that the prisoners themselves used the term *phansigar* interchangeably with 'thug', and the informer even talked of himself as a 'confederate Phansigar'.¹¹ It therefore seems that the Hindi words for 'deceiver' and 'strangler' were both used to describe the phenomenon of thuggee, as was the case in the Madras Presidency and in Hyderabad. In communicating the details of the case to the Government, Borthwick's superior, Stewart, stressed the importance of the information gained in the depositions: 'The expeditions of these murderous gangs have of late years become the greatest calamities with which Malwa has been afflicted; and it will not fail to attract the notice of Government that the very pacification of the country has led to the extension of this murderous system to a degree unknown before.'¹² Stewart here made a direct link between the expansion of the Company's rule and the prevalence of robbers, which ran contrary to the usual argument in favour of British rule in India.¹³ Stewart also suggested that the leaders of the gang as well as the actual stranglers should be executed at their respective villages, and that the rest should either be banished from 'Hindustan' or confined for life.

The Government's reply is significant and really mark the beginning of a much more centralised and directed campaign against thuggee.¹⁴ The operations against the thugs were no longer to be localised with the use of various – and what had eventually proven to be ineffective – measures, but instead through an administrative campaign led by the Government. The Governor General praised Borthwick for his endeavours in successfully seizing and proving the guilt of so many thugs and stated that:

The hand of these inhuman monsters being against every one, and there being no country within the range of their annual excursions

from Bundelcund to Guzerat, in which they have not committed murder, it appears to His Lordship in Council that they may be considered like Pirates, to be placed without the pale of social law, and be subjected to condign punishment by whatever authority they may be seized and convicted.¹⁵

With this assertion of British authority, the Governor General ordered that the leaders and stranglers of the gang were to be executed, while the remainder, though equally guilty, should be handed lesser sentences, ranging from transportation for life with hard labour to imprisonment for a limited period. Borthwick was, moreover, instructed as to how to interrogate the prisoners and compare the depositions of the approvers: the testimony of each approver was to be taken when confronted with the prisoners one at a time, without the presence of the others, so as to exclude the possibility of collusion between either party.¹⁶

This was a remarkable instance of the Government actively getting involved in the details of the committal and conviction of prisoners, and the procedure that was laid down became the precedent in future trials of thugs. Although approvers had been used extensively before, this was the first time they were systematically cross-examined in order to determine the guilt of individuals, or that they were kept separate and their testimonies compared. Comparing thuggee with piracy was also an entirely new line of judicial argument, and while the concept was usually used in connection with localised phenomena, in the Caribbean or Chinese sea, it was used here as a universal category.¹⁷ The absence of jurisdictions on sea resulted in the practice that pirates could be punished by whoever captured them and this rationale was uncritically applied to the thugs in India. The division between executive and judicial powers was strictly observed in the Company's possessions subjected to the regulations, but in this case any pretension to rule of law was superseded by the need to put down thuggee quickly and effectively. This new development reflected the political situation of the late 1820s, when the British were involved in a number of regions without having full authority. Within the Company's dominion, the British were the sole authority but also bound by their own legal regulations, which were rigorously upheld.¹⁸ The establishment of 'Non-Regulation Territories' and agents and residents at foreign courts, however, created the need and opportunity for alternative measures and hence a new sphere of legal innovation.¹⁹ New areas were becoming accessible to the administration and in that respect, this phase of the thuggee campaign cannot be understood independently of the process by which the Company expanded its sphere of interest.

Forty of Borthwick's gang was hung; 20 were transported overseas with hard labour for life, while 12 received limited prison sentences and the rest were released because of their young age or poor health.²⁰ The readiness of the Government to authorise capital sentences on such a scale indicates the gravity with which thuggee was regarded.²¹ Chief Secretary Swinton further envisaged that an officer be assigned the exclusive task of apprehending thugs: 'For this purpose an intelligent British Officer might be selected by Major Stewart to proceed at the proper season in charge of the five approvers to the several villages which are said to be the principal haunts of the Thugs, and through previous arrangements with the Chiefs to whom those villages belong, all those individuals who might be found out as Thugs should be seized.'²² This is the first allusion to the position that Sleeman was later to attain, and curiously the importance of the approvers in connection with that office is also stressed. The agent in Bundelkhand, Ainslie, was chosen for this job because of the number of thugs presumed residing within his jurisdiction and the British officials in the relevant districts were instructed to forward information on thugs to him, which implies a degree of centralisation.²³ That Ainslie held this post prior to Sleeman is usually ignored by historians, who maintain that Sleeman 'discovered' thuggee and established the thuggee campaign. Sleeman did, however, become involved around this time.

Enter Sleeman

Because of the large numbers of people who were murdered in the area, Capt. W. H. Sleeman, Assistant to the Agent at Jabalpur, assigned approvers from his station to accompany detachments of troops marching along the exposed routes.²⁴ In this rather serendipitous manner, 24 thugs were apprehended on two occasions, and Sleeman acquired more approvers and information regarding the thug gangs operating within his jurisdiction.²⁵ Sleeman's first report on the thugs anticipated the dramatic tone that he was later to employ so effectively:

These proceedings are voluminous, but the depredations of these common enemies of mankind, which under the sanction of religious rites, ceremonies and opinions make almost every road in India between the Jumna and the Indus from the beginning of November to the end of May a dreadful scene of hourly murder, are becoming a subject of awful interest, and these proceedings have swelled from my anxiety to collect all the material that would be found to bear upon this particular case ...²⁶



Figure 14 An unflattering sketch entitled 'trial of a thug' by Fanny Parkes, who met both Sleeman and F.C. Smith in the 1830s (from *Wanderings of a pilgrim in search of the picturesque*, 1850)

According to Sleeman the thugs were particularly active on the road between Sagar and Indore, where they considered the travellers as a kind of 'property which they may seize and slay at their leisure'.²⁷ The thugs could murder in Bhilsa, under Maratha rule, without taking any precautions and Sleeman suggested that the whole district should be secured from Sindhia, thus making a clear link between the measures to put down thuggee and the expansion of the Company's territories. Sleeman furthermore claimed that the occurrence of thuggee was increasing under the 'sanction of religious rites and feelings, for by discharging certain duties to the priests and temples of their tutelary deity, Bhowanie, they believe that their murders are all perpetrated under her especial sanction and auspices'. He expressed the hope that the Government would be able to root out the evil of thuggee 'whenever it shall be pleased to consider it a subject of sufficient interest and to exert the legitimate authority with which it is invested over these states for the purpose'. This was a barely concealed (and hardly justified) critique of the Government's failure to do something about the thugs and a call for the British to assume their responsibilities towards their Indian subjects. Finishing his *tour de force*, Sleeman claimed that all thugs aspired to be 'one day invested with the Romaul and to have the honour of strangling'.²⁸ Accordingly, he was conjuring up an image of thuggee as a huge and imminent threat, describing thugs as inherently debased and superstitious beings. It is impossible to say to what extent Sleeman was consciously exaggerating and dramatising the issue, but one cannot help but notice that he was laying it on thick to serve a specific purpose.

The branding of thugs and continued operations

As the murders committed by Sleeman's gang had occurred in several different territories belonging to independent rulers, they could not legally be convicted by the Company courts. But Sleeman's superior F. C. Smith, the Agent of Sagar and Narbada, simply invoked the 'paramount authority' of the British in India, and suggested that Sleeman's gang should be dealt with similarly to those apprehended by Borthwick.²⁹ Thus Swinton's introduction of the legal comparison with pirates became a virtual *carte blanche* when the trial of thugs was impracticable according to Company regulations. Swinton himself suggested: 'to brand convicted Thugs – to set a mark on them like Cain the first murderer and ... to employ the agency of acquitted Thugs to secure persons of noted leaders now at large, on the principle of setting a thief to catch a thief'.³⁰ More importantly, he repeated his plan for an officer to be

specifically employed against the thugs: 'Like the Pindaries, the Thugs must be hunted down by British energy and British zeal, and much, it is respectfully submitted, might be done in a few years, if an officer like Captain Sleeman were especially appointed to this exclusive duty.' Interestingly, Swinton stated that apart from approvers' testimony, 'The very circumstance of being found with a gang would be presumptive evidence', and following this line of argument it would be virtually impossible *not* to obtain a conviction for thuggee.³¹ Subsequently the Government ordered thugs sentenced to imprisonment to be branded with the '*goodna*' (an Indian type of tattoo) on part of the body exposed to view.³² In India, branding was a common means of punishment, and it is noted that a gang under Feringheea caught in 1822 had their faces 'blackened' before being released.³³ Smith was also requested to consult with Sleeman and others in order to determine the best means by which information could be obtained and thuggee eventually eradicated. Eleven of the thugs caught by Sleeman were executed, two transported overseas for life with hard labour, seven were imprisoned for seven years and two were released.³⁴

By now there was an extensive exchange of information between the various officials engaged in the campaign and approvers were sent around to identify prisoners in different places.³⁵ This resulted in a spate of arrests in the course of 1830, which was the direct result of those made by Borthwick and Sleeman. The increased use of approvers and informers was not devoid of problems and in several cases native officers charged with apprehending thugs colluded with them instead.³⁶ In another instance, a thug was first apprehended in Kandhesh, but managed to escape and subsequently went to Jabalpur where he offered his service as an approver.³⁷ Smith, however, defended the procedures and argued that potential abuse 'must be submitted to as the least of the evils attending such a depraved state of society as at present obtained in these provinces, and in general throughout the whole continent of India'.³⁸ Accordingly, the attitude was that the end justified the means, although it is far from clear whether the British were aware of the wider implications of such a policy.

In 1830, the gang that Molony had detained in 1823 was finally 'discovered' in the prison at Sagar, and though 33 had died in the meantime, 72 were sent to Jabalpur to be tried by Sleeman.³⁹ The proceedings held back in 1823 had produced evidence which, according to Smith, fully complied with the principles presently laid down by Swinton. Sleeman actually spoke against capital punishment in this case, as the prisoners had already been detained for eight years, but

Smith disagreed:

The crimes they are convicted of are abhorrent to human nature, they are the sworn natural and irreconcilable enemies of mankind, united by the bonds of a depraved religion in their compact with each other; and as they show none, they deserve no mercy; mercy to such wretches would be cruelty to mankind. Their respite from deaths for so long a period may be attributed solely to their good fortune, and can form no valid plea for present leniency.⁴⁰

Smith's reference to 'a depraved religion' is worth noticing; if he was only referring to the religious beliefs of the thugs, it was merely one more layer to the stereotype, but it may also be interpreted as an indictment of Hinduism and Indian religion in general. Since the religious beliefs of the thugs appeared to be endorsed by Indian religion more generally, the negative values and practices attributed to the thugs thus reflected on all Indians. The existence and suppression of thuggee therefore justified British rule in India. In the event, the Government concurred with Smith's views and 26 of the prisoners were sentenced to be hanged, nine were transported for life, three received 14 years imprisonment and eight got seven years – those not executed were whipped and branded.⁴¹

The anonymous article

In September 1830, Fraser, the agent at Sagar, asked for a year's leave for medical reasons, and Smith suggested that Sleeman should take over that position.⁴² On 3 October 1830, the *Calcutta Literary Gazette* published an anonymous article with the heading: 'Thugs', in which the author described the execution of 11 thugs convicted by Smith for the murder of 35 travellers.⁴³ Before ascending the gallows, the 11 men shouted: 'Bindachul ke jae, Bhowanee ke jae' or 'Glory to Bindachul, Bhowanee's glory', which was supposedly a confession of their guilt since: 'no one in such a situation invokes Bhowanee but a Thug, and he invokes no other deity in any situation, whatever be his religion or sect she is their tutelary goddess, and is worshipped under the four names Davey, Kalee, Doorga, and Bhowanee'. The temple of 'Bindachul' at Mirzapur was allegedly the main place of worship of the thugs who gathered there from all parts of India to sacrifice part of the booty acquired by murder. The priests of the temple were also thought to plan the expeditions and to promise the thugs impunity from persecution and plentiful spoil in return for a share on condition that the thugs

observed the requisite omens and rites associated with the goddess. If the thugs followed the rules, they were assured paradise when they died, but if they were executed it would be due to their own negligence and the displeasure of the goddess.

The author also described the various ceremonies performed by the thugs, such as consecrating the pickaxe they venerated, and how they relied on omens to guide their actions. One of the most important ceremonies was the investigation of the 'Romal' or handkerchief, by which the victims of the thugs were strangled: 'The investiture with the Romal is knighthood to these monsters, it is the highest object of their ambition' Sometimes the victims of the thugs were thought to attain paradise, according to the author, and they were thus similar to human sacrifice and became tutelary saints of their murderers. According to the author, thuggee was:

an organized system of religious and civil polity, to receive converts from all religions and sects, and to use them to the murder of their fellow creatures under the assurance of high rewards in this world and the next, and sad experience teaches us how prone mankind have been in all ages and nations, to prey upon the lives and properties of each other under such assurances, or under any sanction of law, human or divine, which they deem sufficient.⁴⁴

The article finished with the suspenseful promise: 'You will probably hear from me again on this fearful subject.'⁴⁵

First of all, it is noticeable how this article resembles Sleeman's report on his proceedings in May 1830, thus providing an obvious hint as to the identity of the anonymous author.⁴⁶ The description of the execution of thugs is almost a model one, the main feature of which is the resignation or even joy expressed by the condemned thugs – which was perceived as a display of the Oriental's proverbial fatalism.⁴⁷ The invocation of Bhavani becomes an admission of guilt and thuggee is described as a religious institution, backed by the priests at Vindhychal who are more or less named as the real instigators of thuggee.⁴⁸ In this perspective thuggee was a veritable conspiracy, in which the thugs were merely puppets following orders. The claim that the thugs believed they and their victims would go to heaven is not corroborated by any sources and it is to be strongly suspected that the author was employing a terminology that would make the reader associate the thugs with Muslim fanaticism and the Assassins of the Middle Ages.⁴⁹ The account of omens and initiation ceremonies only underlined the supposed fanatical and ritualised

nature of the thug's practices and by describing the victims of the thugs as human sacrifices, the author played straight into the current debates of the time.⁵⁰ Presenting thuggee as an all-India phenomenon increased the extent of its threat but was also an implicit argument in favour of further British expansion. In this deliberate and sensationalist manner, the author of the anonymous article called for the British authorities to increase their exertions and implement more measures to put an end to thuggee and this certainly struck a note with the Government.

The day after the article had been published, Swinton wrote in an official note that: 'The extirpation of this Tribe would, I conceive, be a blessing conferred on the people of India, than which none would be more priced, and its successful accomplishment might be a source of no less satisfaction to the British Authorities, than the recent abolition of the Suttee rites.'⁵¹ Swinton also asserted that more people were killed by thuggee than by *sati* and that Indians regarded the two practices very differently: While the thug's victims died without having had the opportunity to amend their sins, the *sati* was venerated and her act expiated the sins of her dead husband and his family for generations. In a remarkably Orientalist manner, Swinton thus assessed thuggee from the viewpoint of a Hindu and argued for increased measures on the basis of what he perceived to be an indigenous religious rationale.⁵² He furthermore claimed that it would be possible to arrest many more thugs and prevent their excursions, 'If Government were to authorize me to call Mr. Smith's and Captain Sleeman's attention to the subject and require a report from them on its feasibility ...'.⁵³ Swinton was in fact the prime mover within the Government as far as measures against thuggee were concerned. Soon after, Smith was ordered to identify the author of the anonymous article and to draw up a plan to facilitate the apprehension of thugs still at large.⁵⁴ A list of names of thugs should also be collected on the basis of the approver testimonies, yet at the same time, Smith was cautioned as to the inherent danger in the use of approvers, who could be motivated by the promise of rewards or enmity against individuals.

On 13 October, Smith's choice of Sleeman to take over from Fraser was approved by the Governor, who was 'happy to observe that your attention has been turned to the very desirable object of putting down the system of Thuggee and that you have anticipated the wishes of Government as conveyed to you in my letter of the 8th instant on that subject'.⁵⁵ Knowing, as we do now, that it was Sleeman who had written the anonymous article, the sequence of events may be assessed in a somewhat different light: on 21 September Smith proposed Sleeman for the job, on

3 October an article stressing the importance of putting an end to thuggee is published, and on the 13th of the same month, Sleeman is officially approved as Fraser's successor. This was a case of very successful lobbying and it seems likely that Smith was fully aware that Sleeman was the author of the article. With the help of Smith, Sleeman created a sense of urgency, of an emergency for which he was the only remedy – according to himself and Smith. Furthermore, Swinton was by no means unsusceptible to the terminology and arguments presented by the two officials, and thus Sleeman attained the position he coveted.

14

The Thuggee Campaign

On 19 November 1830 Smith submitted a 'Plan for the eventual destruction of the association of Thugs which have of late infested Central India', which he and Sleeman had worked out.¹ The plan consisted of the following main points:

- 1 An officer should be appointed Superintendent for the Suppression of Thugs whose sole task it was to seize, try and punish the thugs. He should be issued with a warrant valid in all of India under the British Government and authorised to follow and arrest thugs in independent states.
- 2 The Superintendent should commit the thugs for trial before the Agent of the Sagar and Narbada territories 'without reference to the scene and locality of the outrage' following the principles of Swinton's letter of 23 October 1829.
- 3 The Superintendent should make out a list of all suspected thugs and copies of this should be transmitted to all British functionaries north of the Narbada.
- 4 Heavy penalties should be passed on heads of villages that harboured notorious thugs both within the Company's and in foreign territories. The Superintendent should also be authorised to detain the wife and children of wanted thugs until he was seized.²
- 5 In order to prevent approvers and pardoned thugs helping their friends, they should be given residence in a place surrounded by walls and subject to imprisonment for life if they left these premises without permission.

Smith argued that Sleeman would be the best suited for the office of Superintendent due to his knowledge and 'extensive acquaintance with

the habits, haunts, and customs of the Thugs and Phansigars'. The hereditary nature of thuggee was further stressed by Smith, who argued that the approvers should never be set at liberty: 'for numerous proofs exist of the utter impossibility of reclaiming even boys, the sons of Thugs, from this horrid but apparently irresistible profession, like tigers, their taste for blood is indelible, and not to be eradicated while life exists'.³ This is the first and perhaps strongest presentation of the idea that thuggee was an irredeemable and essential identity, and that the lust for murder was an ingrained aspect of the thug's personality. A common stereotype of Oriental depravity was thus invoked, and one that was later to be fully developed in the new 'science' of phrenology and the supposition that the characteristics of humans could be measured in the skull and physical features.⁴ Smith had earlier been severely criticised for his conduct as a Magistrate in Meerut, and the wording of this plan clearly indicates that he was trying to redeem himself.⁵ Similarly to Sleeman, Smith was trying to further his own career and the shrill terminology of the plan is noteworthy.

Smith's plan was the logical continuation and development of the ideas Swinton had already voiced and which had led to Ainslie being employed in such capacity against the thugs in Bundelkhand – Smith knew that his plan would be well received. It is interesting to note how Sleeman's knowledge of the thugs was emphasised at this early point reflecting the impact of his article. It should be recalled that Sleeman had only been involved in the measures against thuggee from the end of 1829 and therefore was not even the most experienced officer in that regard. The relationship between Smith and Sleeman and the latter's self-publicity must have played a rather significant role. In the event, Governor Bentinck did not altogether approve of Smith's plan, although Sleeman was authorised to pursue and apprehend thug gangs, for which purpose he was given 50 *barkandazes*.⁶ But the Governor did not consider it necessary to establish a specific office: 'It seems to his Lordship that there is obvious advantage in leaving the measures to be taken by an officer already holding and exercising the functions of a responsible situation.'⁷ Thus the Department for the Suppression of Thuggee was not established in 1830, since the Government preferred to keep the operations within an existing office. This enabled the operations to be continued without the need for new regulations or procedures and with few extra expenses. Smith's measures may not all have been approved by Bentinck, but the fact that Sleeman was assigned to the position as agent at Sagar, still suggests some support from the Government.

As on previous occasions, *ad hoc* solutions were deemed preferable to the institutionalisation of the measures introduced to suppress thuggee.

With the precedent of the capture and trials of Borthwick and Sleeman's gangs in 1829, the operations continued under the direction of Smith and Sleeman in Sagar.⁸ With the assistance of the first few approvers more thugs were caught, some of whom in turn became approvers as well, and the fund of informants upon which the British could rely steadily grew.⁹ Approvers were despatched with detachments of troops to disinter the bodies of their victims and point out and cause the arrest of their former associates wherever they could be found. The thug trials were based on specific cases selected on the nature of the circumstantial evidence available and in order to secure convictions, the suspected thugs were charged in several cases but only sentenced in one – namely the one with the most damning evidence. Up to half a dozen approvers were confronted with the suspects, one at a time, and identified them and testified as to their involvement in the specific case being tried.¹⁰ Part of Sleeman's success in getting the approvers to denounce their former comrades derived from his strategy of playing different approver factions out against each other.¹¹ The factions were constituted primarily of family and caste members and thus Muslim approvers would gladly denounce Hindu suspects and *vice versa*.

It is around this time that most of the thugs on whose accounts Sleeman would place so much importance were caught and made their depositions. Inayat, for instance, was arrested in 1829 while Feringheea was tracked down by approvers in December 1830, after Sleeman had secured his relatives.¹² Doorgha, who had been engaged in thuggee since 1799, gave it up in 1820 but was nevertheless arrested in Cawnpore in 1833, by approvers who knew him from before.¹³ Through their increasing attention, the British changed the nature of thuggee, especially after the initiation of the operations in 1829–30. The mere presence of the British in certain areas caused the thugs to migrate or change routes as in the Surguja expedition, and as early as 1809 and 1810 thugs had been expelled by their former patrons when the British began searching for thugs.¹⁴ The single most important occurrence during the early period was obviously the expulsion from Sindouse in 1812, but it was not until the mid-1820s and onwards, when approvers were systematically sent out with troops, that they had to flee and move frequently from village to village.¹⁵ The thugs would move away from areas that came under the direct control of the British, and concurrent with the British expansion, more thugs were gradually discovered and driven out.

It is to some extent possible to trace the gradual change in routes taken by the Sindouse thugs and their descendents during their expeditions. If we compare the accounts of expeditions from 1800 up till 1832, there is one significant change to be seen, namely that Jabalpur and Nagpur

were gradually left out in a general swing to the west. The expeditions during the three decades always went south-west from the Gwalior territory, and in the later years increasingly north-west into Rajasthan and Gujerat. This not only reflected the expansion of the British possessions but also the shift in trade that occurred in the course of this period.¹⁶ During the trials of 1831–32, a map was drawn up which showed all the locations where murders had taken place in Northern India.¹⁷ The theatre of operations went in a complicated network (clockwise) from Banda, Jabalpur, Nagpur, Malegaon, Baroda, Nimach, Jaipur and Rewari (see Map 1).¹⁸ Thus there is a degree of continuity in the key position of Sagar and the cities to the south-west, whereas Jabalpur and Nagpur slowly lost their importance.¹⁹

By 1831–32 the institutionalised discourse of thuggee was well established and though not formally established, the Thuggee Department was up and running in everything but name. Throughout the first part of the 1830s the operations against thugs were gradually expanded; in 1832 an officer was sent to the Doab to supervise the operations there and the following year another was stationed in Rajputana.²⁰ By 1834, the ramifications of thuggee had been traced to Behar, Awadh, Malwa and Rajasthan and so on, and Smith called for the establishment of a central agency for the suppression of thuggee with officers placed in the different territories.²¹ Smith was not the only one to press for more active efforts and in an official report it was stated that:

Government must therefore reckon on having to maintain an effective establishment for this special purpose for many years to come, and it highly behoves the British Government as the civilised and paramount power so to organize their arrangements with this view as to be able firmly and constantly to maintain the contest against this veritable enemy of the human race until he be entirely stricken down and destroyed.²²

Such arguments could not be ignored by the Government and in January 1835 more resources were allocated to the operations, the full control of which was to be exercised by Smith while Sleeman was made Superintendent at Jabalpur.²³ But Smith did not wish to head the operations any longer and on 5 March 1835, Sleeman was made 'General Superintendent of the operations for the suppression of Thuggee'.²⁴ Smith, in one of his last contributions to the campaign, criticised the way proceedings against thugs were held within the regulation territories by the Nizamat Adalat, and pointed out the problem of sentencing 'hereditary'

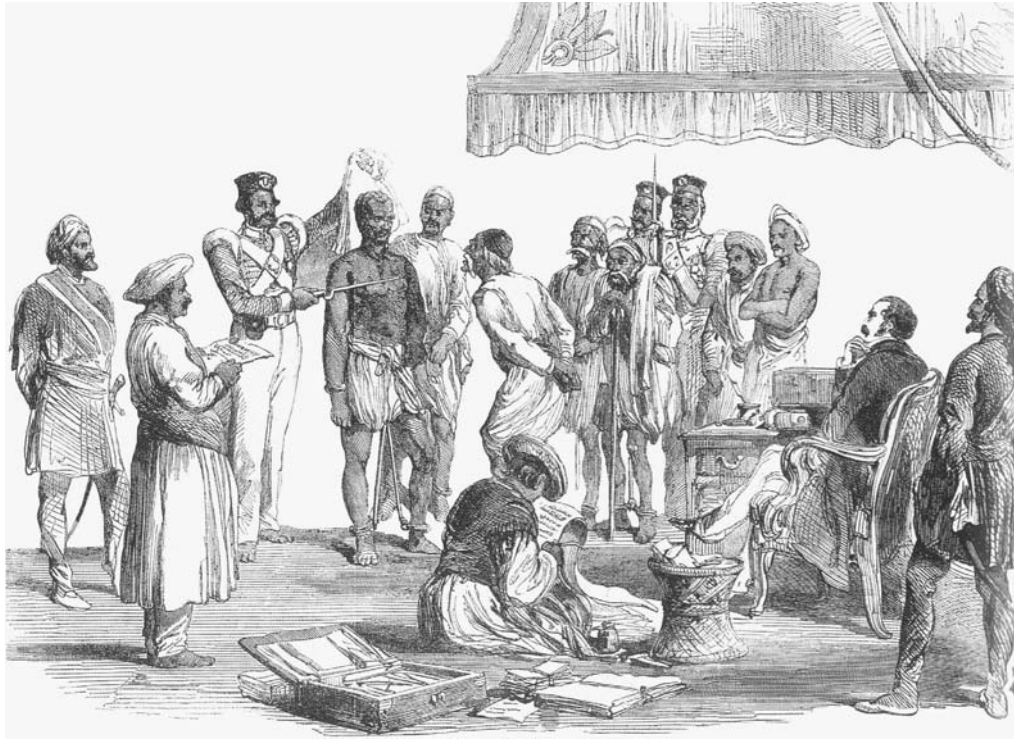


Figure 15 An iconic illustration of the moment when a captured thug is denounced by approvers in a court under the watchful eye of a British official (from *Illustrated London News* (?), reproduced with kind permission of Frank and Marie-Thérèse Wood Print Collections, Picture Bank)

thugs to imprisonment for a limited period of time as they would inevitably return to their 'trade' once released.²⁵ In Smith's opinion thuggee could be completely suppressed in a matter of years, but only if the operations were carried out under the procedures implemented by him and Sleeman in the Non-Regulation Territories. In effect, Smith was asking for the introduction of the non-regulation procedures in the ordinary regulation territories.

The Government was never quite comfortable with the procedures employed during the thuggee campaign and early on Smith was reminded that measures such as the detention of the wife and children of thugs at large, 'ought to be very sparingly resorted to'.²⁶ It was acknowledged that this method had facilitated the apprehension of Feringheea and that the approvers were invaluable in the hunt for thugs, but the Government feared that 'the cases have been not very infrequent in which these people have been enabled to turn to the purposes of their horrible occupation the opportunities afforded by public employment'. Accordingly, Smith was ordered only to convict wanted thugs if there was circumstantial evidence to support the approver testimonies: 'no person must ever be convicted merely for being reputed a thug or being in company of thugs, without satisfactory evidence bringing home to himself, individually a participation in some specific offence'.²⁷ But times changed.

In 1836 a new type of thuggee was discovered, namely river-thugs in Bihar, Bengal and Orissa, who murdered the passengers they transported on their boats on the Ganges.²⁸ These thugs simply threw the bodies overboard and, accordingly, there was even less circumstantial evidence than was usually the case. Armed with a new argument, Sleeman called for regulations that would make it possible to convict the river-thugs and, two and a half decades after Perry had first made such requests, Act XXX of 1836 was passed.²⁹ This act was in many ways groundbreaking:

- 1 Anyone who had, before or after the passing of the act, belonged to any gang of thugs, either within the Company's territories or outside, should be punished with imprisonment for life with hard labour.
- 2 Anyone punishable according to the above could be tried at any court, regardless of the jurisdiction under which he fell.
- 3 In trials of thuggee, the *fatwa* of the law officer was no longer required.³⁰

In this manner the attempts made by Smith to expand the scope of operations and the problem of relying on approvers were resolved with one stroke. The act was a sort of a catchall measure aimed at the prisoners

against whom no specific charge could be pressed, but whom it was nonetheless found necessary to convict. Association with thugs, which the Government in 1833 had specifically stated not to be sufficient grounds for conviction, now became sufficient by law, thus making circumstantial evidence superfluous. The act was not really important within the Non-Regulation Territories where Smith had for years had almost discretionary powers of judgement. The crucial point was that, as Smith had repeatedly asked for, this was now extended to be applicable within the regulation provinces as well. The procedures, originally based on the absence of regulations, which had facilitated the easy conviction of thugs, were now introduced in the regulation provinces. Doing away with the *fatwa* was merely one more step to rid the judicial regulations of its Muslim aspects and had little practical influence. The annulment of jurisdiction, however, enabled the conviction of thugs anywhere in India, regardless of their residence or where the crime had taken place.

Crucially, the act made no attempt to define what was actually meant by the word 'thug' and the legal ambiguity enabled the authorities to persecute any persons or communities by simply labelling them as thugs. 'Thug' became a legal umbrella-term. The discovery of river-thugs led to the passing of the act, but soon dathura-thugs, Megpunna-thugs and jogis attracted the attention of Sleeman and his officers. By 1836 the organised thug gangs that could be traced back to Sindouse had practically ceased to exist and it seems likely that the act was used primarily in cases against the 'new' categories of thugs. The act itself was passed too late to have any real influence on the thuggee campaign proper and rather it facilitated the conviction of disparate groups and individuals involved in crimes of poisoning and the like. The criminal court in the Bombay Presidency, which had earlier criticised the procedural aspects of the thuggee campaign, also criticised the act, as did others within the administration, which led to minor but ultimately non-consequential amendments.³¹

There certainly was criticism of the various measures introduced in the course of the operations against thuggee, but by and large it had no effect.³² In 1838 the task of putting down dacoity was added to Sleeman's responsibilities, as he was made General Superintendent of the Thagi and Dakaiti Department. In the same year, the School of Industry was opened in Jabalpur to teach the approvers and their sons weaving and other 'honest' skills, but unlike other facilities of correction, the thugs could never be fully reformed in the eyes of the authorities.³³ The approvers accordingly spent the rest of their lives confined and old thug prisoners were paraded and made to restage their former deeds to thrill the

occasional Western tourists.³⁴ Between 1826 and 1835, a total of 1562 thugs had been tried; 382 had been sentenced to death, 909 to transportation, 77 to imprisonment for life, 21 were held against security, 71 had received limited sentences of imprisonment, 21 had been acquitted, 11 had escaped, 31 had died, and 49 had been made approvers.³⁵

In 1839, Sleeman declared that thuggee as an organised association had been effectively destroyed and even though some cases occasionally occurred in the course of the following decades, the thuggee campaign was over.³⁶ When Sleeman declared that thuggee had been eradicated, it was in part due to a change in the legal terminology and policies of the British Government. Being the ultimate authority on thuggee, Sleeman could decide when thuggee had ceased to pose a threat to law and order, thereby justifying the long and costly campaign. This also enabled him and his fellow officers to turn to what was now perceived as the more pressing problem of dacoity – yet another category in the vaguely defined colonial nomenclature of indigenous criminality.

15

From Sindouse to Sagar

It should be apparent from the preceding chapters that the account of thuggee usually found within the colonial tradition, and beyond, is only loosely based on the historical records. Sleeman did not discover thuggee in 1829, he did not single-handedly convince the Government to mount the thuggee campaign, nor did he alone unravel the murderous fraternity or even suggest the necessary measures to obtain that goal. The use of approvers and rewards were the traditional means of apprehending criminals and they were used before 1809 and in connection with thuggee well before 1829. Information concerning thugs, such as Wright's report, was widely circulated as early as 1810, information from approvers was exchanged between the districts and the idea of an official list or register of suspected thugs was proposed by Moodie in 1824. While it cannot be denied that Sleeman's personal engagement shaped the thuggee campaign, as well as the colonial representation of thuggee, any account of thuggee that makes no mention of Perry, Halhed, Shakespeare and Stockwell can hardly be considered comprehensive.

The British did not invent or coin the term 'thug' and the pre-colonial material suggests that in several instances the usage of the word was practically identical to that of the nineteenth century. Thuggee, though, was not an ancient practice and even if there were people called thugs in thirteenth-century Delhi, the extant records do not allow us to talk of the existence of the phenomenon prior to the seventeenth century. A number of indigenous and early European accounts from the seventeenth century, however, do contain the key elements of deception and strangling of travellers long before the colonial stereotype of thuggee came into existence. Consequently thuggee cannot simply be reduced to a colonial construction.

It is the claim of this book that the thugs were, in the words of Halhed, 'no more than a species of robber'. That is to say, they are best understood in the context of banditry rather than some vague notion of a religious sect or caste-like entity. In the study of Sindouse I have attempted to demystify thuggee and instead naturalise the phenomenon in a concrete socio-economic, political, religious and historical context. Sindouse was situated in a poor, politically turbulent, inaccessible border-area with insufficient agriculture and the prevalence of banditry in such an area is virtually given. The martial ethos of the landowning Rajput elites in this locality moreover provided the moral and ritual framework within which the thugs sought to inscribe themselves. The 1797 tax list suggests that the thugs in Sindouse and the surrounding area were a distinct category and that they were regarded as an asset on all levels of the indigenous administration. It was a common aspect of the local power structure that the *zamindars* entertained armed retainers and while some had *kazaks* in their pay, others had thugs. This type of patronage was completely institutionalised and worked to the benefit of both the *zamindars* and the thugs. The military designations used by the *zamindars* and villagers to describe the thugs shows that they were considered as mercenaries or retainers. The thugs themselves used the word 'naukari' or 'service' to describe their profession; again implying that it was a common part of village life and a socially acceptable livelihood. The employment of marauders on all levels of the power hierarchy was a basic part of the process of state-building in India during this period and accordingly thuggee was part of a much larger phenomenon.

Thuggee did not constitute a caste-like entity in Sindouse or elsewhere, and even within small tight-knit groups it completely lacked any social or religious homogeneity. The notion of *bhaibandh* or 'brotherhood' appropriately encompasses the sense of affinity existing among the loose and overlapping networks of thug gangs based on kin and accredited kinship. In their myths of origin, the thugs were part of the '84 tribes' but the material also corroborates the actual existence of links between various thug-gangs as well as various communities of what I have described as an itinerant underworld. The notion of an underworld need not encompass a counter-society that is always and fully excluded from 'law-abiding' sedentary society, and I have used it to describe the loose-knit and overlapping networks of people who sometimes engaged in crimes of varying sorts, including thuggee, and whose identities cannot necessarily be narrowed down to either itinerant or sedentary. One of the defining characteristics of the itinerant underworld was the extensive use of slang, but its usage was never limited to criminal activities alone. Thus the

'Ramasee' of the thugs was also employed by traders, jugglers and peddlers which implies a rather less secret and much larger network of people travelling on the roads of India.

The incentive for committing murder and robbing in the manner of thugs was almost certainly profane and though some of the thugs' practices did aim to confer a certain degree of ritual legitimacy upon their acts, the basic motive was economic gain. The pursuit of honour was a central factor, but cannot ultimately be separated from the basic needs of food and money. The *modus operandi* of the thugs varied according to circumstances and was determined by contingencies and practical reasoning, and had no more than a passing semblance of ritualised human sacrifice. The importance thugs attached to omens and observances was not very different from common Indian practices or among other types of criminals, and it is only in the interviews that the rules, rituals and religious beliefs of the thugs were attributed a central significance.

The version of thuggee that Sleeman and Paton eagerly recorded was mainly that of 'hereditary' thugs, and accordingly not representative of all people who engaged in thuggee. The colonial stereotype was based upon the approver accounts, but the approvers were also refashioning themselves in the context of their imprisonment, and the colonial knowledge that was produced during the interviews was therefore the result of convergent strategies. Like most other Indian criminals, the thugs had a goddess as their tutelary deity, and as such made offerings to her prior to their excursions and ate consecrated sugar in her honour. The thugs perceived thuggee as being sanctioned by the goddess, but this does not mean that the murders and robberies were carried out for an explicitly religious purpose. The religious traits in thuggee were quite common, but during the early period the British were dealing with the phenomenon in terms of banditry and never questioned the prisoners as to their religious beliefs. By the early 1830s, when Sleeman was making a career for himself by sensationalising thuggee, the religious elements were brought to the fore and hugely exaggerated to serve his agenda.

In conclusion, I find it safe to assert that travellers *were* strangled and plundered by bands of thugs and that thuggee *was* a recognisable and longstanding phenomenon predating British colonial rule. Thuggee was a type of crime and not a type of criminal, in the sense that there was not a single representative archetypical thug – as opposed to Hobsbawm's notion of the social bandit. Although the concept of 'hereditary criminality' in the literal sense no longer has any credence, some of the thugs from Sindouse did perceive themselves to be 'hereditary'. They claimed to be following the traditional profession of their forefathers,

which held for them a certain status, entailed a number rules and omens to be observed, and had its own rituals, observances and lore. At the same time we also encounter thugs like Ghulam Hussain, whom I have described as an ‘occasional’ thug, that is the men for whom thuggee was only one way of obtaining a livelihood and who spend years cultivating land or in someone’s service until necessity or chance forced them back on the roads. Covered by the categories of ‘hereditary’ and ‘occasional’ thugs we find *zamindars*, soldiers, peasants, yogis, servants and slaves, who might or might not at different times acknowledge being thugs. Being a thug was not a fixed identity and thuggee was not an unchangeable practice, but varied depending on the circumstances. Any attempt at understanding and explaining thuggee would have to take account of the specific spatial and temporal context in which it emerged and occurred. In that regard I fully endorse Sherwood’s remark:

The habits and proceedings of the *P'hánsigárs* it is reasonable to conclude have been modified and varied by different circumstances and events of a local or political nature in the several states infested by them, in some places approximating more than in others to the foregoing description ... It is also not unreasonable to suppose that they may occasionally act in concert with other classes of delinquents; and that their proceedings may sometimes be of a mixed nature, partaking of the peculiarities of those with whom they may be in league.¹

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The initial ‘discovery’ of thuggee in Northern India happened in the Ceded and Conquered Provinces, which had only just been taken over by the Company, and where law and order was being imposed at the point of the bayonet. There was always a general consensus as to the threat posed by banditry, including thuggee, and because of the connection with the *zamindars* and landed interests, it had the potential of turning into armed resistance – as was the case with Sindouse. The very existence of thuggee was seen as a blemish upon British rule in India – glaring proof that ‘rule of law’ had not been established. As far as the measures implemented to combat thuggee are concerned, however, there were deep conflicts within the Company’s administration as exemplified by the disagreements between Perry and the Nizamat Adalat. The early operations against the thugs were almost exclusively based on local initiatives as was the drive for legal innovations, but the dichotomy between the strategies of the magistrates and the courts led

to the failure of these measures. The driving force behind the early initiatives to suppress thuggee came from the lower parts of the administration, that is local officials like the magistrates, and not from the Government. It was a central aspect of the colonial perception of certain types of indigenous criminality that the existing legal regulations were insufficient and the lack of witnesses and circumstantial evidence in cases of thuggee seemed to confirm this. Both in the Ceded and Conquered Provinces and in the Madras presidency, hundreds of thugs or *phansigars* were arrested during the two decades preceding 1826, but the prisoners were inevitably released by the Courts of Circuit or the Nizam Adalat. This opened up the possibility for various extra-legal measures, and made lower-level officials like Perry resort to keeping suspected thugs detained against security for indefinite periods of time.

The proceedings of the Nizam Adalat shows that while the judges did not consider the testimony of thug approvers sufficient for conviction, the approver's general account of thuggee was believed. This can in part be explained with reference to the judges' prejudice against Muslim law, and it seems that the judges deliberately made rulings contrary to those of the magistrates whom they perceived as transgressing their authority and being in breach of the regulations. Thus the early approver testimonies were not disbelieved as such, but on procedural grounds regarded as insufficient to obtain convictions. At the same time, the wider background of these events should be remembered when considering the response of the Company administration. The first decades of nineteenth-century India were characterised by incessant wars and campaigns, as well as the attempt to establish revenue settlements and introduce law and order. The fear of disruption of trade and revenue determined the way banditry and violent crime was dealt with more generally, and there can be no doubt as to the connection made between revenue settlements and the introduction of law and order. The Company was also subjected to severe criticism during these years over the governance of India, its monopoly of trade was limited in 1813, and the enquiry into the administration of justice the same year can only have added to the Government's awareness of the various legal issues of the criminal law.²

Until 1836, the Government constantly stopped short of intervening in the legal procedures pertaining to the admission of evidence in cases of thuggee. Acknowledging the problems faced by the magistrates, yet unwilling to change the regulations, the Government set out on a course of double standards and *ad hoc* measures to tackle the issue of thuggee. Perry was commended by the Government and given more power at the same time that the Nizam Adalat was admonishing his

conduct regarding suspected thugs. The Government supported the exertions of those engaged in the operations, but shied away from involving itself in the legal issues and hence no thugs were convicted in the decade following 1810. This, of course, did not prevent scores of suspects from being held against security, which was little more than a euphemism for keeping them imprisoned indefinitely without trial. During the 1820s a different strategy was resorted to as captured thugs were handed over to local rulers and chiefs for punishment, and the Government thereby convicted the thugs *by proxy*. The establishment of the Non-Regulation Territories eventually facilitated the successful conviction of thugs in 1826, and from then on the legal comparison between thugs and pirates and the concept of 'paramount authority' paved the way for the thuggee campaign. Concern for the safety of the Company's *sepoys* was also significant, the issue being raised in 1810 and repeated in 1816 and 1824, which reflects the importance of the Indian soldiers, not only in military matters but also as the allies of the British in settling and reforming India.

While the Government remained cautious in terms of the regulations, it did implement a number of preventive measures to put down thuggee, such as the establishment of the Irregular Horse, employment of spies and use of rewards. At the same time, Law was removed from his position, in part because of his failure to resolve the problem of thuggee in Etawah, while Halhed was given powers of Magistrate in several districts, with the specific object of putting an end to dacoity and thuggee. The establishment of the Superintendancy of Police was also a measure directed against thugs and dacoits, predating Swinton and Smith's suggestions by 20 years. Thus thuggee turned out to be a career breaker quite as much as a career maker. Law was removed as Magistrate of Etawah, while Ernst was demoted because of his perceived recalcitrance and scepticism on the subject, and Perry and Halhed advanced their career by appearing resourceful when it came to fighting thuggee. Some officials clearly exploited the Government's concern over thuggee to assume more authority and Sleeman merely continued a trend of opportunism, although it must be said he refined it.

During the early period, thuggee was encountered in the periphery of the Company's possessions and was tied in with wider issues of establishing authority, mainly because of the thug's association with landlords. In that respect, the introduction of revenue settlements seems to have been regarded as far more important than the arrest of thugs. By the late 1820s, the British had substantially expanded their possessions and had agents and residents all over the continent working with the independent

rulers. The general perception of the British presence in India had also changed and the strict administration of revenue land was imbued with a new sense of 'responsibility'. Accordingly, the British were encountering thuggee in a very different way. By the 1820s and 1830s, the British were present in practically all the areas where the thugs operated, which created the appearance of a vast phenomenon, but really reflected the increased ability of the British to monitor thuggee. Perry had been dealing with thugs from either Sindouse or Shekohabad, and thus explained the phenomenon in terms of specific local conditions. He was very conscious of the importance of a mild revenue settlement in Sindouse and recognised the importance of the socio-economic background of the people who became thugs. Later thuggee was encountered in very different places and those involved in the operations of the 1830s generally ignored the locality in which the thugs lived, in part due to the assumption that thuggee was an all-India phenomenon, which would make such considerations meaningless.

The Governorship of Bentinck (1828–35) and the advent of Evangelicalism are often referred to as important factors in the establishment of the thuggee campaign. Yet the operations against thuggee were not initiated as a result of the Government's official policy, but due to pressure from Smith, Swinton and Sleeman. To Bentinck, the abolition of *sati* was a crucial and personal cause, whereas he was much less involved in thuggee and did not establish a department, even if he did allow for the operations to proceed under existing offices. What facilitated the successful conviction of thugs was the existence of the Non-Regulation Territories, which had not been established with operations against thuggee in mind. Until 1835 the Government was generally reluctant to authorise new measures and the operations were made possible only through the ambiguous legal position of Sagar and Narbada. The so-called 'Age of Reform', and the deviation from the non-intervention policy hitherto prevalent, created an atmosphere that was highly receptive to the arguments in favour of the thuggee campaign – but it was not the incentive behind it. The capture of thugs through the 1820s had established the stereotype of thuggee, which simply appears to have had more resonance by the 1830s. Only when the operations had been running for some time, and the stereotype of thuggee had taken hold, did the Government actively adopt the policies called for by Smith and Sleeman – and many others before them. Act XXX of 1836 was at the same time a natural result of the change in the legal discourse, which had happened gradually during the course of the first three decades of the nineteenth century. Minimisation of the influence

of Muslim jurisprudence was constantly sought and the act simply institutionalised what was already common practice in the Non-Regulation Territories.

* * *

The colonial representation of thuggee was much more varied than the concept of the '*thuggee* archive' would seem to imply and in the period preceding Sleeman's publication of *Ramaseeana*, several different perceptions of thuggee gradually emerged. Much of the information the British authorities initially received came from native informants, whether these were *zamindars*, *daroghas*, villagers or suspected thugs. The sequence of events, from the first reports to a more institutionalised perception of the phenomenon, demonstrates that this was not simply a colonial construction. Although thuggee soon became part of the colonial stereotype of indigenous criminality, this was not an unequivocal process. The fact that there were people like Ernst, who did not believe in the existence of thuggee, shows that the British representation of thuggee was not hegemonic. Furthermore, thuggee was not generally represented as a religious practice or as an all-India fraternity until well into the 1820s.

We know that the very first reports of thuggee in Etawah in 1809 were based on information from local informants and therefore to a certain extent may be said to reflect the indigenous perception of the phenomenon. Law was specifically ordered to search for *kazaks* after the first discovery of bodies and, accordingly, the initial British response was not to blame some vague notion of secret assassins. The very first accounts of thuggee described them as having carried out their depredations from time immemorial and with such secrecy that they could not be detected, and it was said that they could never be made to betray their associates. This was soon developed in more detail; lurking in the jungles and desolate places, the thugs in different disguises preyed on travellers, strangling them with a silk cord, which they used with such expertise that nobody could escape, and afterwards the bodies were stabbed with knives and thrown into wells or otherwise hidden. Already in the second account that we have of the thugs, Law described them as a 'detestable race of monsters', 'abominable pests of society' and he also referred to the 'numerous enormities committed by them'. Accordingly, a sensational and almost hysterical terminology was used right from the beginning and this was to remain a key element in the colonial representation of thuggee. This 'knowledge' was part of a wider construction of indigenous criminality, which also included dacoits, *kazaks*, Mewatis

and Budheks and so on. The stereotypes of criminals that entailed a slip from ethnicity to a perceived criminal category were in part indigenous, but were appropriated and given heightened importance by the British. In the event, there is a direct link between the early discussions of the criminality of, for instance, the Budheks *vis-à-vis* the thugs and the later Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 by which thousands of people were criminalised by law.

In 1812 thuggee was seen as the result of corrupt local governance and the refusal of the *zamindars* to agree to a settlement. Perry, Halhed, Shakespeare and Sherwood describe and explain the phenomenon of thuggee in a specific spatial and temporal context without having recourse to the same kind of reductive and prejudiced assertions that later became prevalent. Right from his first report in May 1830, Sleeman consistently emphasised the more exotic and sensational aspects of thuggee and though he may have acted with the best of intentions, his own opportunism and self-serving agenda overshadows this. Thus the information that Sleeman collected from the approvers was, to use a contemporary phrase, 'sexed up' in order to promote a sense of urgency concerning the threat posed by thuggee. But most, if not all, of the elements of Sleeman's stereotype were derived directly from the approvers that he knew and interviewed at length. The captured thugs were trying to legitimise their acts and establish a common identity and in doing so, they provided the British with the substance for the construction of the colonial stereotype. These elements were consciously exploited by Sleeman who tried to present thuggee as a religious practice, which would resonate with the Evangelical sentiments of the day. It appealed directly to the Orientalist beliefs in the superstitious and barbaric nature of Indian religion and culture. But the origin of these narratives has to be kept in mind. And like comparable material from medieval and Early Modern Europe, these documents constitute a unique source for understanding marginalised groups who have left no records of their own.

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I hope to have shown that there was more to Thuggee than merely a colonial stereotype, and even the most opaque documents can yield a surprising amount of information. That thuggee was also an artefact of an Orientalist colonial discourse is clear, but colonial knowledge of thuggee was not hegemonic. Neither Perry, nor Sleeman, or any other British official, produced representations of thuggee within a closed system of self-referential discourse. Accounts of thuggee emerged in the landscape of the Indian badlands within specific historical contexts and

were informed by different beliefs and perceptions, both British and Indian. Colonial knowledge was not simply an inverted mirror-image of the 'Orient' superimposed upon the 'other'. Through dialogue and negotiation, records like the interviews produced meaning, or rather different meanings, and in this respect colonial knowledge was reflective of different voices.

So, do the thugs get to speak after all? Well, yes – if we only care to listen, their voices do reach us, 'strangled, altered, distorted'.³ In fact, the 'subaltern' thugs speak volumes (quite literally). It is the critics who have denied them a voice by reducing the material to a constructed text referring only to itself and signifying little more than colonial stereotypes. It is obvious that we do not have access to the historical reality of events of the past and we cannot ask the thugs about their beliefs and practices. But we can engage with the sources.

Epilogue

When Merchant Ivory in 1988 filmed John Masters' novel *The Deceivers*, an opening sequence not found in the novel was inserted. The new first scene was George Bruce's account of the murder of Lieut. Maunsell, here shown mysteriously assassinated in the middle of the night along with his two orderlies. The subsequent discovery of Maunsell's hidden body by the Sleeman-esque William Savage (played by Pierce Brosnan) heralds the initiation of a passionate personal campaign to unravel the secrets of the thugs as Savage dons a turban and goes native by joining the thugs – getting perilously close to loosing his identity as a good (white) Christian in the process. The fact that Bruce made up the entire incident is, of course, lost as the event is immortalised by Merchant Ivory – the epitome of the romanticised memory of the Raj. Bruce settled for the bare fact of Lieut. Maunsell's murder and turned it into a story of how it was hushed up and even lied about by an East India Company that refused to accept its moral responsibilities towards its Indian subjects and ignored the existence of thuggee. A narrative sleight of hand that later allows Bruce to introduce his hero, Sleeman, as the honest and zealous official who revealed the hidden horrors of thuggee, thereby forcing a complacent British administration to take action (as Savage does in the novel and movie). The implication of Bruce's account is that prior to the thuggee campaign of the 1830s, the British were blissfully unaware of the thug's practices and their wholesale slaughter of thousands of Indian travellers. Replete with hints of secret practices, conspiracies and cover-ups, Bruce's account of the murder of Lieut. Maunsell is completely at odds with the primary sources. The 'secret custom' that Bruce alludes to reflects the conventional supposition that thuggee was a religious practice governed by rules and rituals and that the thugs murdered as a means of worship of the Hindu Goddess Kali. The 'violation' supposedly

refers to the prohibition among thugs of murdering Europeans – invented by Bruce, as it were.

* * *

In Sindouse the murder of Lieut. Maunsell is still remembered, as are the thugs.¹ There is not only one local tradition about the past of the village, but different versions of various stories, most of which are linked to specific localities or persons. There is an old *pucka* well in Sindouse, which is still in use and which is commonly known as the ‘foreigner’s well’. It was actually built in 1813 using the money that Tejun received as a reward for having turned in Laljee after the attack on Halhed. There was one curious anecdote associated with the reward, namely that the British had told Tejun he could have anything he wanted and he had asked to get a black dog. Laljee’s name is instantly recognised as he was a Kachwaha Rajput like the present headman and I was shown several houses, which had belonged to his family.² According to local tradition, Laljee was hanged for murdering a ‘Britisher’. Halhed and Maunsell are collapsed into the same person, namely a proverbially cruel ‘Police Inspector’ who maltreated the people of Sindouse and in the end got what he deserved – a stereotypical figure which harks back to pre-Independence.³ The ‘Police Inspector’ was cruel and always beat and abused the villagers and so Laljee killed him. In the words of one of my informants, Laljee was a ‘freedom fighter – not criminal!’. Hence the mere fact that Laljee had historically opposed the British turned him into a proto-nationalist. I was also told that a headman of Sindouse was hanged by the British for sedition during the Second World War and either this refers to Laljee or, as is very likely, events of the early nineteenth and the twentieth centuries are conflated.

During my second visit I tried to avoid introducing the subject of the thugs, so as not to forcefully elicit specific information, but the English-teacher did so himself as I was being shown around Sindouse: the *thags* were said to be a caste who had inhabited the area before the Kachwaha Rajputs settled there, and the *thags* cheated people.⁴ This was, in other words, a literal perception of the word *thag*, combined with the notion of *thags* as a distinct group who lived in Sindouse. One of the younger men, however, stated that the *thags* robbed people travelling through the area and that the Rajputs commanded these robbers – which is, of course, closer to my interpretation of the historical sources. At one point the teacher and the younger man argued whether the Kachwaha Rajputs had driven out the thugs or another Rajput clan, the Parihars (after whom the area is named). Accordingly, the thugs have been incorporated in the local



Figure 16 The headman and elders of Sindouse, 2004 (photo: KAW)

tradition in the context of the traditional clan feuds and the stories of how the Rajputs expelled the original tribal inhabitants of the land – very similar to what the Sindouse thugs told Sleeman in the 1830s.⁵

One old man in Sindouse told me that the dacoits used to rob houses and were ‘baghis’ or noble rebels, but today they kidnapped people – and so there seems to be a clear distinction between a respectable past and a corrupted present in terms of the bandit tradition. The villagers were also keen to impress upon me that the area around Sindouse was different from Chambal Valley and they tried to distance themselves from this largely negative image of the region: ‘In Sindouse nobody is daku – dakus in the surrounding area.’ When I made inquiries regarding the thugs, the reply was inevitably that they had lived in the jungles around Sindouse, outside the actual village. Interestingly, this view is reminiscent of a comment made by the thug Hurree Sing in the 1830s: ‘People knew not what Thuggee was, nor what kind of people Thugs were. Travellers were frequently reported to have been murdered by robbers, but people thought the robbers must be in the jungle; and never dreamed that they were murdered by the men they saw every day about them.’⁶ This sense of estrangement in terms of local robbers is hard to reconcile with the notion of the social bandit. Thus it seems that while Laljee has been completely separated from the thugs on the conceptual level, and is hailed as

an anachronistic patriot, the thugs have been 'othered' in the local tradition and are said to be a group which was expelled from Sindouse by the predecessors of the current Rajput lineages.

The ravines between Bindowa and Murnae are to this day referred to as the 'gora jungle', which may be translated as the 'white man's jungle' and up till the time of Independence, an annual *puja* was held at a small shrine in honour of Lieut. Maunsell. It is still possible to trace the route of Halhed's party on the night of 22 October 1812, from the high ground of Bindowa, and along the twisted paths through the ravines, to the lower ground of Murnae. It is a beautiful but very rough terrain and at times quite impassable. The moment one enters the labyrinthine ravines, the steep sandy banks and scrubs cut off the view and all sense of direction is soon lost. The place is of course perfectly suited for ambush, with extremely low visibility extending only as far as the next bend of the tortuous path. In the near-dark following the attack it must have been almost impossible for Halhed and the remaining survivors of his party to find their way back. Thus the ravines of Sindouse may have provided the final element of confusion to the sequence of misunderstandings that eventually converged in the event of Lieut. Maunsell's death. The border-line between the British and Maratha territories, which Halhed wanted to inspect on that fateful evening, is still there, but now marks the demarcation between Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh.

In spite of Popham's exertions to erase all traces of Murnae in 1812, there is a new village of that name but it is extremely poor and with very few inhabitants. In Sindouse some villagers warned me off going to Murnae, which suggests that its reputation and historical connection with thugs or dacoits has endured. Two different accounts of the murder of Lieut. Maunsell exist in Murnae today: according to the first version Maunsell shot a peacock, which is a sacred animal, and for this (righteous) reason he was killed by the villagers. The second version is somewhat closer to the historical events: the inhabitants of Murnae had not paid revenue for three years and therefore the British sent soldiers to subdue the village and the British officer was subsequently killed. In both versions Murnae was subsequently burned by the British in retaliation for the murder. The latter version is fairly similar to the thugs' description of the burning of Murnae by a French officer at the order of Sindhia around 1800, an event from which Feringheea's name supposedly originated. At the same time, it may simply be a conflation of several events, including the actual attack on Halhed's party, and is in all circumstances reasonably close to how the villagers in 1812 perceived it.

When Stockwell visited Sindouse in 1818, he painted a desolate picture of the area which was in an impoverished state following the expulsion of the thugs.⁷ Little has changed since then and the Sindouse of today is an insignificant village with a population of around 3000, and it is lamented that most of the young people leave for the bigger towns where they can get education and jobs. Because of its location in the middle of the bandit badlands, the Indian Government has little interest in investing in or improving the area around Sindouse. The vulnerable situation of the villagers may be gauged by the fact that they asked me to help them shoot the wild deer that enters their fields and ruins their crops at night. The villagers themselves do not dare venturing into the ravines after dark and they did not even have a gun for hunting.⁸

In 2004 my visit to Sindouse proved an exasperating ordeal. I needed someone familiar with rural Uttar Pradesh to accompany me to act as an interpreter, and even though I was offering a substantial fee, all my contacts fell through. I was dragging my feet in Delhi getting ever more desperate as the date for my departure from India came closer. My half-hearted attempt at research in the National Archives was only briefly diverted by the news of the killing of K. M. Veerappan, the infamous dacoit of Southern India, and the subsequent spate of headlines and articles. Then on 29 October 2004, 13 peasants were massacred by dacoits at Bhanwarpura village, west of Gwalior (Madhya Pradesh); the largest number of dacoit killings in a single instance since Phoolan Devi shot 24 villagers at Behmai in 1981. Sindouse, which is now quite safe, is located more than 100 miles from Bhanwarpura, and in a different state altogether. However, such is the power of the myth of dacoits in Chambal Valley that what had been difficult before, now became impossible – I could find no one willing to go to Sindouse. In the end I had to go on my own and had to rely on the old English-teacher of Sindouse for my interviews. The villagers laughed when I told them that people were afraid to come there and they assured me that I was quite safe.⁹ When I asked about Phoolan Devi, who is reported to have been hiding in Sindouse in the early 1980s, my interlocutors' point of reference was Shekhar Kapur's 1994-movie *Bandit Queen*.¹⁰ Thus in a remote area, for centuries associated with banditry, local knowledge of a famous female dacoit is derived from a European-produced movie. So much for the existence of the Robin Hood-figure in the rural popular imagination.

Notes

Preface

1. George Bruce, *The Stranglers – The cult of thuggee and its overthrow in British India* (London: Longmans, 1968), p. 1–2.
2. A note on words and spelling: this book is based on primary sources that for a large part have not been utilised before and, accordingly, I have quoted extensively from these ‘new’ sources. I have retained the original spelling in these quotations, but otherwise I have used a contemporary spelling of places and names, apart from those with specific colonial connotations. In terms of terminology, it should be noted that thuggee is what a thug practised, just as a robber commits robbery. I am using the term ‘thug’ to describe the people who engaged in the murder and plunder of travellers, without any implication of a religious practice or a cult of hereditary assassins. The actual implication and meaning(s) of the term, will emerge as the text progresses.
3. See Martine van Woerkens, *The Strangled Traveler: Colonial Imaginings and the Thugs of India* (Paris, 1995, English edition Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002); Kevin Rushby, *Children of Kali* (London: Constable); and Mike Dash, *Thug – The True Story of India’s Murderous Religion* (London: Granta, 2005). Van Woerkens and Dash both provide very detailed and well-researched accounts of thuggee, while the standard academic work on the subject remains Radhika Singha, *A Despotism of Law: Crime & Justice in Early Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), ch. 5.

Introduction

1. W. H. Sleeman, *Ramaseeana, or a vocabulary of the peculiar language used by the Thugs, with an introduction and appendix, descriptive of the system pursued by that fraternity and of the measures which have been adopted by the Supreme Government of India for its suppression* (Calcutta: Military Orphan Press, 1836). E. Thornton unscrupulously copied Sleeman’s work in his own *Illustrations of the history and practices of the Thugs and Notices of Some of the Proceedings of the Government of India for the Suppression of the Crime of Thuggee* (London, W. H. Allen, 1837, reprint New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 2000), while a pirated American version of *Ramaseeana* was published in 1839 entitled *History of the Thugs or Phansigars of India*.
2. P. Meadows Taylor *Confessions of a Thug* (London: 1839, reprint Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). Most of Taylor’s material was derived from Sleeman, but the former made the thugs known to a much wider audience through his novel.
3. I shall return to this point further below.
4. See, for instance, Fanny Parkes, *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in search of the Picturesque* (London: Pelham Richardson, 1850, reprint Karachi: Oxford

- University Press, 1975), vol. I, pp. 151–8 and 201–2. Skulls of thugs were also made the subject of study by phrenologists, see H. H. Spry, 'Some accounts of the gang murderers of Central India, commonly called thugs; accompanying the Skulls of Seven of them', *The Phrenological Journal and Miscellany*, 8 (March, 1834): 511–24; and R. Cox 'Remarks on the Skulls and Character of the Thugs', *ibid.*, 524–30.
5. James Hutton, *A Popular Account of the Thugs and Dacoits, the Hereditary Garotters and Gang-Robbers of India* (London: W. H. Allen, 1857), p. 97.
 6. J. W. Kaye, *The Administration of the East India Company: A History of the Indian Progress* (London, 1853), pp. 354–79.
 7. R. Russell and Hira Lal, *Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India* (London: Macmillan, 1916), pp. 558–87.
 8. Much has been written on the construction of caste in colonial India, see, for instance, the work of Bernard Cohn, or Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).
 9. James Sleeman, *Thug or a Million Murders* (London: S. Low, Marston, 1933), p. 18.
 10. *Ibid.*, p. 5.
 11. Sir Francis Taker, *The Yellow Scarf* (London: J. M. Dent and Sons, 1961), and Bruce.
 12. Jan Morris, *Heaven's Command – An Imperial Progress*, 2nd edn (London: Faber & Faber, 1998), pp. 72, 77 and 81.
 13. More recently the thugs have been recast as terrorists and thuggee compared to Al-Qaeda, see David C. Rapoport 'Fear and Trembling: Terrorism in Three Religious Traditions', *The American Political Science Review*, 78 (1984) 658–77; and 'Ameer Ali – Thug', http://www.roadtopeace.org/terrorism/Terrorists/ameer_ali.html (accessed 13/07/2003).
 14. Benedicte Hjejle, *The Social Legislation of the East India Company, with regard to Sati, Slavery, Thagi and Infanticide, 1772–1858* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Oxford, 1958).
 15. See also Kim Wagner, 'The Deconstructed Stranglers – a Reassessment of Thuggee', *MAS*, 38, 4 (2004): 931–63.
 16. Hiralal Gupta, 'A Critical Study of the Thugs and their Activities', *Journal of Indian History*, 37, 2 (Aug. 1959): 167–77.
 17. See Stewart N. Gordon 'Scarf and Sword: Thugs, marauders, and state-formation in eighteenth-century Malwa', *IESHR*, 4, 6 (1969): 403–29; p. 429. Mention should also be made of the collection of articles published in Anand A. Yand (ed.), *Crime and Criminality in British India*, Association for Asian Studies monograph, 42 (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985).
 18. See Sandria B. Freitag, 'Crime in the Social Order of Colonial North India', *MAS*, 25, 2 (1991): 227–61; and C. A. Bayly *Empire and Information: Intelligence gathering and social communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1996).
 19. Singha (1998).
 20. See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (London: Penguin, 1978).
 21. Parama Roy, *Indian Traffic: Identities in Question in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 41–70; Amal Chatterjee, *Representations of India, 1740–1840: The Creation of India in the Colonial Imagination* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1998), 125–44; and Máire ní Fhlathúin,

- 'The Travels of M. de Thévenot through the Thug Archive', *JRAS*, 2, 1 (April 2001): 31–42. Two very recent articles are in a similar vein: Mark Brown's 'Crime, Governance and the Company Raj. The Discovery of Thuggee', *The British Journal of Criminology*, 42 (2002): 77–95; and Tom Lloyd, 'Acting in the "Theatre of Anarchy": The "Anti-Thug Campaign" and Elaborations of Colonial Rule in Early Nineteenth-Century India', *Edinburgh Papers in South Asian Studies*, 19 (2006).
22. Chatterjee, *Representations of India*, p. 4. This is a quote from Kate Teltscher, *India Inscribed: European and British writing on India, 1600–1800* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 5. See also Said, *Orientalism*, p. 5.
 23. Satadru Sen, *Disciplining Punishment: Colonialism and Convict Society in the Andaman Islands* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000).
 24. Simon Sharma, *A History of Britain 3: 1776–2000 The Fate of Empire* (London: BBC, 2002), p. 211. See also Rajnaryan Chandvarkar in *Imperial Power and Popular Politics: Class, Resistance and the State in India, c. 1850–1950* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), who talks of 'the invention of "thuggee"', p. 226.
 25. While I do not accept the notion of 'truth', I do insist that there is a social reality of India, which, however, can only be examined through representations, and representations are by definition subjective and discursive and do not provide any direct access to the past.
 26. Nicholas Thomas, *Out of Time – History and Evolution in Anthropological Discourse, Second Edition* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996), p. 4.
 27. The wording is Carlo Ginzburg's.
 28. The notion of the 'thuggee archive' was conceived by Parama Roy and consists of the published works of Sleeman and the vast range of derivative secondary literature, which she claims is the embodiment of the British discourse on thuggee, see Roy, p. 41.
 29. Marc Bloch, *The Historian's Craft* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1992), p. 77.
 30. Dirk H. A. Kolff *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy: The ethnohistory of the military labour market in Hindustan, 1450–1850* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), pp. 183–4.
 31. I will, in the words of Arthur Marwick, be 'using one episode in one place to draw out wider conclusions'. Arthur Marwick, *The New Nature of History* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001), p. 125.
 32. I would like to point out that this book does not make any claims to be an exhaustive account of thuggee or of the British operations against the thugs. I shall be dealing almost exclusively with the phenomenon of thuggee in the Doab, only briefly mentioning its initial discovery in the Madras Presidency and elsewhere.
 33. Dacoits are gang-robbers or bandits, see further below.
 34. See, for instance, Paul Winther, *Chambel River Dacoity: A Study of Banditry in North Central India* (unpublished PhD thesis, Cornell University, 1972).
 35. See also Florike Egmond's brilliant *Underworlds: Organized crime in the Netherlands, 1650–1800* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993); and P. Billingsley, *Bandits in Republican China* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1988).
 36. See E. Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1969, reprint London: Abacus, 2000); and A. Blok, 'The Peasant and the Brigand: Social

- Banditry Reconsidered', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 14 (1972): 494–503, and *Honour and Violence* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001).
37. See Blok (2001), especially p. 21.
 38. According to Blok: 'Hobsbawm's comparative treatment of banditry overemphasizes the element of social protest while at the same time obscuring the significance of the links which bandits maintain with established power-holders. In future research on the subject, the relative importance of both elements must be accounted for.' The present book heeds this call in examining thuggee, a type of banditry that Blok incidentally also referred to, see Blok (2001), pp. 22 and 17.
 39. Egmond, *Underworlds*, p. 19.

1 Engaging the Colonial 'Archives of Repression'

1. Edward Muir and Guido Ruggiero (eds), *History from Crime, Selections from Quaderni Storici* (London: The John Hopkins University Press, 1994), p. 228.
2. The uncertainties introduced through the translation of depositions, from Hindi, Urdu and Persian to English, should certainly be recognised as a factor when using the records relating to thuggee.
3. Between 1826 and 1847 some 4224 persons were convicted as thugs, of whom a considerable number gave detailed accounts of their practices etc., see W. H. Sleeman *Report on Budhuk alias Bagree Dacoits and other Gang Robbers by Hereditary Profession* (Calcutta: Bengal Military Orphan Press, 1849), pp. 363–7.
4. See Robert Darnton, *The Great Cat Massacre and Other Episodes in French Cultural History* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), pp. 5 and 262.
5. Muir and Ruggiero, p. 231.
6. Carlo Ginzburg, *The Cheese and the Worms* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1980).
7. E. Le Roy Ladurie *Montaillou* (London: Penguin Books, 1980, reprint 1990).
8. Ginzburg 'The Inquisitor as Anthropologist', *Myths, Emblems and Clues* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1986), p. 157. I do take account of the criticism which has been directed against Ginzburg and Ladurie's work, but that does not in my opinion deflect from the basic value of their methodological contributions as far as the use of judicial records is concerned.
9. The category of the approver derives from old English law, and is defined as a criminal who, in return for his own pardon, testifies to the complicity of his accomplices in the crime in question. The role of the approver is thus to *approve* the identity and involvement of his fellow accomplices.
10. See Peter Burke, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe* 2nd edn (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 75. The same process is described in almost identical terms by modern criminologists, see A. Trankell, *Reliability of Evidence* (Stockholm: Beckmans, 1972), p. 27.
11. See also Shahid Amin, 'Approver's Testimony, Judicial Discourse: The Case of Chauri Chaura', in *Subaltern Studies*, 5 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987): 166–202.
12. See, for instance, Appendix O in *Ramaseeana*, vol. II, pp. 154–224.
13. *Ibid.*, vol. I, pp. 141–270.

14. These interviews differ from the depositions in that they had no legal status and were not explicitly part of the operations to suppress thuggee.
15. *Ibid.*, pp. 65–6. Apart from Sleeman subsequently publishing his interviews, Paton's work was clearly intended for publication, see 'Collections on Thuggee and Dacoitee, by Capt. James Paton', Add. 41300, BL, pp. 4–6. Henceforth referred to as 'Paton Collections'. It should be noted that the numbering of the pages in this collection is rather haphazard.
16. Egmond *In Bad Company*, p. 15.
17. *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, p. 175.
18. See Thomas, p. 111.
19. The *benandanti* believed that they were fighting witches and malevolent forces in order to protect the peasants' crops and children. However, during the inquisition's investigation of the *benandanti*, which lasted more than 50 years, they gradually adopted the clerical perception of themselves and in the end acknowledged being witches, see Ginzburg, *The Night Battles* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1983).
20. Carlo Ginzburg, *Ecstasies: Deciphering the Witches' Sabbath* (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1990), p. 10. It should be pointed out that I do *not* accept the general arguments of this book, such as the existence of a pan-European substrata of unconscious beliefs.
21. Marchall Sahlins, *How Natives Think: About Captain Cook, for Example* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), p. 43.
22. See, for instance, R. C. Sherwood, 'Of the Murderers Called P'hansigars', *Asiatic Researches*, 13 (1820): 250–81 ('Sherwood'); and J. Shakespeare, 'Observations regarding Badheks and T'hegs', *ibid.*: 282–92, ('Shakespeare article').
23. See Trial of four thugs, 9–17 Nov. 1810, in Brooke to Dowdeswell, 21 Dec. 1810, BCJP, P/130/27, 18 Jan. 1811 (no. 46), Asian, Pacific and African Collections (APAC), British Library ('Hussain Trial'); and Deposition of Ameer Alee, 14 April 1832, BC, F/4/1406, APAC ('Ameer Alee').

2 Thuggee in Pre-Colonial India

1. See Henry Yule and A.C. Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson, The Anglo-Indian Dictionary* (London, 1886, reprint by Hertfordshire: Wordsworth Reference, 1996), p. 915.
2. See J. B. Gilchrist, *A Dictionary, English and Hindoostanee* (Calcutta: Stuart & Cooper, 1787); and Robert Drummond, *Illustrations of the Grammatical Parts of the Guzerattee, Mahratta & English Languages* (Bombay: Courier Press, 1808).
3. Wilhelm Halbfass, *Studies in Kumarila and Sankara*, Studien zur Indologie und Iranistik, vol. 9 (Reinbek: Verlag für Orientalistische Fachpublikationen, 1983), pp. 7, 13 and 24 (n. 61).
4. Wilhelm Halbfass, *Tradition and Reflection: Explorations in Indian Thought* (New York: State University of New York Press, 1991), pp. 103–7 (pp. 103–4).
5. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
6. Paul Dundas, 'Some Jain References to the Thags and the Samsaramocaka', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 115 (1995): 281–4 (p. 282).
7. *Ibid.*, p. 283.

8. G. Pfirrmann *Religiöser Charakter und Organisation der Thag-Brüderschaften* (unpublished doctoral thesis, Tübingen, 1970), pp. 30–1.
9. This is relevant only if one presupposes that thuggee was a type of religious worship involving human sacrifice.
10. See, for instance, Toker, p. 63; and Bruce, p. 11.
11. Quoted in Charlotte Vaudeville, *A Weaver Named Kabir* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993) p. 159, see also pp. 245, 253 and 273–4.
12. Quoted in Kenneth E. Bryant, *Poems to the Child-God: Structures and Strategies in the Poetry of Surdas* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), p. 196 (thanks to Norbert Peabody for bringing this poem to my attention).
13. See W. H. McLeod, *Early Sikh Tradition: A Study of the Janam-sakhis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1980), pp. 122 and 180.
14. See M. Bloomfield, 'On False Ascetics and Nuns in Hindu Fiction', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 45 (1924): 202–42.
15. This story, 'the Robbers and the Funeral Pyre', is from the B40-Janamsakhi, which dates from 1733.
16. See S. P. Sangar, *Crime and Punishment in Mughal India* (New Delhi: Reliance Publishing House, 1967), especially pp. 41–56.
17. *Ibid.*, pp. 41–70.
18. Jean de Thévenot, *Voyages de Mr. De Thévenot contenant la relation de l'Indostan, des nouveaux Mongols & des autres Peuples & Pays des Indes* (Paris, 1684).
19. The quote is taken from the English version of the book, *The Travels of M. de Thévenot into the Levant* (London, 1687), vol. III, p. 41.
20. John Fryer, *A New Account of East India and Persia, in eight letters, being nine years travels, begun 1672, and Finished 1681* (London, 1698), p. 97.
21. It is worth noticing that an Indian news-writer around 1680 referred to 'highway robbers known in Hindi as *thags*', quoted by I. Habib in *The Agrarian System of Mughal India*, 2nd edn (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 75 (n. 40) and 478 (n. 96).
22. 'Tazir': discretionary punishment aimed at reforming the prisoner.
23. 'Qazi': Islamic judge.
24. Quoted in Jadunath Sarkar, *Mughal Administration*, 3rd edn (Calcutta, 1935), p. 85, translation of terms is mine. See Singha's discussion of the *farman*, Singha (1998), pp. 13–16.
25. See Singha (1998), p. 189.
26. Sangar, p. 45.
27. See also Singha (1998), p. 9.
28. 'Grasia': military Chieftains who illegally collected revenue in villages; i.e. extortion in exchange for protection; 'dhathura': the strongly hallucinogenic seeds of thorn apple (*Datura stramonium*); 'bhang': a strongly intoxicating drink made from cannabis and sometimes opium; 'nux vomica': a tree the fruits and seeds of which contains strychnine.
29. Sarkar, p. 85.
30. J. Forbes, *Oriental Memoirs: Selected and abridged from letters written during seventeen years residence in India* (London: White, Cochrane, 1813), vol. IV, pp. 12–13.
31. *Ibid.*
32. For the meaning of *phansigar* and thug, see also further below.

33. Drummond's work dates from before the 'discovery' of either the phansigars or thugs had been publicised and accordingly this definition of the term must be indigenous in origin.
34. See, for instance, R. C. Sharma, 'Aspects of Public Administration in Northern India in the first half of the Seventeenth Century', *Journal of Indian History*, 54 (April 1979): 107–15.
35. The emperor Akbar is supposed to have persecuted thugs in Etawah in the late sixteenth century but it has not been possible to trace the provenience of this statement, see F. C. Smith to Swinton, 25 June 1832, BC, F/4/1406/55521, APAC.

3 The Discovery of Thuggee, Etawah 1809

1. For this and the following, see Singha (1998); see also Sleeman, *Rambles and recollections of an Indian official* (London, 1844, reprint New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1995); and Percival Griffiths, *To Guard My People: The History of the Indian Police* (London: Benn, 1971).
2. See Singha (1998), ch. I.
3. See Yule and Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*, p. 290.
4. 'Plan for the administration of justice', 15 Aug. 1772, quoted in Jörg Fisch, *Cheap Lives and Dear Limbs: The British Transformation of the Bengal Criminal Law, 1769–1817*, Beiträge zur Südasiensforschung band 79 (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1983), pp. 32–7.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 33.
6. Cunningham to Wellesley, 28 Oct. 1802, Home Dept (Foreign & Political), 31 Mar. 1803 (no. 18), NAI. See also Meena Bhargava, *State, Society and Ecology: Gorakhpur in Transition, 1750–1830* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1999), pp. 96–7.
7. Gerard to Wellesley, 6 Nov. 1802, Home Dept (Foreign & Political), 31 Mar. 1803 (no. 19), NAI.
8. Gerard to Lumsden, 11 Jan.–28 Feb. 1803, Home Dept (Foreign & Political), 31 Mar. 1803 (no. 23–29), NAI.
9. See, for example, report from CC Benares, 24 Mar. 1806, Home Dept (Foreign & Political), 22 May 1806 (no. 1), NAI.
10. Harrington and Tombelle to Minto, 8 Aug. 1808, BCJP, P/129/42, 12 Aug. 1808 (no. 14), APAC.
11. Dowdeswell to NA, 12 Aug. 1808, BCJP, P/129/42, 12 Aug. 1808 (no. 17), APAC.
12. NA to Minto, 17 Sept. and 24 Oct. 1808, BCJP, P/129/42, 13 Oct. 1808 (no. 54–56), APAC.
13. See Regulation IX of 1808, V/8/18, pp. 293–7, APAC.
14. See Regulation X of 1808, V/8/18, pp. 298–9, APAC, and Bayley to Dowdeswell, 23 Nov. 1808, BCJP, P/129/42, 2 Nov. 1808 (no. 1), APAC.
15. Reg. VI of 1796, V/8/17, pp. 13–14, APAC.
16. Patton to Dowdeswell, 1 Dec. 1808, BCJP, P/129/42, 23 Dec. 1808 (no. 20), APAC.
17. On these groups, see further below.
18. See T. Perry Papers, Add. Mss. 5375, CUL ('Perry Papers').
19. Parry to Law, 24 April 1809, BCJP, P/130/1, 12 Jun. 1809 (no. 43), APAC.
20. *Ibid.*

21. Law to Parry, 10 May 1809, BCJP, P/130/1, 12 Jun. 1809, APAC.
22. CC to Bayley, 25 April 1809, BCJP, P/129/58, 19 May 1809 (no. 12), APAC.
23. *Ibid.*
24. See Bayly (1996).
25. Law to Dowdeswell, 25 July 1809, BCJP, P/130/3, 11 Aug. 1809 (no. 19), APAC.
26. Dowdeswell to Law, 11 Aug. 1809, BCJP, P/130/3, 11 Aug. 1809 (enclosed in no. 19), APAC.
27. Burges to Shakespeare, 27 Oct. 1809, BCJP, P/130/9, 15 Dec. 1809 (no. 12), APAC.
28. Steer to Dowdeswell, 18 Nov. 1809, BCJP, P/130/9, 15 Dec. 1809 (no. 19), APAC.
29. *Ibid.*
30. Law to Dowdeswell, 23 Dec. 1809, BCJP, P/130/11, 5 Jan. 1810 (no. 7), APAC.
31. *Ibid.*
32. Given the similarity with Steer's earlier reference it seems unlikely that Law should have made it all up, and the information was probably derived from local informants.
33. Order of Government, attached to *ibid.*
34. Brooke to Dowdeswell, 23 Jan. 1810, BCJP, P/130/12, 9 Feb. 1810, APAC.
35. Dowdeswell to CC, 9 Feb. 1810, BCJP, P/130/12, 19 Feb 1810 (no. 72), APAC.
36. Steer to Law, 1 Jan. 1810, BCJP, P/130/9, 19 Jan. 1810 (no. 50), APAC.
37. *Ibid.*, see also Law to Dowdeswell, 5 Jan. 1810, BCJP, P/130/9, 19 Jan. 1810 (no. 49), APAC.
38. Brooke to Law, 16 Jan. 1810, BCJP, P/130/12, 9 Feb. 1810 (no. 68), APAC.
39. Resolution of GG in C, 19 Jan. 1810, BCJP, P/130/11, 23 Jan. 1810 (no. 1), APAC.
40. *Ibid.*, and Burges to Shakespeare, 21 Nov. 1809, BCJP, P/130/9, 22 Dec. 1809 (no. 22), APAC.
41. Law to Dowdeswell, 7 Feb. 1810, BCJP, P/130/13, 9 March 1810 (no. 5), APAC.
42. Steers to Law, 7 Feb. 1810, in Law to Dowdeswell, 7 Feb. 1810, BCJP, P/130/13, 9 March 1810 (no. 5), APAC.
43. *Ibid.*
44. Dowdeswell to Perry, 9 March 1810, BCJP, P/130/13, 9 March 1810 (no. 7), APAC.
45. Reg. VI of 1810, V/8/18, pp. 345–7, APAC.
46. Yule and Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*, p. 262; and W. Crooke, *The Tribes and Castes of the North-Western Provinces and Oudh* (Calcutta, 1896), vol. I, pp. 100–1.
47. Laing to Dowdeswell, 3 April 1810, BCJP, P/130/15, 21 April 1810 (no. 16), APAC. The use of the term 'race' is interesting, as the Budheks were often described as a tribe, which implies the muddled nature of the terminology used to describe the identity of parts of the indigenous population.
48. See CC to Dowdeswell, 11 Dec. 1807, BCJP, P/129/42, 1 Jan. 1808 (no. 33), APAC. The irregular horsemen were mostly Jats or Rohillas and often came from the various indigenous armies, which had been disbanded, see Seema Alavi, *The Sepoys and the Company: Tradition and Transition in Northern India, 1770–1830* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), ch. 6.
49. Law to Dowdeswell, 28 Oct. 1809, BCJP, P/130/7, 10 Nov. 1809 (no. 34), APAC, and Gardner to Guthrie, 18 Nov. 1810, BCJP, P/131/22, 2 Oct. 1813 (enclosed in no. 29), APAC.
50. Gardner to Guthrie, 18 Nov. 1810, BCJP, P/131/22, 2 Oct. 1813 (enclosed in no. 29), APAC.

51. Gardner to Dowdeswell, 18 March 1810, BCJP, P/131/22, 2 Oct. 1813 (enclosed in no. 29), APAC.
52. Gardner to Dowdeswell, 29 Jan. 1810, BCJP, P/130/12, 16 Feb. 1810 (no. 13), APAC.
53. Some of Gardner's spies managed to make two thugs leave their gangs and become informers but there are no detailed sources on this matter, see Gardner to Dowdeswell, 2 March 1810, BCJP, P/131/22, 2 Oct. 1813 (enclosed in no. 29); and Gardner to Guthrie, 18 Nov. 1810, BCJP, P/131/22, 2 Oct. 1813 (enclosed in no. 29), APAC.
54. Miller to Dowdeswell, 13 Feb. 1810, BCJP, P/130/13, 2 March 1810 (no. 18), APAC, and 5 March 1810, BCJP, P/130/13, 16 March (no. 51), APAC.
55. W. Wright to Miller 12 March 1810, BCJP, P/130/14, 30 March 1810 (no. 6), APAC ('Wright report'). The following is based exclusively on this report.
56. This suggestion followed the rationale that when they committed such heinous crimes, the thugs also indulged in all sorts of immoral excesses. The influence of contemporary British ideas about the criminal classes is noteworthy.
57. Dowdeswell to Miller, 16 March 1810, BCJP, P/130/13, 16 March 1810 (no. 52), APAC.
58. Regulation VIII of 1810, pp. 348–9, APAC.
59. Given the specified target group this might even be seen as a precursor of the later Thagi and Dakaiti Department.
60. Dowdeswell to Miller, 27 March 1810, BCJP, P/130/14, 30 March 1810 (no. 7), APAC; and Dowdeswell to Magts C&C Provinces, 30 March 1810, BCJP, P/130/14, 30 March 1810 (no. 10), APAC.
61. See Sleeman, *Ramaseena*, vol. I, pp. 15–17.

4 Thomas Perry and the First Arrests

1. Perry to Dowdeswell, 19 March 1810, Perry Papers, 5375; and Perry to Dowdeswell, 1 March 1812, Perry Papers, 5377.
2. Perry to Dowdeswell, 1 March 1812, Perry Papers, 5377.
3. Perry to Dowdeswell, 19 March 1810, Perry Papers, 5375.
4. Examination of Ghulam Hussain, *ibid*.
5. Dowdeswell to Perry, 30 March 1810, BCJP, P/130/14, 30 March 1810 (no. 38), APAC; and Perry to Dowdeswell, 11 April 1810, Perry Papers, 5375.
6. Perry to Dowdeswell, 11 April 1810, Perry Papers, 5375.
7. Acknowledgment of Ghulam Hussain, 11 April 1810, *ibid*.
8. *Ibid*.
9. Perry to Dowdeswell, 24 April 1810, Perry Papers, 5375.
10. Dowdeswell to Perry, 8 May 1810, BCJP, P/130/16, 11 May 1810 (no. 62), APAC.
11. Perry to Dowdeswell, 13 May 1810, Perry Papers, 5376.
12. Perry to Dowdeswell, 17 May 1810, Perry Papers, 5375.
13. Dowdeswell to Perry, 8 June 1810, BCJP, P/130/17, 8 June 1810 (no. 72), APAC.
14. See Hussain Trial. The following is based on this record alone.
15. The answer was in both cases decidedly dismissive.
16. Orders of the court, *ibid*. Hussain had given six different depositions and according to Brooke, 'his perjury, his deceptions, and his impostures as a Thug are manifest.' *Ibid*.

17. Perry to Guthrie, 8 April 1811, Perry Papers, 5377; and Perry to Burges, 14 April 1811, Perry Papers, 5377.
18. 'Order of NA, 21 May 1811', in Dorin to Bayley, 25 Aug. 1820, BCJP, P/134/42, 25 Aug. 1820 (no. 14), APAC.
19. Brooke to Dowdeswell, 21 Dec. 1810, BCJP, P/130/127, 18 Jan. 1811 (no. 45), APAC.
20. Brooke to Perry, 25 Nov. 1810, *ibid*.
21. *Ibid*.
22. See proceedings of CC Bareilly, 15 April 1811, Perry Papers, 5377; and Perry to Shakespeare, 1 May 1811, Perry Papers, 5377.
23. Perry to Shakespeare, 22 April 1811, BCJP, P/130/32, 14 May 1811 (no. 93), APAC.
24. Perry to J. Shakespeare, Regr to NA, 11 May 1811, Perry Papers, 5377.
25. Perry to CC, 7 July 1811, Perry Papers, 5377.
26. Perry to CC, 5 Dec. 1811, Perry Papers, 5377.
27. Extract Procs NA, 30 Dec. 1811, BCJP, P/130/49, 18 April 1812 (no. 41), APAC.
28. Perry to Dowdeswell, 1 March 1812, BCJP, P/130/49, 18 April 1812 (no. 40), APAC.
29. Dowdeswell to Perry, 18 April 1812, BCJP, P/130/49, 18 April 1812 (no. 42), APAC.
30. Resolution of GG in C, 29 Aug. 1812, BCJP, P/131/1, 29 Aug. 1812 (no. 33), APAC.
31. Perry to Guthrie, 27 July 1812, Perry Papers, 5378.
32. Order of GG in C, 13 Jan. 1809, BC, F/4/410/10202, APAC; and Ernst to Dowdeswell, 27 Jan. 1809, BC, F/4/410/10202, APAC.
33. Dowdeswell to Ernst, 11 Feb. 1809, BC, F/4/410/10202, APAC; and Ernst to Dowdeswell, 16 March 1809, BC, F/4/410/10202, APAC.
34. Ernst to Blacquiere, 24 April 1809, 16 March 1809, BC, F/4/410/10202, APAC.
35. Blacquiere to Ernst, 28 April 1809, BC, F/4/410/10202, APAC.
36. Dowdeswell to NA, 5 May 1809, BC, F/4/410/10202, APAC, and resolution of GG in C, 12 May 1809, BC, F/4/410/10202, APAC.
37. See resolution of NA, 17 May 1809, BC, F/4/410/10202, APAC.
38. Ernst to Shakespeare, 12 May 1810, BC, F/4/411/10204, APAC.
39. To ascertain the strength of *dathura* Ernst had himself carried out some experiments with seeds of the plant, which were given to a dog. His conclusion was that the plant was not a poison and only mildly narcotic since a considerable dose was required to produce insensibility, see *ibid*.
40. *Ibid*. Ernst also criticised other aspects of the colonial administration.
41. Resolution of the NA, 22 May 1810, BC, F/4/411/10204, APAC.
42. Dowdeswell to Shakespeare, 1 June 1810, BC, F/4/411/10204, APAC.
43. See, for example, Ross to Dowdeswell, 25 May 1812, BCJP, P/130/51, 6 July 1812 (no. 51), APAC.
44. Guthrie to Dowdeswell, 29 Jan. 1812, BCJP, P/130/46, 12 Mar. 1812 (no. 40), APAC.
45. Cases in the Nizamut Adawlut, 1805–19, V/22/440, p. 239–40, APAC.
46. From this it appears that Hussain had not been released after his acquittal, see further below.
47. *Ibid*. 'Akubat' is discretionary punishment, see Fisch, p. 66 n. 174.
48. BoD to GG in C, JD, 30 Sept. 1814, BD, E/4/680, APAC.

49. The adherence to Muslim law was, accordingly, not a hindrance to the conviction of thugs, as claimed by Sherwood, p. 272; and Singha (1998), pp. 194–6.
50. See Regulation XIV of 1810, V/8/17, pp. 396–9, APAC.
51. Kerr to Dowdeswell, 6 Nov. 1812, BCJP, P/131/8, 26 Nov. 1812 (no. 70), APAC.

5 N. J. Halhed in Sindouse, October 1812

1. Dowdeswell to Halhed, 23 Feb. 1810, BCJP, P/130/12, 23 Feb. 1810 (no. 23), APAC.
2. Ross to Dowdeswell, 1 March 1810, BCJP, P/130/13, 23 March 1810 (no. 16), APAC. Brackets in original.
3. Halhed to Dowdeswell, 24 May 1810, BCJP, P/130/17, 8 June 1810 (no. 73), APAC.
4. Perron was one of the most illustrious European freelances in the service of varying Indian rulers – in the case of Jharrow he was acting under the command of the Marathas, see H. Compton, *A Particular Account of the European Military Adventurers of Hindustan from 1784 to 1803* (London, 1893, reprint Karachi: Oxford University Press, 1976).
5. Minutes of Minto, 10 Aug. 1810, BCJP, P/130/20, 10 Aug. 1810 (no. 50), APAC.
6. Dowdeswell to Guthrie, 10 Aug. 1810, BCJP, P/130/20, 10 Aug. 1810 (no. 51), APAC.
7. Guthrie to Dowdeswell, 10 Nov. 1811, BCJP, P/130/41, 10 Dec. 1811 (no. 39), APAC.
8. Dowdeswell to Guthrie, 10 Dec. 1811, BCJP, P/130/41, 10 Dec. 1811 (no. 40), APAC.
9. Dowdeswell to Halhed, 26 Mar. 1811, BCJP, P/130/30, 26 Mar. 1811 (no. 2a), APAC; and Laing to Dowdeswell, 6 Dec. 1810, BCJP, P/130/28, 25 Jan. 1811 (no. 21), APAC.
10. Halhed to Dowdeswell, 24 and 25 June 1811, BCJP, P/130/35, 9 July 1811 (no. 40 and 41), APAC. Guthrie was subsequently ordered by Government to restrain Halhed in the future, see Dowdeswell to Guthrie, 9 July 1811, BCJP, P/130/35, 9 July 1811 (no. 41), APAC.
11. Kerr to Dowdeswell, 29 Dec. 1811, BCJP, P/130/44, 13 Jan. 1812 (no. 37), APAC.
12. Extract Procs JD, 16 July 1811, Home Dept (Foreign & Political) 26 July 1811 (no. 76), NAI.
13. Patton to Dowdeswell, 12 July 1811, BCJP, P/130/36, 30 July 1811 (no. 37), APAC.
14. Perry to Guthrie, 4 July 1811, BCJP, P/130/37, 20 Aug. 1811 (no. 43), APAC.
15. Halhed to Dowdeswell, 27 Jan. 1812, BCJP, P/130/45, 18 Feb. 1812 (no. 38), APAC.
16. Perry to Dowdeswell, 27 April 1812, BCJP, P/130/50, 9 May 1812 (no. 47), APAC; Dowdeswell to Guthrie, 18 July 1812, BCJP, P/130/55, 18 July 1812 (no. 38), APAC.
17. *Thana* Sindouse was the area falling under the jurisdiction of the police station (*thana*) at Sindouse, located in the *pargana* (sub-district) of Parihara. The area is more generally referred to as Sindouse and I will be using the two names more or less interchangeably.

18. Stockwell to Perry, 19 Oct. 1818, in Perry to Shakespeare, 24 Dec. 1818, BCJP, P/134/6, 19 March 1819 (no. 10), APAC ('Stockwell to Perry'). See also D. L. Drake-Brockman (ed.), *District Gazetteers of the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh: Etawah* (Allahabad: F. Luker, 1911), p. 96.
19. See *Report on the Settlement of the Etawah District, for the years 1868–1874* (Allahabad, 1875), p. 33.
20. NA to Minto, 15 Mar. 1809, BCJP, P/129/53, 4 Aug. 1809 (no. 1), APAC.
21. Law to CC, 29 May 1809, BCJP, P/130/3, 4 Aug 1809 (no. 12), APAC; and NA to Minto, 22 July 1809, BCJP, P/130/3, 4 Aug 1809 (no. 10), APAC.
22. Law to CC, 10 Dec. 1809, in Perry to Dowdeswell, 16 March 1810, Procs JD, 27 April 1810, HD (Foreign & Political) 9 June 1810 (no. 30), NAI.
23. Perry to Dowdeswell, 16 Mar. 1810, Procs of JD, 27 April 1810, HD (Foreign & Political) 9 June 1810 (no. 30), NAI. Continuous reports of attacks and violence in Parihara strengthened the impression of a lawless place, see Shakespeare to Dowdeswell, April 1810, BCJP, P/130/15, 27 April 1810 (no. 22), APAC.
24. Dowdeswell to Sackville, 6 April 1810, BCJP, P/130/15, 27 April 1810 (no. 23), APAC.
25. Sackville to Dowdeswell, 16 April 1810, BCJP, P/130/15, 27 April 1810 (no. 24), APAC.
26. Perry to Dowdeswell, 17 April 1810, Perry Papers, 5375.
27. Edmonstone to Mercer, 9 June 1810, BCJP, P/130/18, 29 June 1810 (no. 68), APAC. It appears from the resident's instructions that Sahsoon and Parihara were originally acquired 'under an erroneous supposition regarding their situation'.
28. Perry to Dowdeswell, 27 July 1811, BCJP, P/130/36, 13 Aug. 1811 (no. 41), APAC.
29. Perry to Dowdeswell, 19 Sept. 1811, BCJP, P/130/39, 8 Oct. 1811 (no. 37), APAC. In December 1810 Perry had examined the *darogha* of Sindouse who provided very detailed information on the state of the *pargana*, see further below.
30. Perry to Guthrie, 22 June 1812, Perry Papers, 5377.
31. Perry to Guthrie, 29 June 1812, BCJP, P/130/55, 18 July 1812 (no. 37), APAC.
32. Watkins to Perry, 26 June 1812, in *ibid*.
33. Perry to Guthrie, 29 June 1812, BCJP, P/130/55, 18 July 1812 (no. 37), APAC.
34. Halhed to Dowdeswell, 9 Oct. 1812, BCJP, P/131/5, 24 Oct. 1812 (no. 32), APAC.
35. Dowdeswell to Perry, 20 Sept. 1812, BCJP, P/131/4, 26 Sept. 1812 (no. 37), APAC.
36. Halhed to Dowdeswell, 11 Oct. 1812, BC, F/4/389/9872, APAC.
37. See Perry to Dowdeswell, 10 Oct. 1812, Perry Papers, 5376.
38. Halhed to Dowdeswell, 11 Oct. 1812, BC, F/4/389/9872, APAC.
39. Halhed to Dowdeswell, 9 Oct. 1812, BCJP, P/131/5, 24 Oct. 1812 (no. 32), APAC.
40. Halhed to Dowdeswell, 11 Oct. 1812, BCJP, P/131/6, 31 Oct. 1812 (no. 29), APAC.
41. Statement of Dr Playfair, 11 Oct. 1812, *ibid*.
42. *Ibid*.
43. Halhed to Dowdeswell, 12 Oct. 1812, BCJP, P/131/6, 31 Oct. 1812 (no. 31), APAC.

44. Halhed to Dowdeswell, 13 Oct. 1812, BCJP, P/131/6, 31 Oct. 1812 (no. 32), APAC.
45. Halhed to Perry, 15 Oct. 1812, BC, F/4/389/9872, APAC.
46. Halhed to CC, 13 Oct. 1812, BC, F/4/389/9872, APAC.
47. Halhed to Dowdeswell, 18 Oct. 1812, BC, F/4/389/9872, APAC.
48. Ibid.
49. Halhed to Dowdeswell, 23 Oct. 1812, BC, F/4/389/9872, APAC. The following is based on this report.
50. Halhed to unknown officer, 22 Oct. 1812, Mill Dept, 14 Nov. 1812 (no. 30 and 31), NAI. This friend was probably Capt. Popham, which may explain this officer's later actions, see further below.
51. See Bruce, p. 23, footnote.

6 Sindouse

1. Unless otherwise stated, the following is based on Stockwell to Perry and the examination of Ruheem Khan, 30 Dec. 1810, Appendix B, Shakespeare to Bayley, 30 April 1816, BCJP, P/132/44–45, 30 Aug. 1816 (no. 7), APAC ('Ruheem Khan'). I have retained the original spelling of the names of localities and villages in the area of Sindouse.
2. Law to CC, 10 Dec. 1809, in Perry to Dowdeswell, 16 Mar. 1810, Procs JD, 27 April 1810, HD (Foreign & Political) 9 June 1810 (no. 30), NAI.
3. *DGUP: Etawah*, pp. 71, 128 and 139–40.
4. Ruheem Khan. See also M. Z. Khan, *Dacoity in Chambal Valley* (New Delhi: National, 1981), pp. 23–6.
5. District Planning Map: Etawah (Survey of India, 1996); and *DGUP: Etawah*, pp. 23–4.
6. By 1812 the fort had fallen into disrepair and today there are no longer any traces left of it.
7. Halhed to Dowdeswell, 18 Oct. 1812, BC, F/4/389/9872, APAC.
8. *Ramaseeana*, vol. II, p. 153; Pad to Blunt, 25 June 1816, BCJP, P/132/44–45, 30 Aug. 1816, APAC.
9. Eric Stokes, *The Peasant and the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), pp. 77–8; and Malavika Kasturi, *Embattled Identities: Rajput Lineages and the Colonial State in Nineteenth-Century North India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 24.
10. *Ramaseeana*, vol. II, pp. 154–224.
11. *DGUP: Etawah*, p. 4.
12. See O. H. K. Spate (ed.), *India and Pakistan: A General and Regional Geography* (London: Methuen, 1967), pp. 57–8; A. M. Shah, *Exploring India's Rural Past – A Gujarat Village in the Early Nineteenth Century* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 125; and Michael Mann, *British rule on Indian Soil – North India in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1999).
13. Stockwell to Perry. *Tir* was the loamy soil left by the receding rivers during the dry season, but the produce that could be grown there was so negligible that it was not even included in the revenue settlement of 1813. *Rabi* is the spring harvest, *kharif* the autumn harvest.

14. Watkins to Perry, 26 June 1812, in Perry to Guthrie, 29 June 1812, BCJP, P/130/55, 18 July 1812 (no. 37), APAC.
15. Winther, pp. 4–6.
16. See Kasturi.
17. The revenue of Parihara was held *kham* in the years 1781–82 and 1807–13, which means that it was collected directly from the peasants.
18. See Stokes, p. 295.
19. Laljee, Procs reg. Lieut. Maunsell, para 21, 11 Dec. 1812, Perry Papers, 5376 ('Maunsell Proceedings').
20. I am here using the name of Sindouse more or less interchangeably with that of Parihara. Parihara would be the correct name for the area but in most of the British records Sindouse is used.
21. Ruheem Khan. In this and the following chapters my use of the word thug and thuggee refers to the bandits of Parihara as described by Ruheem Khan and others and not to a fraternity of hereditary assassins – I have retained the terminology for reasons of simplicity.
22. In fact it seems likely that this source was one of the main influences of the budding British stereotype of thuggee.
23. Mool Chund, 28 Feb. 1813, Appendix A, in Shakespeare to Bayley, 30 April 1816, BCJP, P/132/44–45, 30 Aug. 1816 (no. 7), APAC.
24. See *Ramaseeana*, vol. II, pp. 155, 170, 173 and 175.
25. Laljee, para 21.
26. Sohbut Rae, para 22. If this is true, then Sohbut had not fared well compared to his status according to the 1797 list.
27. Laljee, para 21.
28. Dureao, para 43. On Mewatis, see further below.
29. Ibid. In later depositions mention is made of a similar instance of a thug lending money to his associates 'as a Mahajun' or moneylender, 'Paton Collections', pp. 58 and 69.
30. Amaun, para 23.
31. Kurhorah Lodha, para 49.
32. Gungapershaud, para 51.
33. The majority of the people engaged in thuggee would seem to fit the description of subalterns as defined within Subaltern Studies. However, the subject of Subaltern Studies is usually cases of 'righteous' community resistance against elite or colonial rule, but as subalterns the thugs were engaged in rather unrighteous practices that would not conform to any perception of justified violence as an expression of social tension.
34. Doorgha, 26 May 1833, T&D, D.2-(1), NAI ('Doorgha').
35. Doorjun Lodha, para 47.
36. Cashee Ram, para 41; and Dureao, para 43.
37. Yule and Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*, p. 345.
38. Behadun, in Perry to Dowdeswell, 24 April 1810, Perry Papers, 5375.
39. See Shail Mayaram, *Against History, Against State – Counterperspectives from the Margins* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2004).
40. W. E. Begley and Z. A. Desai (eds), *The Shah Jahan Nama of Inayat Khan* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 448. See also Seema Alavi, pp. 20, 194, 220–1 and 225; and C. A. Bayly *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), p. 220.

41. Malcolm (1823), vol. II, p. 174.
42. See Crooke (1896), vol. III, pp. 485–95.
43. V/8/18, pp. 345–7, APAC.
44. Bukhut Lodha, Maunsell Proceedings; and Kalee Khan, in Perry to Dowdeswell, 24 April 1810, Perry Papers, 5375.
45. Ghulam Hussain, 16 Nov. 1810, in BCJP, P/130/27, 18 Jan. 1811 (no. 46), APAC.
46. See Kolff (1990); Gordon (1969); and Alavi.
47. Alavi, pp. 41–2; see also pp. 36–9 and 230.
48. The Pindaris at times numbered thousands of poorly armed cavalry who raided foreign as well as friendly territories, killing and maiming along the way, see M. P. Roy, *Origin, Growth and Suppression of the Pindaris* (New Delhi: Serling Publishers, 1973).
49. Ochterlony to Swinton, 30 April 1822, in N. K. Sinha and A. K. Dasgupta (eds), *Selections from Ochterlony Papers (1818–25) in the NAI* (Calcutta, 1964), pp. 243–6; and Sleeman (1844), vol. I, pp. 443–6.
50. The following is to a large extent based on Gordon (1969).
51. *Ibid.*, p. 427.
52. See also Christopher Kenna, 'Resistance, Banditry and Rural Crime: Aspects of the Feudal Paradigm in North India under Colonial Rule, c.1800–1840', in Edmund Leach, S. N. Mukherjee and John Ward (eds), *Feudalism: Comparative Studies*, Sydney Studies in Society and Culture, 2 (Sydney, 1982), p. 220.
53. Habib, p. 204.
54. Law to CC, 25 Nov. 1809, BCJP, P/130/12, 16 Feb. 1810 (no. 52), APAC. This image of a kind of Hobbesian state is typical of the British view of India; the British perceived themselves as successors to kingdoms and states ridden by despotism, tyranny and chaos, in what was seen as a natural process, see, for example, John Malcolm, *The Political History of India from 1784 to 1823* (London, 1826).
55. Kolff (1990), 'Glossary', p. xiv.
56. Fuddy Khan, in Sleeman *Report on the depredations committed by the thug gangs of upper and central India, from the cold season of 1836–37, down to their gradual suppression, under the operations of the measures adopted against them by the supreme government in the year 1839* (Calcutta: Bengal Military Orphan Press, 1840), p. 173 (brackets in original). 'Chakar' meant servant, 'chakari' being service, and it was often used in the combination of 'Naukar-chakar', see Yule and Burnell, *Hobson-Jobson*, p. 182b.
57. My argument is, on the whole, not so different from that made by Freitag (1991).
58. Ghulam Hussain, in BCJP, P/130/27, 18 Jan. 1811 (no. 46), APAC.
59. Thukoree, *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, p. 222.
60. Feringheea, *ibid.*, p. 223.
61. Thukoree, *ibid.*, pp. 224–5.
62. Lalmun, *ibid.*, pp. 225–6.
63. See no. 209, *Ramaseeana*, vol. II, p. 196.
64. *Ibid.*, pp. 155–224.
65. It should be noted that Sleeman had edited the original list, which I have unfortunately not been able to find, see *Ramaseeana*, vol. II, pp. 154. See also Ruheem Khan.
66. Colebrook to Minto, 12 April 1813, BoR Procs C&C, P/92/14, 12 April 1813 (no. 16), APAC.

67. Kuhadut, 16 May 1810, Perry Papers, 5375.
68. See Habib, pp. 184–6 and 523.
69. The nature of the *jajmani* system has been widely debated among historians, see, for instance, Peter Mayer, 'Inventing Tradition: The late nineteenth century origins of the North Indian "Jajmani System" ', *MAS*, 27, 2 (1993): 357–95.
70. Unless otherwise stated, the following is taken from Maunsell Proceedings.
71. Laljee, para 21.
72. Sohbut Rae, para 22.
73. Bukhut Lodha, para 42.
74. Doorjun Lodha, para 47.
75. See Hobsbawm, p. 41.
76. Lalmun, in *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, pp. 173–5.
77. Sheikh Inayat, no date but 1832, T&D, D.2 (vol. 1), NAI ('Sheikh Inayat'). It must have been Perron and not De Boigne who left India in 1796.
78. See Compton, pp. 232ff, and 244–6.
79. Suntoke Rae, *Ramaseeana*, vol. II, p. 152.
80. Punna, 29 May 1832, T&D, D.2-(1), NAI.
81. Halhed to Dowdeswell, 18 Oct. 1812, BC, F/4/389/9872, APAC.
82. J. Shakespeare, Regr NA, to G. Dowdeswell, Secy JD, 3 April 1810, BCJP, P/130/15, 27 April 1810 (no. 22), APAC.
83. According to Habib: 'The classic act of defiance on the part of the peasants was the refusal to pay land revenue.' Habib, p. 378 and 379, n. 5.
84. *Ibid.*, pp. 380 and 387–8.

7 The Practice of Thuggee

1. Unless otherwise stated, the following is based primarily on Ameer Alee, 14 April 1832, BC, F/4/1406, APAC ('Ameer Alee'); Punna, 29 May 1832, T&D, D.2-(1), NAI, ('Punna'); and Doorgha. This is not an exhaustive account of all the murders that took place during these expeditions, but a narrative focusing on the structurally revealing aspects.
2. On the significance of the designation *jemadar*, see below.
3. It usually took more than double the number of thugs to murder a group of travellers.
4. A dispute later arose between several of the *jemadars* who all wanted the surviving girl, see *Ramaseeana* vol. II, pp. 105–6.
5. According to Ameer Alee, the loot amounted to Rp 3500, while Doorgha said it was Rs 17,000 – the former was most likely only referring to the share his gang received.
6. The brackets are Sleeman's addition to Punna's account; 'Bharts' or bards was the argot term used to designate the stranglers, see 'Paton Collections', p. 66.
7. Apparently a member of the gang had deserted and entered the service of Atma Ram, see Punna.
8. *Ramaseeana*, vol. II, pp. 105–6.
9. Sleeman's notes in margin of Ameer Alee's account. Those marked with * have been positively identified as being from Sindouse (Sursae and Parihara) and where it has been possible to identify them on the 1797 list, the number is given in brackets.

10. Dureao, para 43, Maunsell Proceedings.
11. *Ramaseeana*, vol. II, pp. 155–224. The categorisation of caste and religion is the original one and is of the kind that the British immediately bought into. On the importance of caste in pre-colonial censuses, see Norbert Peabody, 'Cents, Sense, Census: Human Inventories in Late Precolonial and Early Colonial India', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 43, 3 (July 2001): 819–50.
12. By comparison, the thugs in Shekohabad were all Pathans (Afghans) or Mewatis.
13. *Ramaseeana*, vol. II, pp. 155–70.
14. Van Woerkens also mentions a gang caught in the 1830s of which two-thirds of the members were related, see Van Woerkens, pp. 141–2.
15. Punna.
16. Sheikh Inayat.
17. J. S. Koliopoulos, *Brigands with a Cause: Brigandage and irredentism in modern Greece, 1821–1912* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. 239.
18. Genealogical tree of thug family nr. 1, *Ramaseeana*, end of vol. I.
19. *Ramaseeana*, vol. II, pp. 196–7.
20. As in the case of Chaleesrooh affair, such children were obviously regarded as an asset; Hussain was also adopted by the thugs who killed his father, see Hussain Trial.
21. Ameer Alee; and Punna.
22. Among the Shekohabad thugs the function of kinship ties and classificatory relatives was even more pronounced, see Hussain Trial.
23. Ameer Alee.
24. Doorgha.
25. See Sleeman (1840), pp. 67–8.
26. Sleeman to Macnaghten, 10 Aug. 1833, T&D, D.1-(2), NAI.
27. Ameer Alee.
28. Gopy and Budloo, in Perry to Dowdeswell, 10 Oct. 1812, Perry Papers, 5376.
29. Hussain Trial.
30. Kalee Khan, in Perry to Dowdeswell, 24 April 1810, Perry Papers, 5375. See also Nidha, *ibid.*
31. Akbar, *ibid.*; and Kuhadut and Buktawur, in Perry Papers, 5375.
32. Ameer Alee.
33. Sheikh Inayat.
34. Doorgha, in *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, pp. 263–4. Asked the same question 25 years earlier, Hussain had stated simply that: 'Whenever a party of thugs is without a leader they select one amongst them, the most experienced, to be the jemadar.' See Hussain Trial.
35. *Jemadar* and *subedar* signify ranks equivalent to lieutenant and captain respectively.
36. F. C. Smith to Princep, 19 Nov. 1830, BC, F/4/1309/52131 – 1, APAC.
37. Kolff (1990), pp. 173–5.
38. Punna.
39. *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, pp. 136, 134, 75, 84, 72, 111 and 115. Regarding the thug's argot, see further below.
40. See Hobsbawm, p. 35.
41. Ameer Alee.

42. Thomas D. Broughton, *Letters Written in a Mahratta Camp during the year 1809* (London: 1813, reprint New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1995), p. 213. See also Sleeman (1844), vol. I, p. 359.
43. Sleeman's notes in margin of Punna account. Sleeman, furthermore, stated that the rendezvous was to be accounted for: 'from the priests of the temple of Bindachul having indicated the Surgooja and Rutunpore roads to the principal leaders', *ibid.* This is obviously not correct since Ameer Alee's gang came to Takhatpur via Jabalpur and only reached Mirzapur on their return. Rather, it would seem that Sleeman was trying to implicate the priests of the temple at Vindhyachal, thereby making it appear as a religiously motivated and centrally organised cult, see below.
44. Doorgha, in *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, p. 203. The Pindaris were actually very active during this period, making regular excursions into the Nagpur territory in 1807–09 and disrupting trade in the whole area, see M. P. Roy, pp. 102–4.
45. Doorgha.
46. Some of the Shekohabad thugs also attached themselves to the Pindaris, see Kalee Khan in Perry to Dowdeswell, 24 April 1810, Perry Papers, 5375.
47. The Shekohabad thugs prowled along the northern trade route between Rajasthan and Bengal, running parallel with the Grand Trunk Road, see Hussain Trial.
48. Bayly (1983), pp. 159–60.
49. For a different argument see D. E. U. Baker, *Colonialism in an Indian Hinterland – The Central Provinces, 1820–1920* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 57–8.
50. *Ramaseeana*, vol. II, pp. 104–5.
51. Doorgha; and Ameer Alee.
52. Ameer Alee.
53. See Alavi, pp. 208–9.
54. Punna. See also Hussain Trial.
55. Religious mendicants were also murdered by the thugs, see, for instance, Doorgha.
56. Hussain Trial.
57. Ameer Alee.
58. Singha (1998), p. 193, with reference to Gordon (1969), p. 407.
59. Hussain Trial.
60. Ruheem Khan.
61. Hussain Trial. Ruheem Khan stated that: 'In every city they have established receivers of the property which they plunder, and they travel as buggals and cloth merchants.'
62. The thugs would even make birds sing in order to convince their victims that it was dawn, see Hussain Trial.
63. Punna.
64. James Lunt (ed.), *From Sepoy to Subedar, being the Life and Adventures of Subedar Sita Ram, a Native Officer of the Bengal Army written and related by Himself* (Lahore, 1873, reprint London: Papermac, 1988), pp. 10–12.
65. *Ibid.*, p. 11. Deonarain and Tillukdaree were Sita Ram's companions.
66. See 'Editorial note' by James Lunt in *ibid.*, pp. xvii–xviii.
67. Hussain Trial.

68. Hussain Trial, on 11 Nov. 1810, *ibid.* Similar scenes were re-enacted for decades by captured thugs in front of tourists, see, for instance, the photographs by Bourne and Shepherd in the APAC, British Library.
69. *Ibid.* Hussain also said that the victims were stabbed in the face in order to prevent them from being recognised, see also 'Paton Collections', p. 18.
70. Kuhadut, in Perry to Dowdeswell, 16 May 1810, Perry Papers, 5375.
71. Hussain Trial. This is an interesting precedent of the sacred pickaxe later publicised by Sleeman, see *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, pp. 142–3.
72. Ameer Alee.
73. Hussain Trial. The loot obtained from the murder of 15 Rajputs, by another gang, was: 1 pony, 12 guns, 2 bows with arrows, 15 swords, 15 lotas, 5 brasspots and 4 plates, see Gopy, in Perry to Dowdeswell, 10 Oct. 1812, Perry Papers, 5376.
74. Ameer Alee; and Doorgha.
75. See Bayly (1983), pp. 54–5.
76. Doorgha.
77. Nidha, in Perry to Dowdeswell, 24 April 1810, Perry Papers, 5375.
78. According to Ruheem Khan: 'Jewels are often purchased in Sundose, and exported to various cities such as Lucknow and Benares, for sale, and the Lucknow and Benares merchants, often come thither for the express purpose of purchasing jewels.'
79. Ruheem Khan.
80. Hussain Trial.
81. *Ibid.* According to Punna, the Bhadauria Rajputs at Gwalior had a boy who knew the thugs and they used him to extract fines from them.
82. Hussain Trial; and Ameer Alee.
83. Ameer Alee.

8 The Itinerant Underworld

1. The interchangeable and confusing use of terms like 'castes', 'sects' and 'tribes' among colonial ethnographers and officials is well known, and I have opted for the purely descriptive terms 'classes' and 'subgroupings' in order to avoid unnecessary discussion of the caste-system, hierarchies and social structure.
2. Sleeman to Macnaghten, 3 Feb 1838, T&D, G.4, NAI.
3. See Singha, pp. 221–3; and S. Bayly, p. 117. See also J. Marriott, *The Other Empire: Metropolis, India and Progress in the Colonial Imagination* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).
4. *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, pp. 11 and 72.
5. Van Woerkens's attempt to match the names with geographical localities is not convincing, see Van Woerkens, pp. 132–3 and 313.
6. See McLeod to F. C. Smith, 10 Oct. 1834, BC, F/4/1567/64218, APAC ('McLeod Report'). Unless otherwise stated, the following is based on this source.
7. See also *Ramaseeana*, Vol. I, pp. 99 and 137.
8. There are different versions of this story, see *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, p. 68; and Paton Collections, pp. 125–6.
9. The different classes of thugs were: those inhabiting Multan and Persia, 'Mooltanies or Chugras', 'Kadurya or Kulundurass', 'Koelas', 'Jamaldehees',

- 'Baguryas or Sopuryas', 'Oomutwaree', 'Kauthulyas', 'Byds', 'Bararyas', 'Haureewals', 'Tulingyas', 'Lodhee', 'Koorhurreas', 'Uguryas', 'Mothyas', 'Sooseas', and 'Buyragees'.
10. The list of members of the 'lawless fraternities' included: 'Baghoras or Budducks', 'Beryas', 'Bhamta', 'Bhanmuttees', 'Dhutooryas', 'Ghuttee', 'Gath Kutta', 'Kooch Bundeesoore', 'Kunjurs', 'Kumalikee', 'Nuth', 'Sansya', 'Sathyas', 'Thug Bhats', 'Uthaae = geer' [sic] and 'Undhya'. See 'Appendix C', McLeod Report.
 11. In examining the thug subgroupings, I have relied on colonial ethnographical surveys, such as Crooke (1896), with a clear recognition of their outdated methodology and the fact that they were deeply embedded in the colonial project. Yet, when names of supposed thug subgroupings are found in different contexts, it suggests, at the very least, that these designations existed outside and independently of the material collected in relation to thuggee.
 12. Spelled 'Lodhi' it is a common caste of agriculturalists, however, in this context the first possibility seems to be more plausible.
 13. H. M. Elliot, *Memoirs on the History, Folk-Lore and Distribution of the Races of the North Western Provinces of India* (London: Trübner, 1869, reprint Osnabrück, 1976), vol. II, pp. 47–78. See also Sleeman, *A Report on the System of Megpunnaism* (Serampore Press, 1839), p. 71.
 14. See R. G. Varady, 'North Indian Banjaras: Their evolution as transporters', *South Asia*, 2 (March and September 1979): 1–18.
 15. Crooke 1896), vol. IV, p. 57.
 16. *Ibid.*, vol. III, p. 136.
 17. See D. Richardson 'An account of the Bazeegurs, a sect commonly denominated Nuts', *Asiatic Researches*, 7 (Calcutta, 1801): 457–85.
 18. It is worth noticing that tribal groups like the Bhils were also mentioned as being part of the '84 tribes'. Although they were not generally considered as being nomadic, tribals did have a reputation for being 'turbulent' and 'criminal' within later colonial ethnography.
 19. On this, see Egmond, ch. 5.
 20. See Bayly (1983), pp. 28, and 142–3. See also Kolff, 'Sanyasi Trader-soldiers', *IESHR*, 8, 2 (June 1971): 213–18; and N. Battacharya, 'Predicaments of Mobility: Peddlers and Itinerants in Nineteenth-Century Northwestern India', in Claude Markovits, Jacques Pouchepadass and Sanjay Subrahmanyam (eds), *Society and Circulation: Mobile People and Itinerant Cultures in South Asia, 1750–1950* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2003).
 21. See Bloomfield.
 22. Sheikh Inayat. See Ameer Alee for a similar story.
 23. Punna; see also Malcolm (1823), vol. II, pp. 183–4; and *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, pp. 237–8.
 24. Deposition of Sheikh Ismail Aupkhanee, 10 Feb. 1832, Home Dept (Foreign & Political), 30 Jan. 1837 (no. 51), NAI.
 25. *Ibid.*
 26. Bayly (1983), p. 318.
 27. Burges, 15 April 1811, Perry Papers, 5377, CUL. See also Perry to Shakespeare, 11 May 1811, Perry Paper, 5377.
 28. Shakespeare to Bayley, 30 April 1816, BJC, P/132/44–45, 30 Aug. 1816 (no. 7), APAC. It should also be remembered that the 1672-*farman* referred to 'Wicked men ... who administer *dhatura*, *bhanga*, the nut of *nux vomica* and

such other narcotics to people in order to render them insensible and rob their effects ...', see above.

29. Forbes, vol. III, pp. 53–4.
30. Sahib Khan in *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, p. 238.
31. See Parkes, vol. II, pp. 452–4, quoting the *Agra Messenger*, 2 Dec. 1848.
32. See Sleeman *Megpunnaism*.
33. *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, p. 239. Victims of the Megpunna thugs were also recorded as having been strangled with the reins of a pony, Sleeman *Megpunnaism*, pp. 29 and 31.
34. Mannath, 11 Jan. 1838, T&D, D.2-(3), NAI.
35. Giddah Bhaynath, 27 Oct. 1837, *ibid*.
36. Burree Jumaal Khan, 10 Dec. 1836, Home Dept (Foreign & Political), 30 Jan. 1837 (no. 51), NAI.
37. Morlee, *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, pp. 238–9.
38. A note of clarification: Sleeman recorded the secret language of the thugs, the 'Ramasee', and published a vocabulary of it as 'Ramaseeana' in the book of the same name, *Ramaseeana*.
39. *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, p. 3. The different terms describing similar things used by thugs from different areas of India Sleeman explained as corruptions of the original language of the seven clans who had been expelled from Delhi.
40. Sleeman to Macnaghten, 24 July 1835, BC, F/4/1567/64219, APAC.
41. Van Woerkens argues that the thugs defined themselves in the lexicon and that they get to speak through her reworking of the 'Ramaseeana', see Van Woerkens, pp. 114–15.
42. Sherwood, pp. 265–8. On the use of 'phansigar', see further below.
43. Giddah Bhaynath, 27 Oct. 1837, T&D, D.2-(3), NAI; and Poorun Phansygur, 1829, in N. K. Sinha (ed.), *Selected records collected from the Central Provinces and Berar Secretariat relating to the suppression of Thuggee, 1829–1832* (Nagpur, 1939).
44. See, for instance, Peter Burke and Roy Porter (eds), *Languages and Jargons – Contributions to a Social History of Language* (London: Polity Press, 1995).
45. See *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, pp. 68 and 129.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 122.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 85.
48. Sherwood, p. 265. See also Lee Beier, 'Anti-language or Jargon? Canting in the English Underworld in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries', in Burke and Porter, pp. 64–101.
49. Poorun Phansygur, 1829, in Sinha (ed.), *Selected Records*, p. 43.
50. Hussain Trial.
51. See R. R. Mehrota, *Sociology of Secret Languages* (Simla: Indian Institute of Advanced Study, 1977), ch. 2 'The Secret Parlance of Pandas', based on fieldwork in Varanasi in the 1970s.
52. Van Woerkens, p. 179–80.
53. Uwe Danker, 'Bandits and the State: Robbers and the Authorities in the Holy Roman Empire in the Late Seventeenth and Early Eighteenth Centuries', in Richard J. Evans (ed.), *The German Underworld* (London: Routledge, 1988), pp. 75–107 (pp. 98–9).
54. See also Singha (1998), p. 203.
55. See Mehrota, ch. 3.

9 The World of the Thugs

1. Bukhut and Doorjun Lodha, para 42 and 47, Maunsell Proceedings.
2. Among the 'occasional' thugs might also be counted the various itinerant groups who committed the odd murder of travellers from time to time during their travels or pilgrimages.
3. Kalee Khan, in Perry to Dowdeswell, 24 April 1810, Perry Papers, 5375. See also Hussain Trial.
4. See also Nidha, *ibid.*; and Kuhadut and Bukhtawur, 16 May 1810, Perry Papers, 5375.
5. Khandeh Ahir, 27 Sept. 1828, Extract BCJP, 22 April 1829 (no. 36), in BC, F/4/1332/52611(7), APAC.
6. Deposition of Futty Khan, 5 June 1837, in Sleeman (1840), pp. 159 and 163.
7. See also Rambux, Paton Collections, pp. 28/23b–24; Ramzan, 20 Jul. 1837, in Sleeman (1840), pp. 139 and 143–4; and Dhoosoo, 6 July 1837, *ibid.*, p. 165.
8. This depiction of the thugs was by no means the only stereotype of criminals that held sway during the eighteenth—nineteenth centuries, and highwaymen, pirates and mercenaries all over the world were the subjects of similar reductive taxonomies.
9. Hussain Trial.
10. The only exceptions are Sherwood's article where it is stated that 'Cali or Marriatta' was the tutelary deity of the *phansigars*, and a brief reference to the thugs' deity in 1819, see Sherwood, p. 260; and Stockwell to Ewer, 30 March 1819, in Ewer to Bayley, 6 April 1819, BCJP, P/134/6, 16 April 1819 (no. 6), APAC.
11. Sherwood, pp. 262–3.
12. McLeod Report. One approver also told Sleeman that 'Davey instituted Thuggee', *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, p. 187.
13. See Hugh Urban, 'India's Darkest Heart: Kali in the Colonial Imagination', in J. J. Kripal and R. F. McDermott (eds), *Encountering Kali; In the Margins, at the Center, In the West* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).
14. *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, pp. 127–8.
15. Sheikh Ismail Aupkhanee, 10 Feb. 1832, Home Dept (Foreign & Political), 30 Jan. 1837 (no. 51), NAI.
16. See *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, pp. 164–70. The existence of these rules, however, never actually stopped the thugs from murdering women.
17. David R. Kinsley, *The Sword and the Flute* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1995), pp. 91–2, see also n. 15.
18. Allayar, Paton Collections, pp. 76–63/77.
19. Dhoosoo, Paton Collections, p. 16. (brackets in original).
20. See, for instance, *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, p. 7.
21. Paton Collections, pp. 53–5.
22. The notion of the goddess feeding on blood was quite clearly derived from animal sacrifice at places like Vindhyachal in Mirzapur, see Dhoosoo, *ibid.*, p. 41/52.
23. Paton's opening questions, 10 Oct. 1836, *ibid.*, page following 40/50.
24. See Paton's questions, 10 Oct. 1836, *ibid.*, pp. 47/58–9, where he practically identifies Bhowanee with the Devil.

25. See Sleeman's anonymous article, *Calcutta Literary Gazette*, 3 October 1830, transcript in 'Note by Secretary Swinton', 4 Oct. 1830, BC, F/4/1251/50480(2), APAC. ('Anonymous Article').
26. *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, p. 150.
27. Ibid. See also Paton Collections, pp. 41/52.
28. McLeod Report.
29. See also Peter Gottschalk, *Beyond Hindu and Muslim: Multiple Identity in Narratives from Village India* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).
30. Hussain Trial.
31. Fatty Khan, Paton Collections, p. 94. Brackets in original.
32. Mugdooma, *ibid.*, p. 62/75.
33. *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, pp. 145–6.
34. Futteh Khan, Paton Collections, p. 28/33.
35. See, for instance, *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, pp. 157 and 221. One of Sleeman's approvers stated that: 'I have a hundred times heard my father and other old and wise men say, when we had killed a sweeper and otherwise infringed their rules, that we should be some day punished for it; that the European rulers would be made the punishment to chastise us for our disregard of omens, and neglect of the rules laid down for our guidance.' *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, pp. 141–2.
36. Sherwood, p. 263.
37. Futteh Khan, Paton Collections, p. 59.
38. *Ibid.*, p. 58/69.
39. General statements about the nature of thuggee could by definition only be very individual and while one approver stated that 'Thugee is a 'Shikar' (a hunt) sometimes successful, sometimes not', another said that 'We consider it as labour, and not as 'Shekar' (sport).' See Dhooroo, in Sleeman (1840), p. 153; and Bhugt, Paton Collections, p. 58/69.
40. Sherwood, p. 275; See also Paton Collections, pp. 59–48/60.
41. See Janet Dunbar (ed.), *Tigers, Durbars and Kings: Fanny Eden's Indian Journals 1837–1838* (London: John Murray, 1988), p. 104 and 119–23. While visiting Cawnpore in 1837, Emily Eden wrote of another British officer engaged in the operations against the thugs: 'A Captain G. here is one of its great persecutors officially, but by dint of living with Thugs he has evidently grown rather fond of them, and has acquired a latent taste for strangling.' Emily Eden, *Up the Country – Letters from India* (London, 1866, reprint London: Virago Press, 1983), p. 59.
42. Sahib Khan, *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, p. 144.
43. *Ibid.*, p. 162.
44. That this process was not uncontested is obvious from the responses of some of the other approvers present.
45. Hussain Trial.
46. Kalee Khan, in Perry to Dowdeswell, 24 April 1810, Perry Papers, 5375.
47. Punna. See also Nidha, in Perry to Dowdeswell, 24 April 1810, Perry Papers, 5375.
48. Ruheem Khan.
49. Testimony of Ghulam Hussain, 11 Nov. 1810, enclosed in BCJP, P/130/27, 18 Jan. 1811 (no. 46), APAC.
50. Kolff (1990), pp. 181–2.

51. However, it is not at all clear that Sleeman and Paton were aware of the role they played in refashioning the identity of the approvers.
52. Doorgha.
53. Punna.
54. See Norman P. Ziegler, 'Rajput Loyalties During the Mughal Period', in J. F. Richards (ed.), *Kingship and Authority in South Asia* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998) 242–84. It is not impossible that the self-sacrifice of two Muslim thugs at Vindhychal was inspired by the *jauhar* or respectable Rajput act of sacrifice, see Genealogical table nr. 82, *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, following p. 270.
55. Sahib and Nasir, *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, pp. 153–154.
56. Sahib Khan, *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, p. 196.
57. See for instance *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, pp. 152–4.
58. Paton Collections, p. 24.
59. *Ibid.*, p. 28.
60. Buhram, *ibid.*, p. 24. See also Paton Collections, pp. 23b–24.
61. Besides the Rajputs, there were also other models of the martial ethos, such as the figure of the Muslim gentleman trooper, See Alavi.
62. See Kolff (1990).
63. Doorgha.
64. Sleeman (1844), vol. II, pp. 30–1. See also David Shulman, 'On South Indian Bandits and Kings', *IESHR*, 17 (1980): 283–306.
65. See Winther, p. 24.
66. See Kasturi, pp. 200–28.
67. Kasturi, pp. 200–1.
68. Kasturi seems to be of the opinion that Rajput dacoity can be distinguished from non-Rajput dacoity, *ibid.* p. 200 n. 2.
69. It has been suggested by some authors that thuggee might have constituted an anti-colonial practice, but this is simply not borne out by the material, see Hiralal Gupta, p. 173; and Felix Padel, *The Sacrifice of Human Being: British Rule and the Konds of Orissa* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 138. Kathleen Gough invokes the thugs as reformatory social bandits in her article 'Indian Peasant Uprisings', in A. R. Desai (ed.), *Peasant Struggles in India* (Bombay: Oxford University Press, 1979), pp. 103–5.
70. See for instance *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, p. 262.
71. Inayat, *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, p. 229. See also H. Bevan, *Thirty Years in India, or, A Soldier's Reminiscences of Native and European Life in the Presidencies, from 1808 to 1836* (London: Pelham Richardson, 1839), pp. 256–66; and Dash, p. 200.
72. See Kaye (1853), footnote p. 361. The newspaper in question is *Sumachar Durpan*. See also Fhlathúin, 'The Campaign Against Thugs in the Bengal Press in the 1830s', *Victorian Periodical Review*, 37, 2 (2004): 124–40.
73. See also Gordon (1969), pp. 408–9.
74. See also J. F. Richards and V. N. Rao, 'Banditry in Mughal India: Historical and Folk Perceptions', *IESHR*, 17, 1 (1980): 95–120, particularly pp. 115–16.
75. Sheikh Inayat; and Doorgha. According to Punna the thugs had an astrologer in Sindouse who appointed the time for their departure on expeditions.
76. Punna. According to Sleeman's notes in the margin: 'the Thibaw is the auspice on the right. Pilaw is appearance on the left. Thibaw must be first

- or[it is] a bad omen, Thibaw alone is good but followed by Pilaw better still. Pilaw not heard first or alone.'
77. See Turner to Dowdeswell, 24 June 1812, BCJP, P/130/56, 8 Aug. 1812 (no. 52), APAC; and Sleeman (1849). It was also common for kings and warlords to perform a *pūja* before setting out on an expedition or campaign, yet again suggesting a military affinity.
 78. Kinsley (1995), p. 94.
 79. See Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1986), p. 109–10.
 80. According to Sleeman, the thugs shouted: 'Bindachul ke jae, Bhowanee ke jae', Anonymous Article.
 81. The 'Maroodeekur' jogis mentioned six different goddesses who protected them on their thug expeditions, Giddah Bhaynath, 27 Oct. 1837, T&D, D.2-(3), NAI.
 82. See, for example, Broughton, pp. 179 and 255; and Habib, p. 195.
 83. W. Croke, *An Introduction to the Popular Religion and Folklore of Northern India* (Allahabad, 1894, reprint New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1994), p. 306.
 84. Sheodeen, Paton Collections, p. 78.
 85. See *Ramaseena*, vol. I, pp. 121 and 69–70.
 86. Hussain Trial. The activities of the thugs were also supposed to be depicted in the Ellora caves, dating from around 760 AD, *Ramaseena*, vol. I, pp. 201–2; and Tucker, p. 63 n. 1. It seems likely that it was a relief of Yama, the god of death, in the process of strangling a Brahmin, which was mistaken for a depiction of thuggee.
 87. See also Paton Collections, pp. 64/79–80.
 88. Blok (2001), p. 21.
 89. Budloo, in Perry to Dowdeswell, 10 Oct. 1812, Perry Papers, 5376.
 90. Birj Lal, Appendix A, in Shakespeare to Bayley, 30 April 1816, BCJP, P/132/44–45, 30 Aug. 1816 (no. 7), APAC.
 91. Hussain Trial.
 92. Paton Collections, pp. 19 and, 58/69.
 93. Allayar, Paton Collections, p. 76.
 94. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
 95. Feringheea, *Ramaseena*, vol. I, p. 223. See also the account of the 'Agyreea' thugs in McLeod Report.
 96. Thukoree, *ibid.*, p. 222.
 97. Deposition of Nidha, in Perry to Dowdeswell, 24 April 1810, Perry Papers, 5375.
 98. See, for instance, Thomas R. Metcalf, *Land, Landlords, and the British Raj* (London: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 5–6
 99. See *Ramaseena*, vol. I, p. 224.
 100. See, for instance, S. Bayly, pp. 28–46.
 101. It does not seem to be of any great significance that the so-called 'original' thug clans were supposed to have been Muslim.
 102. See, for instance, Metcalfe (1979), p. 4.
 103. Hobsbawm, p. 35. See also pp. 24–5 and 104; and Blok (2001), 'Bandits and Boundaries: Robber Bands and Secret Societies on the Dutch Frontier (1730–1778)', pp. 31–2.
 104. Watkins to Perry, 26 June 1812, in Perry to Guthrie, 29 June 1812, BCJP, P/130/55, 18 July 1812 (no. 37), APAC.

105. *DGUP: Etawah*, p. 43; and Sanjay Sharma, *Famine, Philanthropy and the Colonial State: North India in the Early Nineteenth Century* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001).
106. *DGUP: Etawah*, p. 43.
107. See also Hobsbawm, p. 35.
108. According to Hobsbawm: 'The ideal situation for robbery is one in which the local authorities are local men, operating in complex local situations, and where a few miles may put the robber beyond the reach or even knowledge of one set of authorities and into the territory of another, which does not worry about what happens "abroad".' Hobsbawm, p. 25.
109. Oomrao, para 54, Maunsell Proceedings.
110. See, for instance, Freitag (1991).
111. There can be no doubt that the British during the 1830s had a profound and mainly negative effect on rural India, see Mann and Sharma.
112. The disarmament of native armies, which was part of British policy right from the beginning, swelled the ranks of mercenary bands and robber gangs, especially between the Maratha wars 1803–05 and 1817–18, during which period the Indian military labour market was given its final death blow. But that does not account for the existence of thuggee pre-1800.
113. See S. Bayly, p. 35; and Sleeman (1844) *Rambles*, vol. I, p. 226.
114. See also Kolff (1990), p. 172.
115. Kalee Khan, in Perry to Dowdeswell, 24 April 1810, Perry Papers, 5375.
116. Blok (2001), p. 22.
117. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
118. Paton Collections, page preceding p. 58/69.
119. See Kasturi.
120. See Winther, pp. 82–95.
121. It should be noted that the notion of *bhaibandh* is never mentioned in the sources relating to thuggee and, accordingly, I am using it only as a means of conceptualising the phenomenon as it occurred in Sindouse.
122. See, for instance, Singha (1998), p. 191.
123. Moodie to Swinton, 3 Feb. 1824, Pol Letters from Bengal, 31 May 1826 (no. 44), BC, F/4/984/27697, APAC.
124. See Winther, pp. 91–2.
125. This line is based on Winther's statement regarding the dacoits of Chambal Valley, see Winther p. 36. It is worth noticing that in many ways my findings concerning thuggee are virtually identical to those of Winther regarding twentieth-century dacoity.

10 Halhed in Sindouse – A Second Look

1. Unless otherwise stated, the following is based primarily on Maunsell Proceedings.
2. Doorga. Perry referred to this occurrence in his examination of Laljee, para 21.
3. Halhed to Dowdeswell, 11 Oct. 1812, BCJP, P/131/6, 31 Oct. 1812 (no. 29), APAC.
4. It seems that Tejun was rapidly growing from being the smallest to becoming the largest landowner in Sindouse.
5. Halhed to Dowdeswell, 18 Oct. 1812, BC, F/4/389/9872, APAC.

6. Laljee, para 21.
7. Ibid. See also Sohbut Rae, para 22.
8. Amaun, para 23.
9. Laljee, para 21.
10. Gunesh, para 32; and Gungapershaud, para 51.
11. Gungapershaud, para 51; and Bhugwunt Sing, para 55.
12. A *tahsildar* was the official in charge of the *tahsil* or subdivision of the district. See Popham to Perry, 28 Feb. 1813, in Perry to Dowdeswell, 1 March 1813, BCJP, P/131/17, 14 May 1813 (no. 54), APAC.
13. Halhed to Dowdeswell, 18 Oct. 1812, BC, F/4/389/9872, APAC.
14. Ibid. See also Stokes, pp. 41 and 59.
15. See Mann, pp. 23–42.
16. Sohbut Rae, para 22.
17. Halhed to Dowdeswell, 12 Oct. 1812, BCJP, P/131/6, 31 Oct. 1812 (no. 31), APAC.
18. Doorgha. Halhed was actually just out on an evening ride, to reconnoitre the area – and it is very unlikely that he would have attacked a village in the evening with only a dozen troopers.
19. Gungapershaud, para 51.
20. Gunesh, para 32.
21. Halhed to Dowdeswell, 21 Feb. 1813, BCJP, P/131/14, 13 March 1813 (no. 74), APAC.
22. Murdun, para 72.
23. Bhola, para 7. ‘Sircar’ is the East India Company.
24. See Kasturi, pp. 80–1 and 176.
25. Koor Boodh Sing, para 24.
26. Murdun, para 72.
27. Ibid.
28. Gungapershaud, para 51.
29. See Strachey to Halhed, 1 Nov. 1812, HD (Foreign & Political), 4 Dec. 1812 (attached to no. 32), NAI.
30. On the role of cattle raids in Rajput feuds, see Kasturi, p. 177; and Mayaram, p. 165.
31. See Stokes (1978), pp. 120–39; Kasturi, p. 178 ff; and more generally the structuralist and ideological approach of Ranajit Guha, in *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1983).
32. The complexity of the situation also demonstrates how difficult it is to describe such events merely in terms of ‘criminal’ as perceived by the British, or ‘legitimate’ as perceived by the Rajputs. Kasturi and Mayaram, both make what comes across as a moral distinction between colonial and indigenous perceptions of banditry and rebellion, see Kasturi, pp. 200–1; and Mayaram, p. 142.
33. See *The Madras Almanac for the year 1812* (Madras: Asylum Press, 1812), p. 39. Thanks to Sanchari Dutta for this reference.
34. With a string of contingent incidents preceding it, the event of the attack on Halhed was in fact constituted by misunderstandings, and may be regarded in terms of Marshall Sahlins’s ‘structure of the conjuncture’; see, for instance, Sahlins ‘The Return of the Event, Again’, in Aletta Biersack (ed.), *Clio in Oceania – Toward a Historical Anthropology* (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994), pp. 37–99 (p. 47).
35. See *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, p. 86.

11 Sindouse – The Aftermath

1. Strachey to Halhed, 27 Oct. 1812, HD (Foreign & Political), 4 Dec. 1812 (no. 32), NAI.
2. Strachey to Halhed, 30 Oct. 1812, HD (Foreign & Political), 4 Dec. 1812 (attached to no. 32), NAI.
3. Dowdeswell to Halhed, 31 Oct. 1812, BCJP, P/131/6, 31 Oct. 1812 (no. 33), APAC.
4. Dowdeswell to Halhed, 7 Nov. 1812, BC, F/4/389/9872, APAC.
5. Popham to Fagan, 9 Nov. 1812, Mill Dept, 24 Dec 1812 (no. 5), NAI.
6. *Ibid.*; and Halhed to Dowdeswell, 23 Oct. 1812, BC, F/4/389/9872, APAC.
7. Popham to Fagan, 14 Nov. 1812, Mill Dept, 24 Dec. 1812 (no. 10), NAI.
8. Fagan to Popham, 21 Nov. 1812, Mill Dept, 24 Dec 1812 (no. 11), NAI. It should of course be remembered that relations between Sindhia and the British were extremely precarious and the possibility of open hostilities never far off.
9. Gardiner to Fagan, 24 Dec. 1812, Mill Dept, 26 Dec. 1812 (no. 16), NAI.
10. Halhed to Dowdeswell, 19 Nov. 1812, BC, F/4/389/9872, APAC.
11. See Bukhut Lodeh, para 42.
12. Fagan to Gardiner, 5 Dec. 1812, BCJP, P/131/9, 24 Dec. 1812 (no. 34), APAC.
13. Perry to Dowdeswell, 17 Dec. 1812, BCJP, P/131/11, 2 Jan. 1813 (no. 41), APAC.
14. Doorgha.
15. See receipt of 10 Dec. 1812, in Popham to Fagan, 14 Dec. 1812, HD, Foreign & Political, Procs Mill Dept, 13 Feb. 1813 (nos. 33–34), NAI.
16. See Maunsell proceedings.
17. See ‘no. 42’, in Perry to Dowdeswell, 21 June 1813, BCJP, P/131/9, 10 July 1813 (no. 39), APAC.
18. Doorgha.
19. See Kolff (1990), ‘Index’, p. 215.
20. Munohur Kachwaha, para 35.
21. Dureao, para 43.
22. Thukoree, *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, p. 222.
23. *Ibid.*, p. 219.
24. *Ibid.*, see also p. 157.
25. *Ibid.*, p. 221.
26. Sheikh Inayat, *ibid.*, p. 226.
27. Sheikh Inayat.
28. Nujjurn Qodeen, Appendix A, in Shakespeare to Bayley, 30 April 1816, BJC, P/132/44–45, 30 Aug. 1816 (no. 7), APAC.
29. Doorgha; and Stockwell to Wauchope, 10 June 1815, *Ramaseeana* vol. II, pp. 366–8; and Stockwell to Perry, 11 Aug. 1815, *ibid.*, pp. 371–3.
30. *Ramaseeana*, vol. II, p. 367 (*italics in original*).
31. See Thukoree and Feringheea, *op cit*.
32. Halhed to Perry, 10 Dec. 1812, in Perry to Dowdeswell, 15 Jan. 1813, BCJP, P/131/12, 30 Jan. 1813 (no. 62), APAC. (‘Halhed Report’).
33. *Ibid.*
34. I have not been able to find the term given by Halhed – ‘Khumnakee’ – in the *Hidaya*, see Charles Hamilton (trans.), *The Hedaya, or guide; a commentary on the Mussulman laws* (London, 1791).

35. See, for instance, W. Wright to Dowdeswell, 18 Sept. 1810, BCJP, P/130/22, 9 Oct. 1810 (no. 69), APAC.
36. Perry to Dowdeswell, 16 Dec. 1812, Perry Papers, 5376.
37. Moore to Batson, 27 Jan. 1813, BCJP, P/131/17, 14 May 1813 (no. 58), APAC.
38. Batson to Perry, 22 Feb. 1813, BCJP, P/131/17, 14 May 1813 (no. 56), APAC.
39. Popham to Perry, 28 Feb. 1813, in Perry to Dowdeswell, 1 March 1813, BCJP, P/131/17, 14 May 1813 (no. 54), APAC.
40. Ibid.
41. Perry to BoC, 26 Feb. 1813, Perry Papers, 5378; and Dowdeswell to Perry, 15 May 1813, BCJP, P/131/17, 14 May 1813 (no. 59), APAC.
42. Guthrie to Perry, no date, BCJP, P/131/17, 14 May 1813 (no. 57), APAC.
43. Perry to Dowdeswell, 15 Jan. 1813, BCJP, P/131/12, 30 Jan. 1813 (no. 62), APAC; and Dowdeswell to Perry, 30 Jan. 1813, BCJP, P/131/12, 30 Jan. 1813 (no. 65), APAC.

12 Continued Measures against Thugs

1. Perry to Dowdeswell, 10 Nov. 1812, Extract Procs JD, 26 Nov. 1812, Home Dept (Foreign & Political), 11 Dec. 1812 (no. 24), NAI.
2. Dowdeswell to Perry, 26 Nov. 1812, *ibid.*
3. Order of GG in C, in Jenkins to Wauchope, 27 June 1813, Extract Procs PD, 20 Aug. 1813 (no. 4), BCJP, P/131/21, 28 Aug. 1813, APAC.
4. Perry to Shakespeare, 7 Aug. 1813, Perry Papers, 5379 ('Perry Report').
5. Blunt to Dowdeswell, 28 Oct. 1813, BCJP, P/131/23, 6 Nov. 1813 (no. 42), APAC. 49 cases of murder by thuggee were reported for 1813, see 'no. 34', Blunt to Dowdeswell, 31 May 1814, BCJP, P/131/41, 5 July 1814 (no. 32), APAC.
6. Blunt to Dowdeswell, 31 May 1814, BCJP, P/131/41, 5 July 1814 (no. 32), APAC.
7. Blunt to Dowdeswell, 31 July 1814, BCJP, P/131/45, 9 Aug. 1814 (no. 56), APAC.
8. Shakespeare to Bayley, 30 April 1815, BCJP, P/132/11, 27 Sept. 1815 (no. 193–5), APAC.
9. This was of course logical if the broadest meaning of the term 'thug' was applied, but the lack of a more detailed distinction remained a problem, see, for instance, Bird to Bayley, Aug. 1815, BCJP, P/132/6, 5 Aug. 1815 (no. 12), APAC.
10. Shakespeare to Bayley, 30 April 1815, BCJP, P/132/11, 27 Sept. 1815 (no. 193–5), APAC.
11. Bayley to Shakespeare, 23 Aug. 1815, BCJP, P/132/11, 27 Sept. 1815 (no. 200), APAC.
12. Perry to Dowdeswell, 3 May 1814, BCJP, P/131/38, 20 May 1814 (no. 67), APAC.
13. Ibid.
14. Stockwell to Wauchope, 22 Dec. 1814, *Ramaseeana*, vol. II, pp. 364–6.
15. Stockwell to Wauchope, 14 Oct. 1814, *ibid.*, pp. 362–4.
16. Shakespeare to Bayley, 8 July 1816, BCJP, P/132/44, 22 July 1816 (no. 1), APAC; and Stockwell to Close, 13 Aug. 1816, Perry Papers, 5379.

17. Shakespeare to Bayley, 30 April 1816, BCJP, P/132/44–45, 30 Aug. 1816 (no. 7), APAC.
18. To show that thugs were known under different names in different parts of India, Shakespeare quoted from the previously mentioned work of 1813 by James Forbes, where the word *phansigar* is used.
19. Bayley to Shakespeare, 30 Aug. 1816, BCJP, P/132/46, 30 Aug. 1816 (no. 23), APAC.
20. Shakespeare 'Observations regarding Badheks and T'hegs', *Asiatic Researches*, 13 (1820): 282–92.
21. Elliot to Turnbull, 19 July 1817, BCJP, P/133/44, 9 April 1818 (no. 20), APAC.
22. See also Ainslie to Ewer, 3 March 1826, BCJP, P/136/62, 27 March 1826 (in no. 14), APAC.
23. Ewer to Bayley, 26 May 1818, BCJP, P/134/10, 30 July 1818 (no. 21), APAC.
24. Reg. VIII of 1818, V/8/19, APAC.
25. Perry to Shakespeare, 24 Dec. 1818, BCJP, P/134/6, 19 March 1819 (no. 10), APAC.
26. Stockwell to Ewer, 30 March 1819, in Ewer to Bayley, 6 April 1819, BCJP, P/134/6, 16 April 1819 (no. 6), APAC.
27. Ibid.
28. Stockwell seems to have drawn on British notions of vagrancy and the danger of idleness.
29. Reg. III of 1819, V/8/19, APAC.
30. Dorin to Bayley, 25 Aug. 1820, BCJP, P/134/42, 25 Aug. 1820 (no. 14), APAC.
31. 'Final order ...', 30 Nov. 1819, in Dorin to Bayley, 25 Aug. 1820, BCJP, P/134/42, 25 Aug. 1820 (no. 14), APAC.
32. Ibid.
33. Wellesley to Stewart, 25 June 1819, BC, F/4/774/20927, 24 July 1819 (no. 46), APAC; and *Ramaseeana*, vol. II, pp. 139–41.
34. Molony to Stewart, 1 Oct. 1820, in *Ramaseeana*, vol. II, pp. 132–3.
35. Molony to Maddock, 1 Oct. 1820, *ibid.*, p. 136.
36. F. C. Smith to Princep, 19 Nov. 1830, BC, F/4/1309/52131 – 1, APAC.
37. Caulfield to Ochterlony, 25 June 1822, in *Ramaseeana*, vol. II, pp. 124–5 and 130.
38. Procs by Moodie, 19 Nov. 1823, Extract Pol Letter from Bengal, 31 May 1826 (no. 45 – 1), BC, F/4/984/27697, APAC.
39. There was even some cooperation and exchange of approvers between Moodie and officials in Hyderabad, see *Ramaseeana*, vol. II, pp. 271–98.
40. Moodie to Swinton, 3 Feb. 1824, Extract Pol Letter from Bengal, 31 May 1826 (no. 44), BC, F/4/984/27697, APAC.
41. Swinton to Majoribanks, 20 April 1824, Extract Pol Letter from Bengal, 31 May 1826 (no. 46), BC, F/4/984/27697, APAC.
42. Ewer to Ainslie, 17 June 1824, Extract Pol Letter from Bengal, 31 May 1826 (attached to no. 35), BC, F/4/984/27697, APAC.
43. See Extract Pol Letter from Bengal, 10 Dec. 1828, BC, F/4/1251/50480 – 1, APAC.
44. Swinton to Majoribanks, 6 Aug. 1824, Pol Letter from Bengal, 31 May 1826 (no. 36), BC, F/4/984/27697, APAC.
45. See Sherwood. The article had first been printed in 1816 in the *Madras Literary Gazette*.

46. See Sherwood, p. 250. In Tamil they were called 'Ari Túlúcar' (Muslim stranglers), in Canari: 'Tantí Callerú' (thieves who use a catgut noose), and in Telagu: 'Warlu Wahndlú' (people who use the noose), *ibid.*
47. Sherwood knew of the thugs of Northern India through, for instance, the Perry Report.
48. See van Woerkens, pp. 151 and 288.
49. See, for example, Fhlathúin.
50. '... it may be conjectured that many persons, deprived by the declension of the Mohammedan power of their wonted resources, were tempted to resort to criminal courses to obtain a subsistence.' *Ibid.*, p. 271.
51. Unfortunately, no work has been done on the *phansigars* of the Madras presidency, and it falls outside the scope of the present book to do so, but see the following: Hjeje, pp. 285–92; *Ramaseeana*, vol. II, pp. 304–9; and Grant to Regr FA, 25 July 1810, MJP, P/322/54, 19 Feb. 1811, APAC. There are a handful of the primary sources in the Madras Judicial Proceedings, APAC.
52. In the Deccan too the word 'phansigar' was used by the prisoners themselves, see Procs of Court of Enquiry by order of Lieut. Col. C. Deacon, Commg Light Field Div Hyderabad Subsidiary Force, 8 Oct. 1823, in *Ramaseeana*, vol. II, p. 272.
53. Malcolm (1823), vol. II, p. 187.
54. Marquess of Hastings, *Summary of the administration of the Indian Government* (London, 1824), pp. 51–2. Also quoted in *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, pp. 17–19.
55. *Phansigars* apprehended in 1823, in Hyderabad, described how they had served with thugs from Northern India, including those of Sindouse and Murnae and had been on expeditions to Sagar, Jabalpur, Nagpur and Aurangabad, see Sheriff to Deacon, 13 Oct. 1823, *Ramaseeana*, vol. II, p. 292.
56. BoD to GG in C, 26 April 1820, BD, E/4/699, APAC.

13 The Operations Commence

1. Fraser to Wilder, 1826, in *Ramaseeana*, vol. II, pp. 46–50.
2. F. C. Smith to Wilder, 9 Nov. 1826, *Ramaseeana* vol. II, pp. 51–3.
3. Pringle to Barwell, 9 May 1827, *Ramaseeana*, vol. II, p. 250–65.
4. While one informer was later killed by the thugs, another fled in order to save his life, *ibid.*
5. Rujub, in *Ramaseeana*, vol. II, p. 245–7. Pringle's own conduct: 'was visited with the severest censure; and both the Government and Nizamut Adawlut were led into a belief, that there was no such gang of Thugs, and that the crime, if it existed at all, was very limited in its extent'. Pringle to Ramsay, 3 Feb. 1836, *Ramaseeana*, vol. II, pp. 247–9.
6. Hodges to Devetre, 24 March 1829, *Ramaseeana*, vol. II, pp. 75–85.
7. Boyde to Sleeman, 13 Dec. 1831, *Ramaseeana*, vol. II, pp. 86–7. 'King's evidence' is the term used rather than 'approver'.
8. See *ibid.*, p. 75.
9. Budja Bheel, Extract Bengal Pol Cons, 23 Oct. 1829 (no. 57), BC, F/4/1251/50480(1), APAC.
10. Amanoolah, *Ramaseeana*, vol. II, pp. 387–95. He later gave a full deposition before Borthwick and the discovery of further bodies of victims corroborated his account.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 388; see also pp. 396–421.
12. Stewart to Swinton, 12 Aug. 1829, *Ramaseeana* vol. II, pp. 378–9.
13. Malwa had only been under British influence since 1818, but it was becoming an important area for trade and opium.
14. Swinton to Stewart, 23 Oct. 1829, *Ramaseeana*, vol. II, pp. 379–84.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Borthwick also requested that the approvers should be set at liberty after they had fulfilled their obligations, Borthwick to Stewart, 10 Dec. 1829, Extract Bengal Pol Cons, 15 Jan. 1830, BC, F/4/1251/50480(1), APAC.
17. The resolution had been drafted by Swinton, see ‘Note by Secretary on Gang of Thugs’, 10 Oct. 1829, Extract Bengal Pol Cons, 23 Oct. 1829 (no. 62), BC, F/4/1251/50480(1), APAC.
18. This, as we have seen, had not prevented Perry from keeping suspects imprisoned without conviction or the Government from using Indian allies to punish thugs.
19. See Singha (1998), pp. 172–3.
20. The thugs about to be hung supposedly: ‘made full and public confessions of their guilt, attesting to the truth of the depositions of the evidences, and declaring that their fathers and grandfathers had been thugs, that they themselves had followed the same calling, and that the fate which now awaited them was only what hundreds had met at their own hands.’ Borthwick to Stewart, 7 Feb. 1830, Extract Bengal Pol Cons, 5 March 1830 (enclosed in no. 46), BC, F/4/1251/50480(1), APAC. Such statements obviously played right into the stereotype of thuggee that was now beginning to take shape.
21. See Extract Pol Letter from Bengal, 26 Dec. 1829, BC, F/4/1251/50480(1), APAC.
22. ‘Note by Secretary on Gang of Thugs’, 10 Oct. 1829, Extract Bengal Pol Cons, 23 Oct. 1829 (no. 62), BC, F/4/1251/50480(1), APAC.
23. Swinton to Ainslie, 23 Oct. 1829, *Ramaseeana* vol. II, p.386.
24. Sleeman to Smith, 13 May 1830, BC, F/4/1251/50480(2), APAC. This is Sleeman’s first involvement in the measures against thuggee.
25. Oliver to Sleeman, 10 Dec. 1829, BC, F/4/1251/50480(2), APAC; and Sleeman to F. C. Smith, 13 May 1830, BC, F/4/1251/50480(2), APAC.
26. Sleeman to F. C. Smith, 13 May 1830, BC, F/4/1251/50480(2), APAC.
27. *Ibid.* Sleeman had enclosed a map in his letter, which we unfortunately do not have anymore. The construction of maps showing the routes and murder places of the thugs was to become a recurrent factor in the thuggee campaign.
28. *Ibid.*
29. F. C. Smith to Swinton, 5 July 1830, BC, F/4/1251/50480-(2), APAC.
30. ‘Note by the Secretary’, 3 Aug. 1830, BC, F/4/1251/50480(2), APAC.
31. *Ibid.*
32. The Government ordered that: ‘their name and the words “Convicted Thug” may be stamped on the back or shoulders of all sentenced to seven years imprisonment and upwards, a deviation from the Regulations fully warranted by the enormity of the crime of Thuggism which justly places those who practise it beyond the pale of social law.’ Swinton to F. C. Smith, 4 Aug. 1830, BC, F/4/1251/50480(2), APAC.

33. *Ramaseeana*, vol. II, pp. 127–8. See also Clare Anderson, 'Godna: Inscribing Indian Convicts in the Nineteenth Century', in Jane Caplan (ed.), *Written on the Body – The Tattoo in European and American History* (London: Reaktion, 2000), pp. 102–17. For depictions of different types of branding, see Paton Collections, pp. 7 and 269–71.
34. Swinton to F. C. Smith, 4 Aug. 1830, BC, F/4/1251/50480(2), APAC.
35. Borthwick to Cartwright, 30 April 1830, BC, F/4/1251/50480(2), APAC.
36. See Sleeman to F. C. Smith, 5 April 1830, BC, F/4/1251/50480(2), APAC.
37. Cartwright to Swinton, 31 May 1830, Extract Bengal Pol Cons, 11 June 1830 (no. 27), BC, F/4/1251/50480(1), APAC.
38. F. C. Smith, Agt Sagar and Narbada, to G. Swinton, Chief Secy Govt, 5 July 1830, BC, F/4/1251/50480-(2), APAC.
39. F. C. Smith, Agt Sagar and Narbada, to H. J. Princep, Secy Pol Dept, 19 Nov. 1830, BC, F/4/1309/52131 (1), APAC.
40. *Ibid.*
41. Princep to Swinton, 27 Dec. 1830, BC, F/4/1309/52131(1), APAC.
42. F. C. Smith to Swinton, 21 Sept. 1830, BC, F/4/1251/50480(2), APAC.
43. Anonymous Article.
44. *Ibid.* The author went even further in his historical comparisons: 'When the pope authorised the murder of the unhappy Americans by the Spaniards, they were sacrifices to Christ and the Apostles with more sanguinary avidity than the people of India have ever been by the votaries of Bhowanee ...' *Ibid.*
45. *Ibid.*
46. Capt. W. H. Sleeman, Princl Asst Agt Jabalpur, to F.C. Smith, Agt Sagar and Narbada, 13 May 1830, BC, F/4/1251/50480(2), APAC.
47. It is similar to the accounts of both John Fryer (1698) and Fanny Parkes (1830). Parkes quoted Sleeman's article, vol. I, pp. 151–8, but see also pp. 201–2.
48. To the extent that the thugs had a 'connection' with the temple of Devi of Vindhyaçal, it reflected their appropriation of Rajput ritual practices: 'All Bundela royal houses worshipped Vindhyaçalini Devi as their clan goddess (*kula devi*) ...', see Ravindra K. Jain, *Between History and Legend – Status and Power in Bundelkhand* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2002), p. 13. For a very interesting discussion of this particular aspect, see Cynthia Ann Humes, 'Rajas, Thugs, and Mafiosos: Religion and Politics in the Worship of Vindhyaçalini', in Sabrina Petra Ramet and Donald W. Treadgold (eds), *Render unto Caesar: Religion and Politics in Cross-Cultural Perspective* (Washington, DC: American University Press, 1995), pp. 219–47.
49. It is possible, however, that this alleged belief reflected the Rajput martial ethos, as found in the *Mahabharatha*, for instance, according to which warriors who die in battle attain glory in the afterlife (thanks to Paul Dundas for making this point).
50. *Sati* was often referred to as human sacrifice and its abolition came to symbolise the spirit of reform of the 1830s, see, for instance, Singha (1998), pp. 83–5, 115–17 and 119–20.
51. 'Note by Secretary Swinton', 4 Oct. 1830, BC, F/4/1251/50480(2), APAC.
52. Nevertheless, the Christian rationale of Smith's argument cannot be ignored.
53. *Ibid.*
54. Swinton to F. C. Smith, 8 Oct. 1830, BC, F/4/1251/50480 (2), APAC.
55. Swinton to F. C. Smith, 13 Oct. 1830, BC, F/4/1251/50480 (2), APAC.

14 The Thuggee Campaign

1. F. C. Smith to Princep, 19 Nov. 1830, BC, F/4/1309/52131 (1), APAC.
2. The argument was that since: 'Thugs are generally hereditary there could be no injustice in chaining the lion's whelps, till the lion himself is disposed of.'
3. *Ibid.*
4. On phrenology and thuggee, see Crispin Bates, 'Race, Caste and Tribe in Central India: The Early Origins of Anthropometry', in *Edinburgh Papers in South Asian Studies*, no. 3, (Edinburgh, 1995).
5. Smith stated that: 'nothing could screen me from men interested in defaming my official conduct at Meerut', see F. C. Smith to Princep, 19 Nov. 1830, BC, F/4/1309/52131 (1), APAC.
6. Princep to F. C. Smith, 28 Dec. 1830, *ibid.*
7. *Ibid.*
8. For a comprehensive account of the early phase of the operations, see F. C. Smith to Swinton, 20 June 1832, in Sinha *Selected Records*, pp. 104–26.
9. See also Lieut. Reynolds, 'On the Thugs', *The New Monthly Magazine*, 38 (1833): 277–87; and J. A. R. Stevenson, 'Some accounts of the P'hansigárs, or Gang-robbers and of the Shudgarshids, or Tribes of Jugglers', *JRAS*, 1 (1834): 280–4.
10. See, for instance, F. C. Smith to Swinton, 26 May 1832, BC, F/4/1405/55519, APAC.
11. Attached to W. H. Sleeman, Asst Agt Sagar, to W. H. Macnaghten, Secy Govt, 10 Aug. 1833, T&D, D.1-(2), NAI.
12. Sheikh Inayat; and Sleeman to F. C. Smith, 7 Jan. 1831, BC, F/4/1309/52131(1), APAC.
13. Doorgha.
14. Kuhadut and Bukhtawur, 16 May 1810, Perry Papers, 5375.
15. Regarding Sleeman's assertion that many of the thugs arrested in the first half of the 1830s were descendants of the Sindouse thugs, see 1797 list, *Ramaseeana*, vol. II, pp. 155–224; and list of thugs apprehended 1829–36, K.1-(1), 1829–36, T&D, NAI.
16. See Bayly (1983).
17. 'Outline map exhibiting the places of the murders for which the Thugs were convicted at Saugor during the sessions of 1831/32, compiled by Capt. Robb, Saugor, 5th July 1832', F77/6A, NAI.
18. Paton drew up a similar map in 1838, showing the routes of the thugs operating in Awadh, see 'Paton Collections', also reproduced in Sleeman (1840).
19. A curious aspect of the map is the huge 'empty' space right in the middle where no murders took place, covering the area between Banda, Sironj, Kota and Dhaulpur. This is the area the thugs themselves inhabited and where they generally refrained from carrying out their operations in order not to incur the displeasure of the local rulers, see F77/6A, NAI.
20. See F. C. Smith to Macnaghten, 4 May 1832, BC, F/4/1407/55522, APAC; and Graeme to F. C. Smith, 23 May 1832, T&D, B.2(1), NAI.
21. F. C. Smith to Macnaghten, 29 Aug. 1834, BC, F/4/1566/64216, APAC.
22. 'Report on the state of the Sagar and Narbada Territories' by Bird, 31 Oct. 1834, BC, F/4/1566/64216, APAC.
23. Resolution of Govt, 7 Jan. 1835, BC, F/4/1566/64217, APAC.

24. Macnaghten to F. C. Smith, 5 March 1835, BC, F/4/1566/64217, APAC.
25. F. C. Smith to Macnaghten, 17 April 1835, BC, F/4/1567/64218, APAC.
26. Macnaghten to F. C. Smith, 23 April 1833, T&D, B.2(3), NAI.
27. *Ibid.*
28. Sleeman to Macnaghten, 8 Sept 1836, BC, F/4/1685/67998, APAC.
29. 'Extract Proceedings by the Governor General of India in the Legislative Department', 14 Nov. 1836, BC, F/4/1685/68000, APAC. The fact that the publication of *Ramaseeana* coincides with the passing of the Act is probably no more than a coincidence, since Sleeman does not actually mention the need for such legal innovation in his book. The book was originally intended as an article on the 'Ramasee' alone, see Sleeman to Macnaghten, 24 July 1835, BC, F/4/1567/64219, APAC.
30. See Hjejle, p. 426; also Singha (1998), p. 168.
31. Legeyt to Willoughby, 30/12–36, BC, F/4/1760/72103, APAC. See also Hjejle, pp. 325–6. See also Act XVIII and XIX of 1837 commenting on Act XXX of 1836, Govt of India to CoD, 16 Oct. 1837, BC, F/4/1760/72113, APAC.
32. See Sinha *Selected Records*, pp. 94–8 and 102–3; and Singha (1998), p. 209.
33. See Hjejle, p. 355.
34. See, for instance, W. H. Russell, *The Prince of Wales' Tour of India* (London, 1877), pp. 513–15.
35. 'Tabular Statement', 14 Oct. 1835, *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, pp. 38–9. From 1836 till 1847 a further 2662 prisoners were convicted, but these also include dacoits and the overall numbers are uncertain, see Hjejle, pp. 428–31.
36. See Singha (1998), p. 220.

15 From Sindouse to Sagar

1. Sherwood, p. 272.
2. See Fisch, pp. 85–9.
3. Ginzburg *Ecstasies*, p. 10.

Epilogue

1. The following is based on the interviews I conducted with inhabitants of Sindouse (Sandaus), Bindowa and Murnae (Madnai) on two occasions in December 2002 and November 2004. I am greatly indebted to the friendliness and hospitality of Pradhan Malkhan Singh Kushwah, and the help of English-teacher K. P. Dubej and Jyotirmoy Chaudhuri.
2. The village elders together wrote up a short genealogy of Laljee's family for me and could even tell of one of his brothers who returned to the village after 1812.
3. There is still some animosity towards the British for 'leaving the Muslims in majority' and thereby causing the Partition.
4. The oldest houses in Sindouse had supposedly been built by thugs – unfortunately they no longer exist!
5. See *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, p. 223.
6. *Ramaseeana*, vol. I, note, p. 37.
7. Stockwell to Perry.

8. I felt unable to do anything but make a monetary contribution towards solving the problem; by doing so I hope that I have not contributed to the extinction of any endangered species.
9. It should be added that I never felt otherwise.
10. Shekhar Kapur, Director, *Bandit Queen* (Channel Four Films and Kaleidoscope, 1994). See also Mala Sen, *India's Bandit Queen: The True Story of Phoolan Devi* (London: Harvill, 1993, reprint 2001), p. 144.

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