

ACTING IN THE “THEATRE OF
ANARCHY” :
THE 'ANTI-THUG CAMPAIGN' AND
ELABORATIONS OF COLONIAL RULE
IN EARLY NINETEENTH-CENTURY INDIA

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TOM LLOYD

I. GHULAM HUSSAIN: THE FIRST 'THUG'?

Between 1808-9, Thomas Perry, the East India Company's new magistrate in the turbulent north-Indian district of Etawah, was confronted with the discovery of more than sixty mutilated corpses in wells and ditches scattered along the region's busy highways.² Perry offered a 1,000-rupee reward for information about the bodies, and, following a lead from an informant, eight men were arrested on suspicion of murder. One of them, a twenty-year old agricultural labourer named Ghulam Hussain, confessed. Several of Ghulam's associates subsequently admitted to murdering travellers over many years as members of a gang led by a certain Ujba, describing their methods in lurid detail:

[We] murdered him in the following manner: Ramsooth...strangled him with a handkerchief; when he was senseless one of the party inflicted wounds with a knife in both eyes and another wounded him, in the same manner, in his belly so that no person might recognize the body.... [We then] buried the corpse in a nullah about a mile to the left of the road.³

For Perry, this was confirmation of the existence of 'thuggee'⁴ – a specifically 'Indian' form of brigandage whereby unsuspecting travellers were inveigled from the roads by duplicitous highwaymen before being garrotted, robbed and buried. After several weeks of interrogations, it emerged that a few thousand 'thugs' were living under the protection of the *zamindars* of their home villages on either side of the river Jamuna

¹ This is H. H. Spry's phrase. *idem.*, *Modern India; with Illustrations of the Resources and Capabilities of Hindústan*, (Whittaker & Co., London, 1837), Vol. I, p. 155.

² In 1808, Etawah was a recently-acquired, important frontier region on the outermost reaches of territories controlled by the Company in north-western India, bordering lands controlled by the Marathas. The district was also an established and significant routeway for indigenous merchants and pilgrims, suffered from unstable agricultural conditions, and had a reputation for lawlessness. W. Hamilton, *The East-India Gazetteer*, (first published 1815; 2nd edn., Parybury, Allen, and Co., London, 1828), Vol. I, p. 544; T. Perry, Magistrate of Etawah, to G. Dowdeswell, Secretary of the Judicial Department, 9 Dec. 1808, Perry Papers, Add. Mss. 5375, CUL, quoted in C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780 – 1870* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1996), p. 174.

³ Dash, *op. cit.*, p. 32. Extracts from Perry's interrogation of Ghulam Hussain can be found in the Perry Papers, Add. Mss. 5375, CUL, fos. 110-14, 117-22, and those of his associates – 'Dullal', 'Kalee Khan', and 'Acbar' – in *ibid.*, fos. 125-35.

⁴ To emphasise the problematic nature of the terms 'thuggee', 'thug', and 'thugs' (plural, possessive), to keep vivid for the reader the mutability of their meanings depending on the location, in time and space, of their enunciator, I place them in inverted commas throughout the dissertation, except when quoting other authors, in which case their spelling and usage is retained. For the same reason, I refer to 'thuggee' as a phenomenon, dependent on human perceptions.

between Lucknow and Jaipur, venturing out in small gangs to work the roads of Etawah. The 'confessions' of these 'thugs', wrote Perry, were

...so extraordinary that the whole might be considered fabulous, were we not aware that it is no unusual circumstance to discover six or eight murdered bodies, and sometimes a greater number, in pits and wells.⁵

Yet Perry also noted that the methods used by the 'thugs' made it difficult to produce evidence adequate to prove each man's culpability for a specific attack, especially since no witnesses to them were left alive:

...by destroying all living testimony to the fact...[the perpetrators] precluded the possibility of any complaints being preferred...and consequently in no[t] one of the cases which has been reported to the office has any individual been directly implicated.⁶

Without witnesses to the attacks, or even formal complaints from relatives of the victims, the sole proof of the prisoners' guilt was their testimonies, which meant Perry was unable to complete prosecution and punishment of the Etawah 'thugs' under the law then followed by the Company in India. Instead, the Company's wrath fell upon Murnae, one of the villages in the neighbouring district of 'Sindouse', where several hundred 'thugs' had fled after Perry begun arresting suspects in 1810.⁷ In November 1812, N. J. Halhed, the Assistant to the Superintendent of Police of the Western Provinces, led an attack on Murnae, razing and ploughing the village to symbolise the extirpation of 'thuggee' from Etawah.⁸

Less than two decades after Perry's comparatively isolated encounter with 'thuggee' the colonial administration had grown so concerned about the phenomenon that an 'Anti-Thug Campaign' (ATC) was sanctioned to eradicate "thug associations in India".⁹ Between 1826 and 1841, 3,064 indigenes were accused of 'thuggee', found guilty, and sentenced to imprisonment, transportation, or execution.¹⁰ Like their predecessors of the 1810s, the British authorities investigating 'thuggee' in India in the 1830s—officers of the 'Thuggee Department' (TD)—perceived many difficulties in generating proof for their suspicions: 'thugs' were stealthy, elusive, and allegedly protected by landed patrons. No witnesses survived their attacks, and scant forensic evidence remained. Furthermore, William Sleeman, who became the General

⁵ Perry to Dowdeswell, 11 Apr. 1810, Perry Papers, fos. 115-117, quoted in Dash, *op. cit.*, pp. 30-1.

⁶ Perry to Dowdeswell, 1 Mar. 1812, Perry Papers, fos. 113-117, quoted in *ibid.*, p. 34.

⁷ Sindouse, immediately south of Etawah, bordered the Marathas' territory—where the majority of the 'thugs' living along the banks of the Jamuna had headed. 'Sindouse' is now Sandaus in Uttar Pradesh.

⁸ I am indebted to the research of Christopher Bayly, Kim Wagner and Mike Dash, which I have plundered extensively for information about Perry's encounter with 'thugs' circa 1810. See C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information*, esp. pp. 174-5; K. A. Wagner, 'The Deconstructed Stranglers: A Reassessment of Thuggee', *MAS*, 38, 4 (2004), esp. pp. 950-962; Dash, *op. cit.*, esp. pp. 7-52. For accounts of British operations against 'thuggee' circa 1809-1815, see E. M. Thornton, *Illustrations of the History and Practices of the Thugs* (first published 1837; repr. Asian Educational Services, New Delhi, 2000), esp. pp. 271-327, and W. H. Sleeman, *Ramaseeana, or a Vocabulary of the Peculiar Language Used by the Thugs* (G. H. Huttman, Military Orphan Press, Calcutta, 1836), esp. Appendices U, V, and W, pp. 304-375.

⁹ G. Swinton, Chief Secretary to the Supreme Government, to F. C. Smith, Agent to the Governor General in the Sagar and Narmada Territories, 8 Oct. 1830, in *SRT*, pp. 9-10.

¹⁰ 'Tabular Statement of the Results of Thug trials held in India, 1826-41', in P. Meadows Taylor, 'State of Thuggee in India', *British and Foreign Review* XV, 29 (1843), p. 293.

Superintendent of the TD, claimed that the wider population were either too terrified to testify against them, or too ignorant of the menace that lurked in the margins of their societies. Proof of 'thuggee', it seemed, could only come from 'thugs' themselves.¹¹

Therefore, just as Perry warily reflected that his 'discoveries' might seem "fabulous", so historians must be open to the possibility that the discourse on 'thuggee' is entirely self-referential; its only basis in actuality being the existence of the discourse itself. I begin by addressing this possibility in the context of an analysis of the most important historiographical debates about 'thuggee'. An inquiry into 'historical truth' is the predominant theme of this analysis because, like the British officials who encountered and sought to suppress 'thuggee' in the 1830s, recent (Anglophone¹²) historians have been preoccupied by the issue of its existence or non-existence independently of the colonial mind. To put this debate crudely: if 'thuggee' existed, then the colonial administration was justified in suppressing it; if it was a colonial fantasy pinned on hapless indigenes, it was not. By extension, if history constitutes the 'truth' about the past, it offers the means to resolve this debate. From the contextualising exercise of an historiographical analysis, I move to a more specific exploration of the ATC, particularly the processes by which 'thugs' were located and prosecuted in the changing colonial legal discourse of the 1830s. As the colonial state moved to suppress 'thuggee', it defined particular approaches to indigenous criminality, the records of which in turn yield insights into the methods of and ambitions for British governmentality in India. The investigation of the constitution of indigenous criminality and its relationships to colonial governmentality is developed in the final section of my essay, in which the scope of my representation of the colonisers' engagements with 'thuggee' again widens, to consider the imbrication of the campaign to suppress this 'criminal' phenomenon with elaborations of the justification for *and* implementation of British colonial rule in India in the nineteenth century.

* * *

II. HISTORIOGRAPHICAL DEBATES ON 'THUGGEE'

Trapped in an Historiographic Impasse: Reconstructive Revisionism versus Relativist Representations

According to principles laid down in the Islamic legal code by which it was influenced in the early nineteenth century, the *Nizamat Adalat* (the Company's supreme court, located in Bengal) was unwilling to uphold guilty verdicts based solely on the testimony of confessing prisoners. Therefore, in 1812, it dismissed the case against Ghulam Hussain and his associates, admonishing Perry for using "irregular" procedures to bring it before the court in the first place.¹³ A historical assessment of the processes by which Ghulam's 'confession' was obtained, and particularly the hyperbolic content of the claims made in it, likewise challenges the surefootedness of Perry's claim to have straightforwardly 'uncovered' 'thuggee' in Etawah *circa* 1810. Dash notes that Ghulam did not so much *confess* to being a 'thug' as agree to the

¹¹ See Sleeman, *Ramaseena*, Introduction, pp. 11-12, 26-7, 32-9, 53-6.

¹² There are several French and German accounts of 'thuggee' that I am aware of but have not read. In particular, R de Pont-Jest, *Le process des Thugs* (Paul Dupont, Paris, 1879); G. Pfirrmann, 'Religiöser Charakter und Organisation der Thag-Brüderschaften' (unpub. Ph.D. dissertation, Universität zu Tübingen, 1970).

¹³ Dash, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-2.

suggestion, or accusation, that he was by one of Perry's interrogators. This 'admission' was then repeated before Perry, in translation, three weeks later.¹⁴ Furthermore, Ghulam successively increased the number of killings he had been involved in each time he was cross-examined by Perry. From the initial claim that he had merely watched others strangle a victim, he went on to admit to his direct participation in one, then four, then fourteen, then about sixty, and finally ninety-five murders.¹⁵ If all this is not convincing enough evidence to question the reliability of Ghulam's 'confession', or raise the possibility that it was structured according to his interrogators' wishes, perhaps his claim that 'thuggee' had existed in India since no less a luminary of a classical western European education than Alexander the Great bestrode the earth is!¹⁶ The case of the first 'thugs' to be tried by the British colonial administration left behind few certainties: confused and/or zealous police agencies; devious and/or intimidated suspects; discrepancies over translation and etymology; an absence of evidence from 'third' parties; and still the mutilated bodies. The clearest conclusion to be drawn from the case of Ghulam Hussain is the difficulty of trying to 'prove' that 'thuggee' existed one way or the other.

Nevertheless, challenging the reliability of Ghulam's 'admissions' does not amount to a refutation of the existence of 'thuggee' as a distinctive type of robbery and murder that the British 'discovered' in India in the early nineteenth century. The suspicion that Ghulam's testimony contains exaggerations and bears traces of outside structuring suggests deviations from the 'true' version of the events, from the actuality of 'thug' attacks, rather than a *dismissal* of it. To follow the line taken by C. A. Bayly (1996), Wagner (2004), and Dash (2005), we can concede the possibilities that suspects like Ghulam may have inflated their claims under interrogative pressure and that impatient or unscrupulous officials may have tampered with their formal depositions without dropping the argument that 'thuggee' actually existed, that '*something happened*':

Too many dead bodies...[were] exhumed for anyone to doubt that murderous gangs really did infest the highways and byways of the mofussil. Too many suspected Thugs...[were] identified by too many informers, and...caught in possession of too much stolen loot, for there to be any question that Thuggee itself was real.¹⁷

These historians have therefore attempted to revise understandings of 'thuggee' by reconstructing it, by exhuming it from the past, based on the premise that the colonial administration did indeed 'uncover' a distinctive practice of robbery and murder in India in the early nineteenth century. The assumption, which van Woerkens (1995) also follows when she attempts to answer the question "Who Were the

¹⁴ It must also be acknowledged that there is an ongoing debate over the meaning of the word 'thug', which commonly signified less violent acts than strangling and robbery in India *circa* 1810: the Sanskrit *s'thag* means 'to deceive'. See P. Dundas, 'Some Jain References to the Thags in the Sainsaramocaka', *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 115, 2 (1995), pp. 281-4; S. N. Gordon, 'Scarf and Sword: Thugs, Marauders, and State Formation in Eighteenth-Century Malwa', *IESHR*, 6, 4 (1969), pp. 407-9.

¹⁵ Whether the *initiative* for increasing the numbers killed came from Ghulam (because he felt this is what his interrogator wanted to hear) or from Perry (because he needed confessions to large(r) numbers of murders) is secondary, the primary concern here being the reliability of the accused's testimony.

¹⁶ Dash, *op. cit.*, pp. 29, 298-99n..

¹⁷ *ibid.*, p. 218. Cf. C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information*, p. 175; Wagner, *op. cit.*, p. 949. These three contemporary historians draw on the concise socio-economic analyses of 'thuggee' made by Sahai (1936-7), Gupta (1957) and Gordon (1969). See my bibliography for full references.

Thugs?"¹⁸, is that there is a story about 'thuggee' to 'get straight'.¹⁹ For van Woerkens, the prospect of a reconstructive approach is the potential for a comparison or an exploration of the space between the actual (Thuggee) and the imagined ('thuggee'). For Wagner and Dash, the aim is to re-evaluate 'thuggee' as a type of 'banditry'—a less encumbered term in the context of this debate—and so make plausible, alternative explanations for 'thuggee' to those repeatedly offered by the colonial administration and especially William Sleeman: that 'thugs' belonged to an ancient and widespread 'organisation' of religiously motivated, hereditary murderers.²⁰ To carry out such surveys, the actuality must first be rebuilt, and this will be done by paying 'proper' attention to the sources, by peeling away the mystifying shrouds of colonial (mis)perception(s) to reveal the core 'truth' beneath. Thus, Wagner and Dash (who have written more extensively on the subject than C. A. Bayly) in particular advocate a 'return to the sources' as the means to displace Sleeman's hegemonic, colonialist 'misrepresentation' and to re-anchor 'thuggee' in the past, as an actuality that can be thoroughly and accurately investigated if the right sources are found and the right questions are asked of them.²¹ Their inquiries are valuable, not least since they have begun to explore sources that suggest that the people arrested for 'thuggee' were of diverse origin, circumstance and status—diversity that the colonial terminology (Thug, Thuggee) could not accommodate.²²

Yet the reconstructive approach is flawed by a methodological naivety that pushes 'the sources' too far: ultimately, it cannot deliver what is promised. As Ricoeur has observed, the currency of 'history' is memory, which is preserved in written documentation in both the twenty-first century, Western 'culture' of history that he is engaging with and in the case of histories about 'thuggee'. The mnemonic character of historical sources does not mean they are 'faulty' or 'incomplete'—they are sources, no more, no less, with their own validity—but, like memories, historical sources do not capture the actuality of a past moment in its entirety.²³ Van Woerkens, Wagner and Dash all show an awareness that no source on 'thuggee' offers a window on the past; a transparent, unobstructed view of 'what happened'. All three critique the documentation on 'thuggee', demonstrating the constructions and contradictions specific to these colonial sources, and accepting that the TD's investigations into 'thuggee' may have shaped what was 'seen'. As Wagner duly observes, "the process of persecution, imprisonment and interrogation of the thugs obviously changed the nature of thuggee, both in practical terms and conceptually".²⁴ Yet these criticisms are seen as 'limitations' of these particular sources rather than on the type of insight any source gives into the actuality of the past. The argument is that these sources only take us so far to the 'truth' of 'thuggee' before they run out of useful information or

¹⁸ "Who Were the Thugs?" is the title of chapter 3 of part 1 of M. van Woerkens, *The Strangled Traveler, Colonial Imaginings and the Thugs of India* (trans. Catherine Tihanyi) (University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 2002), pp. 109-88. For a brief but damning critique of *The Strangled Traveler*, see S. Sen, 'Martine van Woerkens, *The Strangled Traveler: Colonial Imaginings and the Thugs of India* (trans. Catherine Tihanyi)', *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 72, 2 (2004), pp. 566-9.

¹⁹ See H. Kellner, 'Language and Historical Representation', in K. Jenkins (ed.), *The Postmodern History Reader* (Routledge, London and New York, 1977), esp. p. 137.

²⁰ Wagner, *op. cit.*, p. 949.

²¹ Wagner, *op. cit.*, pp. 933, 944, 949-51, 958-9, 962-3; Dash, *op. cit.*, 'Author's Note', xi-xiii, and p. 79.

²² Hence my insistence on placing the nouns in inverted commas, dropping the capitalisation, and describing 'thuggee' as a phenomenon.

²³ P. Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting* (trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer) (University of Chicago Press, Chicago & London, 2004), p. 235. See also S. Kracauer, *History: the last things before the last* (Markus Wiener Publishers, Princeton, 1994), pp. 191-3.

²⁴ Wagner, *op. cit.*, p. 955.

disappear beneath a closing tide of colonial rhetoric and prejudice. To quote Wagner again, “[focussing] on the gross and glaring discrepancies of Sleeman’s discourse on thuggee...does not bring us any closer to a broader understanding of the phenomenon *behind* the colonial stereotype”.²⁵

By one reading, the notion of “the phenomenon *behind* the colonial stereotype” is simply a way of saying that the TD’s version of ‘thuggee’ is problematic and that there is an alternative. However, it also suggests that there is only one, ‘correct’ alternative; awaiting its discovery by historians—hence the reconstructivists’ argument that the Company officials *misperceived* ‘thuggee’. If these accounts were able to ‘reveal’ this correct alternative, by stripping away ‘falsehood’ from colonial sources or ‘unearthing’ ‘truer’ ones, then ‘thuggee’ would cease to be a phenomenon—something *perceived* and so subjectively constituted—and become objectified—discrete, unchanging, complete, accounted-for.²⁶

Not only does this constitute a profoundly unhistorical approach to the subject—an attempt to lift ‘thuggee’ *out* of history—but it follows a vacuous methodology, since the ‘removal’ of colonial ‘distortions’ or the use of alternative sources does not get ‘thuggee’ *straight*: it simply changes the perspectives through which it is viewed. There are certain alternatives to the colonial accounts, as well as ways of reading them to expose their inconsistency and to challenge the vision of ‘thuggee’ that was enforced and prosecuted by the TD in the early nineteenth century (a project I follow below), but this does not provide the opportunity to overthrow colonial understandings, to go behind them, or to forget why they took a particular form, so much as to situate and interrogate them. Exposing the non-innocence of the colonial perspective does not guarantee the innocence of others (including one’s own), rather, it alerts us to the realisation that all perspectives are situated, and likewise non-innocent.²⁷

A marked alternative to the ‘reconstructive’ arguments can be found in Chatterjee’s short account (1998), in which he argues that ‘thuggee’ was a conspiracy perpetrated not by rapacious indigenes but by rapacious colonisers: “Thugs, once ‘discovered,’” he argues, “sprang up all across India”.²⁸ Van Woerkens follows a similar line in various sections of *The Strangled Traveler*, suggesting that both the ‘scientific’ knowledge-gathering project led by William Sleeman and the fiction produced for metropolitan readers by the likes of Phillip Meadows Taylor were complementary aspects of “colonial *imaginings*” of ‘thuggee’.²⁹ These arguments offer the antithesis to the reconstructive accounts, arguing over the same ground—the *actual* existence (or non-existence) of the phenomenon—but offering opposite conclusions: ‘thuggee’ was ‘constructed’ not ‘discovered’.

²⁵ [My italics.] *ibid.*, p. 950.

²⁶ In this way, the reconstructive approach follows the same modalities and makes the same complacent truth claims of the colonial knowledge-gathering projects (including that which attempted to ‘uncover’ ‘thuggee’) investigated by Bernard S. Cohn and Ronald Inden, and is open to Barthes’ debunking of ‘positivist’ historical representation, whereby, as Ricoeur puts it: “History gives the illusion of finding the real that it [actually] represents”. See B. S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton University Press, Chichester, 1996), pp. 4-15; R. Inden, *Imagining India* (Blackwell, Oxford, 1990), esp. pp. 10-13, 22-3; R. Barthes, ‘The Discourse of History’ (trans. Stephen Bann), *Comparative Criticism*, 3 (1981), pp. 7-20; Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, pp. 236, 249-50 (the quotation is from p. 250).

²⁷ See D. J. Haraway, ‘Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective’, in *idem.*, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (Free Association Books, London, 1991).

²⁸ A. Chatterjee, *Representations of India, 1740-1840* (Macmillan, Basingstoke, 1998), esp. pp. 125-38 (the quotation is from p. 133).

²⁹ Van Woerkens, *op. cit.*, pp. 201-260.

Wagner and Dash argue that Chatterjee's account (and others that they characterise as similar, such as those by P. Roy (1998) and Flathuín (2001, 2004)) denies the existence of 'thuggee' while lacking the basis to make such a denial. As Wagner observes, it is not possible to disprove the colonial understanding and so deny the existence of 'thuggee' without providing an alternative 'to take its place': "before one can prove the existence of a discourse of misrepresentation...one must first establish that the individual accounts are in fact misrepresentations".³⁰ And, the argument continues, the likes of Chatterjee cannot establish that the colonial accounts are misrepresentations since they reject the prospect of a stable, underlying 'truth'. Since these various 'relativists' hold that nothing is 'truer' than anything else so they must accept that their attempts to deny the existence of 'thuggee' (or indeed 'reality') are no 'truer' than any other account and so only arbitrarily persuasive, or they must take off their relativist masks, drop their hypocrisy and admit that ('like the rest of us') they cannot do without The Truth either.

Of course, Wagner and Dash here try to bind the likes of Chatterjee into their own historical and historiographical projects, which rest on the prospect of reaching The Truth *behind* things - in this case, the existence of 'thuggee' behind the various misrepresentations of it. Yet all Wagner and Dash succeed in doing is highlighting their own discomfort in coming to terms with the accounts of 'thuggee' by writers investigating its discursive representation. Wagner assumes that the scholars he criticises intend to prove that the colonial representation is a *misrepresentation*, rather than - simply - a *particular* representation specific to supporters of colonialism.³¹ This epistemological point is crucial to finding a way around the historiographical impasse that has made for contradictory and complacent scholarship on 'thuggee'.³² Chatterjee does not *need* to disprove the existence of 'thuggee' as separate from the colonial mind, for his account is not aiming to prove its non-existence. Rather, as with P. Roy's account, it engages with 'thuggee' on a discursive plane, making a literary critique in which the texts analysed are treated as "representations...neither evaluated on their supposed accuracy, nor assessed on the extent of knowledge of India which they display".³³

Therefore, understanding 'thuggee' does not require writing out the so-called 'distortions' of the colonial accounts, but, following Foucault's archaeological method, retaining them and reading them to see the particularity of the vision they give shape to:

Archaeology...[attempts] to define discourses in their specificity; to show in what way the set of rules that they put into operation is irreducible to any other; to follow them the whole length of their exterior ridges, in order to underline them the better. ...We do not seek below what is manifest in the half silent murmur of another discourse; we must show why it could not be other than it was, in what

³⁰ Wagner, *op. cit.*, p. 937.

³¹ *ibid.*, p. 935.

³² Nor does this argument make the claims made by authors like Bayly, Wagner and Dash redundant. It simply realigns their truth claims as referring to 'realities' (histories) rather than an actuality (The Past), since their historical accounts are also literary criticisms (of the documentation on 'thuggee') and no 'less real' or 'invalid' for it - whether the authors are comfortable with the idea or not.

³³ Chatterjee, *op. cit.*, p. 4. Cf. P. Roy, 'Discovering India, Imagining *Thuggee*', in *idem.*, *Indian Traffic: Identities in Question in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (University of California Press, Berkeley, 1998), p. 43.

respect it is exclusive of any other, how it assumes, in the midst of others and in relation to them, a place that no other could occupy.³⁴

As such, 'thuggee' cannot be understood by attempting to distil truths from the colonisers' concoctions. Rather, we must explicate the *incorporation* (embodiment) of colonial understandings in the people arrested for 'thuggee', formulating answers to the question: 'How did colonial understandings of 'thuggee' come to be accepted, affirmed and enacted by Indians?'

In this process of answering, by *making histories*, historians produce their own imaginings of the past. As such, I am not arguing for the outright *rejection* of the approach or ambition of the accounts by Gordon, van Woerkens, C. A. Bayly, Wagner and Dash, but for an appreciation of the rhetorical nature of their (and any other—including my own, later in this essay) claims to present 'truths' about 'thuggee'. Rhetorical truths can be convincing, and are no less real for being subjectively constituted, but we must not confuse the reality of the past (how someone thinks it happened) with the actuality of it (what happened), which clearly cannot be perfectly re-presented. The authors of the reconstructivist inquiries forget that they are writing 'histories'—literary representations of the past, themselves locatable in a specific spatial and temporal context, and largely reliant upon documentary memories of 'thuggee', with the subjectivity and partiality, but not *incorrectness*, that this implies. Thuggee (no inverted commas) may well have been non-discursive: a distinct, discrete type of brigandage. But it was *also* discursively constituted during the early nineteenth century (and beyond, in the 'histories' that re-present it). As historians, dealing with documents from the past, we can assess the discursive constitution of 'thugs', not their *actual* behaviour. Therefore, I disagree with Wagner's conclusion that "The character of the early material, British and Indian, is such that the history of the phenomenon of thuggee need no longer be limited to the study of its representation".³⁵ On the contrary, a historical account of 'thuggee' can only study its representations.

Routes Around the Impasse

In her *Indian Traffic* (1998), P. Roy moves beyond a dispute over whether or not 'thuggee' 'existed' to analyse its *relational* character to the colonial administration of the early nineteenth century, accepting the possibility that 'thugs', as the historian encounters them, are "ineluctably discursive".³⁶ In particular, both Singha (1993 and 1998) and van Woerkens (elsewhere in *The Strangled Traveler*) have investigated the constitution of 'thugs' in the legal discourse of colonial India, noting in particular the dialectical processes by which the TD came to understand 'thuggee' on the basis of the cross-examination of 'approvers'. The strength of Singha's approach is her attention to the power-play between the interrogating officer and the suspected 'thug'.³⁷ This leads to the appreciation that the cross-examinations of people arrested for 'thuggee' did not lead to a dialogic colonial account, in which the accused's version was simply combined with the Company's, but a dialectical one, whereby the colonisers' judicial power moulded 'thuggee' into what the Company needed it to be. In this sense, TD officers sought affirmation of what they already knew. This is not a straightforward conspiracy theory—the colonisers did not invent an entire 'thug' myth and then force suspects to swear to its

³⁴ M. Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge* (trans. A. M. Sheridan Smith) (Routledge, London, 1997). pp. 139, 27-8, respectively.

³⁵ Wagner, *op. cit.*, p. 962.

³⁶ P. Roy, *op. cit.*, esp. pp. 43, 48-9, 55, 63-4 (the quotation is from p. 43).

³⁷ I do not include van Woerkens in this since her approaches to 'thuggee' are quite intentionally various, with mixed success.

'truth'. Instead, as Metcalf puts it, 'thuggee' "enabled the British to give voice to their own enduring fears and anxieties...[becoming] a metaphor for the representation of what they feared most in India, the inability to know and control their colonial subjects".³⁸

Developing this thesis, Freitag (1991, 1995), who has investigated the relationship between 'thuggee' – as conceived by the TD as a collective crime, perpetrated by gangs of a common constitution – and colonial conceptualisations of authority, argues that the Company's responses to the phenomenon reveal attempts to implement two governmental norms of colonial rule in India. First, that the state's legitimacy rested on its powers of military and moral suasion; second, the insistence that 'authority' was exclusive and indivisible.³⁹ Thus, just as a study of 'crime' informs us about the concerns of those who define it, so a study of 'thuggee' can inform us about colonial rule in early nineteenth-century India. Rather than being a private battle between 'thugs' and the TD, the various competing understandings of 'thuggee' must be seen in the polyphonic milieu of elaborations of British colonialism.⁴⁰ I now turn to chart the passage of 'thuggee' through histories not by reducing it to a timeless, transcendent, essential fact, but by sustaining the provisional, relational, existential characteristics of the phenomenon and by exploring the specific, power-laden situations in which it has been constituted.

* * *

III. 'THUGS' AND THE COLONIAL LEGAL DISCOURSE OF THE 1830s

The Initiation of the Anti-Thug Campaign: Locating 'thugs' in a "Despotism of Law"⁴¹

In October 1829, evidence from six 'thug' 'approvers' – the term used in nineteenth-century British legal parlance for a criminal who turned informer in return for a more lenient sentence and usually, though not in the case of 'thuggee', a pardon – was sufficient to persuade the Supreme Government in Calcutta to authorise the execution of a gang arrested by Captain W. Borthwick, the Company's Political Agent at Mahidpur:

³⁸ T. R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge University Press, New York, 1994), p. 41.

³⁹ See S. B. Freitag, 'Crime in the Social Order of Colonial North India', *MAS*, 25, 2 (1991), esp. pp. 227-30, 235-7, 252; *idem.*, 'Collective Crime and Authority in North India', in A. A. Yang (ed.), *Crime and Criminality in British India* (University of Arizona Press, Tucson, Arizona, 1995), esp. pp. 141, 151; R. Singha, "'Providential' Circumstances: The Thuggee Campaign of the 1830s and Legal Innovation', *MAS*, 27, 1 (1993), esp. pp. 89, 96; van Woerkens, *op. cit.*, esp. pp. 57, 72, 292-3.

⁴⁰ I think these points are well illustrated in M. N. Flathuín's micro-study of the complicity between the TD and the Bengal press in the reinforcement and dissemination of colonial understandings of 'thuggee': *idem.*, 'The Campaign Against Thugs in the Bengal Press in the 1830s', *Victorian Periodicals Review*, 37, 2 (2004), pp. 124-140, esp. pp. 125-6, 130.

⁴¹ This is Radhika Singha's phrase for the colonial state's utilisation of the 'rule of law' in early nineteenth-century India. In particular, Singha demonstrates the friction that developed between the Company's Political and Judicial Departments over the prosecution of 'thuggee' in the 1830s, and the extent to which the ATC opened fissures in the ideology of the equal, abstract, universal legal subject. I acknowledge my debt to and direct the reader to Radhika Singha's meticulous research, which I referred to extensively in preparing this section of my dissertation. See *idem.*, "'Providential' Circumstances', esp. pp. 109-115, 119-138; and *idem.*, *A Despotism of Law: Crime and Justice in Early Colonial India* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998).

...the Governor-General in Council has no hesitating in authorizing and directing capital punishment to be inflicted on the leaders, and all of the Gang, who shall prove to have been employed as the stranglers.⁴²

British-led efforts against 'thuggee', which had lain dormant since Perry's comparatively isolated efforts *circa* 1810-12⁴³, were quickly reinvigorated. Francis Curven Smith, Agent to the Governor General in the Sagar and Narmada Territories in western-central India, and William Sleeman, one of his Political Assistants stationed at Jabalpur, took the precedent set by the Supreme Government as permission to begin trials against people who had been held in jails falling under their jurisdiction since 1823, using evidence from eight of them who turned approver to secure prosecution and insisting that the extraterritoriality of their attacks made 'thuggee' a problem for the *Political*, rather than Judicial, Department:

Gumberia, the scene of one transaction wherein 11 men were strangled by the Gang was at the period in question 1822/23 in the Territory of the Scindeah [the Maratha ruler of the state of Gwalior]; and it has therefore appeared to me [Smith] that the trial cannot be referred to the Judicial Department on default of Jurisdiction; but must be disposed of by the Political Department.⁴⁴

By October 1830, Sleeman was being recommended as leader of a campaign to suppress 'thuggee', impressing his superiors George Swinton (Chief Secretary to the Supreme Government) and Smith with his "extensive knowledge of the character and habits of the Thugs"⁴⁵, as demonstrated in his anonymously published letter to the *Calcutta Literary Gazette*:

It is an organized system of religious and civil polity prepared to receive converts from all religions and sects and to urge them to the murder of their fellow creatures under the assurance of high rewards in this world and the other.⁴⁶

From its outset, the ATC was an exercise involving not only the punishment of 'thugs', but unravelling their 'system'. Sleeman's "extensive knowledge" would be crucial in effecting a 'successful' suppression campaign, since, as the Court of Directors had acknowledged in a general letter circulated in April 1830, 'thuggee' was shrouded in mystery:

⁴² [My italics.] Swinton to J. Stewart, Officiating Resident at Indore, 23 Oct. 1829, in *SRT*, pp. 12-3.

⁴³ It should be noted, however, that the Magistrate of Chitoor, William E. Wright, believed he had uncovered something very similar, if not identical, to 'thuggee' in southern India in the same period. See Thornton, *op. cit.*, pp. 271-99.

⁴⁴ Smith, to H. T. Prinsep, Secretary to the Governor General in the Political Department, 19 Nov. 1830, in *SRT*, pp. 45-50.

⁴⁵ See Swinton to Smith, 8 Oct. 1830, in *SRT*, pp. 9-10; Smith to Prinsep, 19 Nov. 1830, in *SRT*, pp. 51-3.

⁴⁶ W. H. Sleeman, anonymous letter, published in the *Calcutta Literary Gazette, Journal of Belles Lettres, Sciences and the Arts*, 3 Oct. 1830, in G. Bruce, *The Stranglers: The Cult of Thuggee and its Overthrow in British India* (Longmans, London, 1968), pp. 82-3. See also van Woerkens, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-2. Note that the scale of Sleeman's vision of 'thuggee' was far more extensive than that developed by colonial officers *circa* 1809-15, with 'thugs' now alleged to belong to an "organized system" extended over "every quarter of India". Perry, meanwhile, suggested that the Etawah 'thugs' were "divided into three classes *entirely unconnected with each other*", but mainly clustered along the banks of the Jamuna. [My italics.] Perry to G. Stockwell, Superintendent of Police in the Western Provinces, Aug. 1815, in Sleeman, *Ramaseena*, Appendix W, pp. 369-71.

There are instances of this Crime in several Zillahs of the Western Provinces, but in most of them it is unknown. ...the Police have scarcely ever been successful in tracing the offenders. The reports in regard to this offence in some of the Districts are very vague. Bodies of persons found in such a state that it could not be known whether they had been murdered or not, are given as cases of murder by Thugs. It is stated by the Magistrate of Futtehpore, a district in which these offences are common, that in the course of a year in his Jurisdiction not less than 120 persons fall into wells, it may therefore be suspected that in many instances persons are reported to have been murdered by Thugs who have in truth died from some accident.⁴⁷

British-led operations against 'thuggee' were therefore compromised by the existence of a vague body of knowledge about it, the scepticism of certain police and political authorities about its existence, and, in particular, an absence of decisive forensic evidence to offer proof of 'thug' attacks.⁴⁸ To overcome such problems, both Perry (in 1810) and Borthwick (in 1829) relied on the 'confessions' of certain gang-members to generate the required proof for what they believed was some form of organised crime. Yet when Perry brought charges, the *Nizamat Adalat* refused to pass verdicts of guilt, reluctant to make these 'confessions' the sole basis of the guilt of other alleged 'thugs'.⁴⁹ Smith was well aware of both the difficulties with acquiring reliable evidence about 'thuggee' and what he called the "nervous dread" of the *Nizamat Adalat* "of the responsibility of punishing capitally in the cases of numerous criminals".⁵⁰ However, as an Agent in the non-regulation⁵¹ Sagar and Narmada Territories, Smith was employed by the Company's Political rather than Judicial Department and answered directly to the Supreme Government, which meant that the sentences he passed—in his judicial capacity as Commissioner—did not come before the *Nizamat Adalat* for review.⁵² Therefore, he took charge of the trials of 'thugs' captured both in neighbouring Indian 'princely' or 'native' states (as they were variously called) and in British territories.⁵³

The rapid accumulation of guilty verdicts against 'thugs' and the expansion of the means available to the agency developing at Jabalpur in the 1830s overtook the colonial administration to the extent that the TD's expenses were not recognised as a "General charge being incurred for the welfare of the whole of India" until 1835, the year Sleeman became 'General Superintendent' of the ACT.⁵⁴ By the mid-1830s, the ATC was indeed beginning to take on pan-Indian dimensions, with Sleeman's assistants expanding operations into the Deccan, the Doab, Rajputana, Malwa and Delhi.⁵⁵ This permanent staff of seven assistants, commanding over three hundred *nujeebs* between

⁴⁷ [My italics.] General letter from the Court of Directors, 6 Apr. 1830, in *SRT*, p. 1.

⁴⁸ Indeed, apart from the reports by the magistrates Perry and Wright, the only other records about 'thuggee' before the late 1820s seem to have been two articles published in the journal *Asiatick Researches* in 1820, by Shakespear and Sherwood (see bibliography for full references).

⁴⁹ See Dash, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-2, 302n.

⁵⁰ Smith to W. H. Macnaghten, Secretary to the Governor General, 26 Jun. 1833, quoted in Singha, "Providential Circumstances", p. 128.

⁵¹ That is, lying without the jurisdiction of the 'Regulations' followed in the Bengal Presidency.

⁵² In 1835, the Sagar and Narmada Territories were merged into the Presidency of Agra and its revenue and judicial arrangements fell under the supervision of the Board of Revenue and the *Sadar Adalat*. See *ibid.*, p. 123, fn. 164.

⁵³ Although, as Singha points out, under Regulation 17, Sections 2-4 (1817), the *Nizamat Adalat* could bypass a *fatwa* in one of the Company's Sessions Courts. *ibid.*, p. 111, fn. 114.

⁵⁴ [My italics.] Quoted in *ibid.*, p. 122 (see fn. 159-60). The TD's expenses were accounted to the Sagar and Narmada Territories alone until 1835.

⁵⁵ 'Doab' refers to the land between the Ganges and Jamuna rivers. The Deccan was a plains region in southern-central India.

them, was assisted by a further seventeen British officers—Residents at the courts of Indian rulers based in Indore, Hyderabad and Lucknow, and Agents based in territories under British control. Just as in the trials held by Smith, those held by Residents were only submitted to the Secretary of the Political Department, H. T. Prinsep, for review, while Agents tried 'thugs' at tribunals specially convened by the TD to evade interference from the Judicial Department.⁵⁶

That it took until 1836 to enact specific legislation against 'thuggee' is a further measure of the extent to which Sleeman and Smith were able to organise and expand relatively freewheeling operations against 'thuggee' in the early 1830s, evading the restraining influence of the Judicial Department. Act XXX read as follows:

1. ...whoever shall be proved to have belonged, either before or after the passing of this Act, to any gang of Thugs, either within or without the Territories of the East India Company, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, with hard labour.
2. And...every person accused of the offence...may be tried by any court, which would have been competent to try him, if his offence had been committed within the Zillah where that Court sits, any thing to the contrary, in any Regulation contained, notwithstanding.
3. And...no Court shall, on a trial of any person accused of the offence...require any Futwa from any Law Officer.⁵⁷

The legislation granted the TD wide-ranging powers, applying retrospectively, beyond the boundaries of the Company's dominions, and permitting any court within its jurisdiction both to try people for 'thuggee' and to circumvent the principles of Islamic law. Yet the legislation did not clearly identify who 'thugs' were, nor what the offence was, the implication being that "Everyone [in the colonial administration] knew what 'thuggee' was, except for a few pettifogging judges".⁵⁸ Indeed, Act XXX was in many ways the Supreme Government's attempt to give the appearance of due legal process to the Political Department's initiative against 'thuggee', which was exploiting the comparatively loose judicial structures in place in the Company's non-regulation territories.⁵⁹ Similarly, Act XIX was passed in 1837 to resolve the ambiguity over using evidence from approvers, establishing the principle that

...no person shall, by reason of any conviction for any offence whatever, be incompetent to be a witness in any stage of any cause, Civil or Criminal, before any Court, in the Territories of the East India Company.⁶⁰

⁵⁶ See *ibid.*, p. 111; Sleeman, *Ramaseeana*, Introduction, pp. 56-7; Dash, *op. cit.*, pp. 193-4; Freitag, 'Collective Crime', p. 147; and van Woerkens, *op. cit.*, pp. 45-7. For a selection of the correspondence explaining the expansion of the ATC in the early 1830s, see Smith to Swinton, 25 Mar. 1832; Smith to Macnaghton, 24 Apr. and 29 May 1832; and Macnaghton to Swinton, 25 Jun. 1832, in *SRT*, pp. 73-5, 80-1, 90-1.

⁵⁷ W. H. Sleeman, *Report on Budhuk alias Bagree Decoits and other Gang Robbers by Hereditary Profession and on The Measures Adopted by The Government of India, for their suppression* (Bengal Military Orphan Press, Calcutta, 1849), p. 353. All anti-'thug' and anti-dacoit legislation passed 1836-48 can be found in *ibid.*, pp. 353-62 and a précis of it in van Woerkens, *op. cit.*, pp. 100-1.

⁵⁸ Singha, 'Providential' Circumstances', p. 84.

⁵⁹ F. J. Shore described the Sagar and Narmada Territories as "a theatre for the experiments of incipient legislation". F. J. Shore, Officiating Commissioner of the Sagar and Narmada Territories, to the Secretary of the *Sadar* Board of Revenue, Allahabad, 7 May 1836, quoted in *ibid.*, pp. 89-90.

⁶⁰ Sleeman, *Report on Budhuk alias Bagree Decoits*, p. 353.

Evidence from approvers could now be used not only to locate and identify people suspected of being 'thugs', but to convict them in court of the 'lesser' offence of 'belonging' or 'having belonged' to a 'thug' gang, as defined in Act XXX, paragraph 1.

Association was clearly easier to establish than the individual culpability for specific attacks, since the latter required supplementary evidence such as recovered loot or identified corpses rather than a certain number of coinciding denunciations from approvers.⁶¹ Moreover, under Regulation 8 of 1818, Company magistrates and judges could demand security for a prisoner's future good behaviour and sentence them to confinement for failing to provide it. Sleeman would remind one TD officer that, so long as he was "morally" satisfied of their guilt, it was his *duty* to detain suspected 'thugs' under Regulation 8, in order to prevent such a criminal being released back into society just because there was insufficient 'evidence' to commit him on a charge of 'thuggee' – be it association with a gang, robbery, or murder.⁶² This fitted with the wider claim advanced as early as 1809, by the Magistrate of Chitoor: to suppress such "extraordinary associations", "extraordinary measures" were necessary.⁶³ Sleeman agreed, explaining in *Ramaseeana* (1836) that the liberty of the 'mainstream' population – indeed, the liberalist project of paternal colonial rule in India – could be realised by recourse to illiberal measures, which were justified by the absence of 'civilisation' in the subcontinent:

To suppress associations of this kind in such a country and such a society as those of India, a departure from rules like these [that the testimony of any number of confessing prisoners shall not be considered a sufficient ground to authorize the detention of their associates], however suitable to ordinary times and circumstances, and to a more advanced and a more rational system of society, becomes indispensably necessary.⁶⁴

Before 1836, well over half (1,892 out of 3,437, or 55%) of the total trials held under British auspices *circa* 1826-41 had been completed, with a conviction rate of 98.9%.⁶⁵ Whatever 'thuggee' was, the British were suppressing it, and as Sleeman's fame and reputation soared, the methods of his TD fell under decreasing scrutiny. Yet despite the emergence of a widespread consensus about both what 'thuggee' was and the extent of the threat it posed to the lives of Indian travellers, the 'proof' for its existence came largely from a single source: the approvers.

Liminal 'Criminals'

According to Meadows Taylor, 56 of the 3,437 individuals charged for 'thuggee' between 1826 and 1841 were "made approvers after committed", thereby agreeing to

⁶¹ For the mooting of punishments for different 'thug' offences, see Swinton to Stewart, 23 Oct. 1829, in *SRT*, p. 13.

⁶² See Singha, 'Providential' Circumstances', pp. 134-5, fn. 214.

⁶³ Extract from W. Wright, Magistrate of Chitoor, to the Register of the *Foujdari Adalat*, Dec. 1809, in Thornton, *op. cit.*, pp. 271, 274. The letter is also printed in Sleeman, *Ramaseeana*, Appendix U, pp. 304-6.

⁶⁴ Sleeman, *Ramaseeana*, Introduction, p. 54, see also pp. 51-3.

⁶⁵ The acquittal rate is based on the following calculation: a total of 1,892 'thugs' were arrested circa 1826-41. 134 escaped from jail or died before sentencing, leaving 1,758 who received a full trial. Of these, there were 21 acquittals (1.1% of the total tried), with the remaining 'thugs' receiving anything from the death penalty, to conditional release pending the arrival of someone putting up security for them. All percentages are rounded to one decimal place. Calculated from 'Tabular Statement', in Meadows Taylor, 'State of Thuggee in India', p. 293.

co-operate with the TD in various ways.⁶⁶ Shortly after arrest, these 'thugs' were manacled in leg-irons and segregated from other captives. They were interrogated by TD officers and required to produce a testimony or 'deposition' in which they admitted to their involvement in 'thuggee', recounted the attacks they had participated in, and named other 'thugs' involved. This document formed the centrepiece of evidence used against suspects in trials held throughout the 1830s. Approvers were also required to show TD employees (usually, parties of *nujeeps*—armed militiamen—or sepoys led by a senior 'native' soldier) where bodies had been buried, which were then exhumed and if possible identified, and where their former associates lived. Associates brought in on the strength of approvers' accusations were identified in face-to-face parades by a succession of the informers who had been previously kept apart to prevent collusion.⁶⁷ In the course of the 1830s, Swinton, Smith and Sleeman organised an 'approvers-system', believing that 'leading' 'thugs'—understood as the most experienced, most eloquent, and most prolific killers—knew most about 'thuggee' as a 'system' or subculture.⁶⁸ Since they were thought too dangerous to release, even if they co-operated fully with the British, approvers were maintained in small coteries and questioned at length by Sleeman and other leading officers involved in the ATC.⁶⁹ Whether they were working to establish the guilt of certain associates by producing depositions or participating in more general interviews about their "careers" (as Sleeman called them), approvers were thought to hold exclusive information that could improve colonial knowledge about and control over the phenomenon. As Dirks has observed,

Colonialism was itself a cultural project of control, colonial knowledge both enabled conquest and was produced by it; in certain important ways, knowledge was what colonialism was all about.⁷⁰

Likewise, for officers in the TD, the suppression of 'thuggee' in India was both a law-and-order problem, requiring the establishment of culpability for various attacks, and a conquest for knowledge—the means to establish culpability, which was why Borthwick had offered certain members of 'Amanoolah's' gang reduced sentences in return for their co-operation with his investigations, as he explained in July 1829:

[Amanoolah's] Deposition...was perhaps alone sufficient to establish the guilt of the prisoners, but as *it was desirable to obtain all the information possible of the acts*

⁶⁶ *ibid.*, p. 293.

⁶⁷ Spry, *Modern India*, Vol. II, pp. 159-62; Dash, *op. cit.*, pp. 155-62; van Woerkens, *op. cit.*, pp. 68-71.

⁶⁸ See Swinton to Stewart, 8 Oct. 1830; Swinton to Smith, 4 Aug. 1830; Smith to Swinton, 20 Jun. 1832, in *ibid.*, pp. 10, 4, 112-3, respectively. See also W. H. Sleeman, Political Assistant to the Agent to the Governor General in the Sagar and Narmada Territories, to T. Macleod, Assistant to the Governor General, 27 Jul. 1833, National Archives of India, G2 (letters issued by W. H. Sleeman, 1833-1835), fos. 57-8, quoted in van Woerkens, *op. cit.*, pp. 68-9. In particular, Smith argued that the various gangs captured had "divided interests and deadly animosities" that the suppressors might be able to exploit. Smith to Prinsep, 19 Nov. 1830, in *SRT*, p. 49.

⁶⁹ See Swinton to Stewart, 23 Oct. 1829, in Sleeman, *Ramaseeana*, 'Appendix X', p. 383. Sleeman published his 'conversations' with thirty-eight approvers held at Jabalpur as part of *Ramaseeana*. James Paton, First Assistant Resident at Lucknow in the 1830s, conducted similar interviews with approvers held there, and it seems he also intended to publish his findings. He did not publish them, however, and they can only be found amongst his papers at the British Library (See, J. Paton, *Private Papers: Collections on Thuggee & Dacoitee*, BL, Addl. Mss. 41300).

⁷⁰ N. B. Dirks, Forward to Cohn, *op. cit.*, p. ix.

*and proceedings of this band of systematic murderers, that the Government might be the better able to adopt effectual measures for their eventual extirpation, I held out the promise of a pardon to other individuals of the gang to come forward, on which five of the prisoners, whose Depositions are enclosed, presented themselves as evidence against their associates.*⁷¹

Thus, the significance of considering the nuances of the various configurations of power operating in particular between the colonial authorities and suspected 'thugs' (the power to interrogate and to judge, and to give or withhold knowledge), and mapping the shifts within these configurations, is never more pertinent for a renewed understanding of 'thuggee' than in an analysis of the testimonies of those who agreed to 'turn approver'. It is in the power-laden negotiations between the colonial official and the captive indigene, in the bid of the former to extract evidence of and knowledge about the identity of the latter as a certain type of criminal, that we find 'thugs'.

As Amin has argued, albeit about a much refined version of the system used in the 1830s, the approver is a 'rebel' or 'criminal' who has shifted his locus in relation to the actions being prosecuted from a protagonist of them to an agent of counter-insurgency.⁷² For the approvers, testifying under pain of death, the more deeply they incriminated themselves as past practitioners of 'thuggee', and the more they confirmed their interrogators' perceptions of their 'crimes', the more valuable their testimony became – both to the TD, who simultaneously obtained 'proof' of their own general theories on 'thuggee' and of the specific guilt of other suspected 'thugs' awaiting trial, and to the approvers themselves, who were now more likely to be spared. Therefore, van Woerkens' argues that "the culprit did not respond to the explicit demand of truth, but to the secret expectations of the colonizers".⁷³ Indeed, Lushington, Political Agent at Bharatpur, complained early on in the ATC that it was dangerous, if not reckless, to allow the least trustworthy of all natives to become the heartbeat of British-led efforts to understand and suppress their 'system', noting their "utter disregard...of truth and justice", and demonstrating his own awareness of the potential for deceit afforded by the 'thugs'' liminality.⁷⁴ It is unsurprising then, that Meadows Taylor would observe in the early 1830s that "as fast as new approvers came in, new mysteries were unravelled and new crimes confessed".⁷⁵ For Sleeman, interested in capturing and punishing 'thugs', this dynamic was a problem that could be overcome by taking sufficient precautions to keep approvers separate and cross-checking their evidence (after all, "in such a country and such a society as those of India", the TD argued, "extraordinary measures" were not only justified but necessary). More importantly, these methods secured the 'proofs' of 'thuggee' and thus the confirmation of the accuracy of the colonisers' suspicions that were the lifeblood of the ATC.

Yet, as Ricoeur has observed, because a testimony is delivered by a 'witness' to people (TD officers, the judge in court) not present at the events described in it, it transfers 'what happened' "to the level of things said". That is, the testimony must be

⁷¹ [My italics] W. Borthwick, Political Agent at Mahidpur, to Stewart, 26 Jul. 1829, in Sleeman, *Ramaseeana*, Appendix X, p. 377.

⁷² Amin's research is into the Chauri Chaura riots of the early 1920s. See S. Amin, *Event, Metaphor, Memory: Chauri Chaura, 1922-1992* (University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1994).

⁷³ Van Woerkens, *op. cit.*, p. 72.

⁷⁴ G. T. Lushington, Political Agent at Bharatput, to A. Lockett, Agent to the Governor General at Ajmere, Jun. 1832, in *SRT*, p. 97. Cf. W. Sleeman, *A Report on the System of Megpunnaism* (The Serampore Press, 1839), p. 3.

⁷⁵ P. Meadows Taylor, *Story of My Life* (with an introduction by D. Walder) (first published 1877; repr. Zwan Publications, London, 1989), p. 72.

spoken and so heard, for it is only by hearing that those not present can believe (or not) in the actuality of the events reported:

Testimony signifies something other than a simple relation of things seen. Testimony is that on which we rely *to think that...to estimate that...in short to judge*. Testimony wants to justify, to prove the good basis of an assertion.... The eyewitness nature of testimony, therefore, never suffices to constitute its meaning. It is necessary that there be not only a statement but an account of a fact serving to prove an opinion or truth.⁷⁶

A testimony thus occupies an intermediary position between a statement made by a person and a belief assumed by another (in this context, that of the guilt of both the approver and his accomplices) on the faith of the testimony of the first. Its claims to be a 'true' or 'faithful' description of events ultimately rely upon the hearer's willingness to accept the teller's tale. When the TD could not find the requisite 'objective' evidence of 'thuggee', such as recovered loot or corpses, as was usually the case⁷⁷, the apparent 'objectivity' of the approver's statements—of their 'faithful' relation of 'what happened'—owed its final basis to nothing more substantial than the readiness of the judge to believe in them.⁷⁸

However, I am not attempting to prove that there were 'miscarriage(s) of justice' during the anti-thug trials of the 1830s so much as explore the production of a specific vision of 'thuggee' by the colonial authorities investigating it. Understanding the liminality of the approvers is crucial in developing, in turn, an understanding of 'thuggee' as the colonial administration came to see it, for the power relations in play during the production of the approvers' statements helped determine the outlines of this vision. 'Power' must be seen here in the positive, 'creative' sense—the power to produce a perception of the phenomenon satisfying both parties involved in the representational transaction.

A certain Khaimraj showed that suspected 'thugs'—like TD officers—understood the liminality of their position in relation to the ATC, and phrased the prisoner's dilemma faced by the accused in stark terms:

I was fully resolved to keep silent, but finding that two or three of my companions had already told all, and had pointed out the spots and bodies of the different individuals whom we had murdered during the last few days previous to our being seized, I considered it would be very foolish in me to abide by such a resolution, particularly when I found I might save my life by a full and true confession, while remaining silent would not avail me or any of my companions any thing.⁷⁹

To the approver, the TD's valuation of his information determined whether he was retained alive in the relative sanctuaries of the compounds of TD officers (Sleeman's in Jabalpur, Paton's in Lucknow), or committed for trial on a 'full' charge of 'thuggee' whereby he might receive the death penalty: his life depended on his ability to enact,

⁷⁶ [Ricoeur's italics.] P. Ricoeur, 'The Hermeneutics of Testimony', in *idem.*, *Essays on Biblical Interpretation* (edited with an introduction by L. S. Mudge) (SPCK, 1981), pp. 123-4, 129.

⁷⁷ For the TD's difficulties in finding circumstantial evidence, see van Woerkens, *op. cit.*, pp. 67, 71, 77-9.

⁷⁸ Cf. C. Reitz, 'Thuggee and the "Discovery" of the English Detective', in *idem.*, *Detecting the Nation: Fictions of Detection and the Imperial Venture* (Ohio State University Press, Columbus, 2004), p. 32.

⁷⁹ 'Extract from the Deposition of Khaimraj Phansigar, admitted to give evidence', in Sleeman, *Ramaseena*, Appendix X, pp. 296-7.

to mimic, this Other that the TD alleged him to be.⁸⁰ To the TD, the worth of the approver was what he could say, what he could reveal about 'thuggee'. As Amin has observed,

The Approver is so designated because he produces the Approver Testimony; he does not *exist* otherwise: it is his Statement that makes him the approver – a case of existence fully assimilated to discourse. The approver is indeed the ultimate figure of speech.⁸¹

The discursive constitution of 'thuggee' is precisely what an analysis of the approvers' statements gives insights into. Such an analysis does not refute the 'something happened' argument for the existence of 'thuggee' independent of the colonial mind, for it does not compete in the same game of truth. That is, it neither attempts to 'recover' a "hidden transcript"⁸² on 'thuggee' by stripping the approvers' depositions of 'colonial distortions', nor suggests that what is contained in them is 'inaccurate' or 'untrue'. Rather, it explores the specificities of the processes leading to the production of the approvers' statements, and in turn the consequences of this for colonial perceptions of the phenomenon of 'thuggee': "it is this *construction* of the AT [approver testimony] rather than its particularistic truth or falsity that deserves recognition from the subaltern perspective".⁸³ The subalterns I am concerned with here are of course the suspected 'thugs' who turned approver. Their depositions are 'factual' documents, but 'facts' are relevant only in a certain context—they are subjectively selected and arranged. I contend that it was the organisation and presentation of these 'facts' by the TD that constituted what the colonisers and historians alike have called 'thuggee'.

The Dialectical Production of 'thuggee' in India

Approvers' statements were recorded using a set formula, transcribed in Persian and subsequently translated into English.⁸⁴ Depositions began with a statement of the

⁸⁰ By agreeing to testify, approvers could not only avoid the death penalty, but go on to earn a small salary, live in relative security, and transfer their allegiance to the colonial administration. Fanny Eden described Captain Paton (stationed at Lucknow) as a "great Thug fancier" who "makes positive pets of some", and suggested that TD officers viewed the approvers "in a most romantic light". Bukhtawar explained his and others' lack of apprehension about denouncing former accomplices in terms of having become "servants of Government". See J. Dunbar (ed.), *Tigers, Durbars and Kings, Fanny Eden's Indian Journals, 1837-38* (London, 1988), pp. 120, 104; Sleeman, *Ramaseeana, Conversations*, p. 186; Smith to Prinsep, 19 Nov. 1830; and Swinton to Smith, 2 Apr. 1831, in *SRT*, pp. 54, 66-7, respectively.

⁸¹ [Amin's italics.] S. Amin, 'Approver's Testimony, Judicial Discourse: The Case of Chauri Chaura', in R. Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies*, V (Oxford University Press, Oxford and New York, 1987), p. 187.

⁸² This is J. C. Scott's term for a subaltern's description of events made without the presence of the bearers of hegemonic or 'superior' social power. See *idem.*, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (Yale University Press, New Haven and London, 1990), esp. pp. 18-19, 27, 83, 130, 176, 206.

⁸³ [Amin's italics.] Amin, *op. cit.*, pp. 186-7.

⁸⁴ Paton's papers contain references to the translation process and include a letter sent to all magistrates involved in the ATC of the 1830s asking them to follow a set list of questions. See Paton, Addl. Mss. 41300, fos. 173 (on the translation process), 400-1 (on the letter regarding the formulaic set of questions).

name, age and 'caste'⁸⁵, of the person suspected of being a 'thug', where they were born, and where they were 'based' up to the time of arrest, as in the case of one 'Rama Jemadar's' testimony, made before Sleeman at Jabalpur in 1832:

My name is Rama, age about 27 years and caste Naik, I have within the last few years resided at different villages but latterly at Sagrilly in the Pertabhur District. I am a native of Pulkara in the Rutlam District.⁸⁶

'Thugs' then narrated recollections of the expeditions they had participated in that featured the persons they had identified to the British. Each act of 'thuggee' was described in the following way: the approver gave a vague geographical description of the vicinity of the crime; described how the victims were identified and attacked; named the person responsible for their death; listed the possessions taken and detailed how they were distributed among gang-members; and indicated roughly where the gang headed next, as Rama explained:

Proceeding to Jirranda Rajghur, Para Jarry, Chota Oodeypoor, and Dubooer, we arrived at Baroda...and afterwards proceeded in the direction of Dalka.... [O]n the stage from the...village [we] met a traveller coming from Rajkote riding on a cart.... By deceitful persuasion we induced him to quit the cart and join us. We proceeded on to the next stage where we halted for the night and the next day...this Traveller was strangled by Rambuksh Poorbia (at large) assisted by Dutta (at large) who held his hands. I do not remember who buried the body. One hundred rupees were found upon him.

After this we went to Nuggur where we remained a considerable time...and celebrated the Hooly. ...A few days after this our spies brought information of four Augriaes [money carriers employed by merchants] having left the town for Joria Bunder upon which Bhowanee⁸⁷ ordered seventeen or eighteen Thugs to go after them. I was one of the party. ...[A]t the distance of about a coss from Joria we fell upon them and strangled them. Rambuksh Poorbia (at large) strangled one. My brother Omeida (dead) strangled another, and Dutta Kureea Mala (at large) the third. I myself and others held their hands. I do not remember the names of those who buried them. Eight Rupees weight of Gold was found upon them.⁸⁸

Therefore, the testimonies were not rambling recollections of the past, but accounts of isolated, specific events and the consequences of them: those details about which the prosecution wished to hear. The deposition was a deliberately edited or condensed record of several years of a 'thug's' life, in which details about the precise identities of the victims, the politics of the interactions between different gangs encountered on an expedition, or the material and social circumstances of those involved in 'thuggee' were allowed to fade into the background. By contrast, the foreground of the approvers' testimonies was brilliantly illuminated by the 'empirical

⁸⁵ 'Caste' is in inverted commas to draw attention to the disparities between colonial, indigenous, and twenty-first century understandings of the word. See S. Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Ages* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1993); N. B. Dirks, *Castes of Mind: Colonialism and the Making of Modern India* (Princeton University Press, Princeton and Oxford, 2001).

⁸⁶ 'Examination of Thug approver Rama Jemadar', in *SRT*, p. 127.

⁸⁷ Rama's reference to 'Bhowana' is to the overall leader of this gang, named in the opening paragraph of his deposition, rather than to Bhavani, a Hindu goddess who the British took as synonymous with Kali.

⁸⁸ 'Examination of Thug approver Rama Jemadar', in *SRT*, pp. 127-8. For more analysis of the way depositions were recorded, see van Woerkens, *op. cit.*, pp. 60-7.

facts' about each attack: the number of victims killed, the names of the murderers, the amount of loot taken, and (roughly) where and when the attack took place. This presented the TD with seemingly 'objective' details of each crime used by the prosecution. What is left out of the statements is of course as significant as what is retained, not least since these 'background' details may have offered alternative insights into why people turned to what was called 'thuggee' or how regularised gang-relations were. Instead, the persistence of this template as the formalised means of recording 'consistent' (or repetitive) statements meant that these details were not recorded in the legal discourse, in which 'thugs' indeed appeared as 'extraordinary' criminals, whose identity was coterminous with their criminality. This decontextualising process helped produce accounts of 'thuggee' that authenticated colonial suspicions about what was a scantily understood phenomenon at the point at which the ATC was authorised.

Furthermore, the formula within which the testimonies were framed was designed to produce a *narrative* account of 'thuggee'. This process of narrativisation required the accused "to make totalities out of scattered events"⁸⁹, "to extract a configuration from a succession."⁹⁰ By their sequential relation of separate acts of 'thuggee', which may have occurred years apart from one another, into a temporally continuous "career of crime"⁹¹ in which the only thing 'thugs' do is murder people and rob them, the depositions gave an artificial coherence to the 'thugs' actions:

The investigation focused thus on "thug crime," and it carried in itself a stereotypical stress between the general and the particular, between the invariant narrative morphology and the profusion of details.⁹²

This further reinforced the colonial conceptualisations of 'thuggee' as a full-time, 'hereditary profession' and a corporate or 'caste-like' criminal identity from which there was no escape and for which 'everyday' professions were merely a 'screen'. To cite Rama's deposition once more:

My family have followed exclusively the occupation of Thugs for two hundred years past and I was brought up to no other. My grandfather was a celebrated Thug Jemadar [leader] and my father who succeeded him became a leader of equal note. Omeida, my elder brother, too, became under my father's tuition an expert hand in all Thug ways and practices.⁹³

Thus, the intentions and circumstances that led to Rama's 'career' of crime are given no further explanation than the acknowledgement that the suspect was a 'thug', that is, a 'born' murderer ("brought up no other"). The accumulation of many similar statements taken from different suspects across the subcontinent throughout the 1830s served to authenticate the colonial representation of 'thuggee' as an ancient, widespread 'system' practised by preordained sociopaths.⁹⁴ The evidence contained in approvers' depositions coagulated colonial perceptions of 'thuggee', giving them a more certain form and greater consistency—as those pressing for an ATC *circa* 1830

⁸⁹ Amin, *op. cit.*, p. 186.

⁹⁰ P. Ricoeur, 'The Narrative Function', in *idem.*, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences: Essays on Language, Action and Interpretation* (Cambridge and Paris, 1981), p. 278.

⁹¹ This is Sleeman's phrase: *idem.*, *Ramaseena*, Introduction, p. 39.

⁹² Van Woerkens, *op. cit.*, p. 66.

⁹³ 'Examination of Thug approver Rama Jemadar', in *SRT*, p. 127.

⁹⁴ Cf. 'Examination[s] of [the] Thug approver[s] Rama Jemadar, Moty, Rama, and Mana', in *SRT*, pp. 127, 137, 142, 147; Sleeman to the *Calcutta Literary Gazette*, 3 Oct. 1830, in Bruce, *op. cit.*, pp. 82-3.

had hoped. The combination of the editing and narrativising processes had the effect of lifting the 'thugs'' actions out of the context of their times and of reinforcing the dominant colonial conceptualization of 'thuggee' as a distinctive, widespread, hereditary, criminal identity. This facilitated further arrests by establishing a trope of disobedience, whereby 'thuggee' was intelligible and condemnable as a practice, while the need to establish individual motivations and culpability for specific attacks was increasingly obviated.⁹⁵

An example of this process is given below, but first I wish to re-mention Ricoeur's observation (cited in my earlier discussion of the historiography of accounts of 'thuggee') that certain events from the past remain beyond the reach of historians. In the case of the ATC, this observation is most pertinent to the *thousands* of suspects arrested, tried and convicted of 'thuggee' who did not become approvers. These individuals appear only fleetingly in the documents relating to the suppression of 'thuggee'; as the members of approvers' gangs, as the accused on trial given one chance to prove their innocence, as names and numbers in the TD's statistical tables of their operations. To take an illustrative case, the approver Feringheea alleged that a certain 'Mittoo', a forty-year old arrested at Hoshangabad, had been present at "5 or 7 affairs" (or attacks). 'Mittoo' and thirty other 'thugs' were tried at Jabalpur in April 1833, accused of participation in two separate attacks on parties of goldsmiths and money-carriers on the road between Jhansi and Sagar in 1819, which resulted in a total of sixteen murders and the theft of 700 rupees' worth of property. Nine other approvers in addition to Feringheea deposed against 'Mittoo', all agreeing that he was a 'thug', but contradicting each other about the identity of leader of the gang to which he was alleged to belong, the number of 'affairs' he had been party to, and his precise role in them. Depending on which approver was asked, 'Mittoo' had belonged to the gangs of either 'Feringheea', 'Kaleen', 'Karman', 'Mandoo', or 'Bukunt'; had been present at anywhere between two and twenty attacks; and was variously described as merely a "sharer" (of a portion of the stolen property), the giver of the signal (to strangle the victims), and a 'professional' 'thug' since childhood. We may speculate as to the reasons for these discrepancies: perhaps the approvers themselves had only seen 'Mittoo' at a certain portion of the attacks he was accused of; perhaps 'Mittoo' had joined different gangs at different times; perhaps the approvers' memories were unreliable. All thirty-one people accused pleaded not guilty, 'Mittoo' included. 'Mittoo's' only defence—the brief hint of his agency as a suspected 'thug'—was that 'Gopaul of Bhusdee' would vouch for his "good character", but in the trial notes it was recorded that "the witness referred to is dead". This defence was indeed flimsy in contrast to the prosecution, which combined not only the overlapping although inconclusive depositions of ten approvers, but also their lengthy narratives about their own "careers" as 'thugs' (in which they indicted the likes of 'Mittoo') and the TD's growing conviction that 'thuggee' was a widespread 'system'. The thirty-one people accused of 'thuggee' received sentences of incarceration (twenty-six), transportation (four—including 'Mittoo') and execution (one sentence).⁹⁶

According to Meadows Taylor's statistics for 'thug' trials held *circa* 1826-41, almost 93% of people tried as 'thugs' shared the same experience of the TD as these thirty-one: one chance to assert their innocence in the face of a mountain of 'evidence' of their guilt. It is unsurprising then, that of those who did not turn approver, escape from jail or die before sentencing, just 3% were acquitted. To borrow Taussig's

⁹⁵ As Amin observes, "The prosecution treats the Approver Testimony as a sealed text which derives its meaning from its *constitution* and not from any *context*". [Amin's italics.] See Amin, *op. cit.*, p. 187.

⁹⁶ Extracts from the trial of Mittoo, BC F/4/1490 (58672), fos. 105-245, esp. fos. 110-179; all statistics in the above paragraph were calculated from 'Tabular Statement', in Meadows Taylor, 'State of Thuggee in India', p. 293.

phrasing, this was the TD's response when it came "face to face with 'savagery' – the savagery imputed to the Other, then mimicked on the body of that Other".⁹⁷ The British colonial administration strangled 460 'stranglers' on the gallows during the ATC.

Model 'Criminals'

In the early 1830s, Sleeman used the 'approver-system' and the information from cross-examinations and 'conversations' with 'thugs' to construct sprawling genealogies or 'family-trees' depicting the ancestry of the 'system' as the British had 'found' it.⁹⁸ Although he was unable to trace lineages back further than a few generations, and even then in an unconvincing and inconclusive manner, these diagrams seemed to further corroborate the claim that 'thuggee' was a generational or 'caste-like' 'trade' that was passed on from father to son:

...the *Burkas*, or fully initiated Thugs, who have as yet escaped us...are capable of creating new gangs in any part of India that they may be permitted to inhabit; and that they will so create them if left for any time undisturbed in any place, no man who is well acquainted with the system will for a moment doubt.⁹⁹

The conclusion drawn from this was that the 'system' would inevitably continue to replicate without intervention on the scale that, it was insisted, only the colonial government had the resources, commitment and technologies to implement.¹⁰⁰ These conclusions were given the appearance of being 'scientific' (testable, repeatable, objective) truth, by the 'confirmation' from phrenologists – one of them Sleeman's cousin Henry Spry – that 'thugs' were biologically predetermined criminals:

The skulls [of seven 'thugs', sent to Edinburgh's Phrenological Society by Spry after their execution in Jabalpur] show that combination of large organs of the animal propensities with comparatively moderate organs of the moral sentiments, which predisposes individuals to any mode of self-gratification and indulgence, without restraining them by regard to the rights and welfare of others. The thugs belong to the class of characters in which I would place the captains and crew of slave-ships, and...the more desperate among soldiers; ...men who...when temptation is presented to them, feel little or no compunction in yielding to it.¹⁰¹

⁹⁷ M. T. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (Routledge, New York, 1993), pp. 86-7; 'Tabular Statement', in Meadows Taylor, 'State of Thuggee in India', p. 293.

⁹⁸ A sample of ten of these diagrams can be found in *Ramaseeana*. One of the ten is numbered '88', which gives some indication of Sleeman's dedication and of how large the 'thug' 'conspiracy' was believed to be.

⁹⁹ [Sleeman's italics.] Sleeman, *Ramaseeana*, Introduction, pp. 20-1.

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 21-2.

¹⁰¹ R. Cox, 'Remarks on the Skulls and Character of the Thugs', *The Phrenological Journal and Miscellany*, 8 (1834), p. 525. For more on the phrenology of 'thug' skulls, see H. H. Spry, 'Some Account of the Gang-Murderers of Central India, commonly called Thugs; accompanying the skulls of several of them', *The Phrenology Journal and Miscellany*, 8 (1834); and W. Turner, *Contributions to the Craniology of the People of the Empire of India. Part III. – Natives of the Madras Presidency, Thugs, Veddahs, Tibetans and Seistanis* (Robert Grant & Son, Edinburgh, 1906). For an accessible critique of phrenology and the imbrication of nineteenth-century anthropometry and racism, see S. J. Gould, *The Mismeasure of Man* (Penguin, London, 1981), esp. pp. 51-99.

Sleeman's belief that he had decoded the 'thugs' secret-language ('*ramasee*')—following something of a convention established by other amateur colonial etymologists¹⁰²—was likewise offered as evidence suggesting that 'thugs' shared a unique subculture that could be objectively recorded.¹⁰³ Therefore, the approver's depositions must be seen in the broader context of various supplementary 'proofs' about 'thuggee' produced by the TD: 'conversations' revealing information about the lifestyles of 'thugs', genealogies depicting their ancestry, and anthropometry demonstrating their propensity for violence and callousness. These 'proofs' followed a circuitous route around the suspicions of the colonisers, the approvers' testimonies, and the TD's scientific projects; all three were mutually reinforcing, describing 'thugs' as 'extraordinary', discrete from 'mainstream' society, and members of a massive 'system' of hereditary criminals.

These 'proofs' did not remain as the private knowledge of the TD and the upper echelons of the colonial administration, but were mobilised in order to facilitate the suppression campaign. The co-opted voices of the approvers were thus used as a measure of the authenticity of the TD's findings and of its officers' ability to 'read' Indian society 'properly'. In the course of the ATC, the TD developed a symbiotic relationship with both the Bengal press, which had a largely European readership and the subcontinent's regional or 'Mofussil' press.¹⁰⁴ In 1831, H. S. Graeme, the Resident at Nagpur, suggested releasing additional details about 'thuggee' "from time to time in the public prints of trials connected with these atrocious cases of murder".¹⁰⁵ Flathuín cites the following extract taken from the *Calcutta Gazette* in 1837, which makes the motivations behind Graeme's suggestion explicit:

...the public at large may be apprized of the extent to which that atrocious crime has been carried [out] by the Thug Fraternity, and...the native portion of the community especially, may be put upon their guard against these insidious murderers.¹⁰⁶

No wonder Meadows Taylor recalled that the "the whole country was in alarm" during the 'revelations' about 'thuggee' in the 1830s.¹⁰⁷ Since the details of the anti-'thug' trials did not stay in the courtroom, neither did the version of 'thuggee' produced in the approvers' narratives. Using the press, it was promoted across the subcontinent to enforce the colonial understanding of the phenomenon throughout India, such that the author of a letter to the *Meerut Observer* in 1836 could knowingly describe 'thugs' as members of "a depraved and heartless race, unmoved by the cry

¹⁰² For example, Richardson and Sherwood both published similar, though less extensive, vocabularies of the alleged secret-languages used by 'groups' similar to 'thugs' (as Sleeman understood them) in the early nineteenth century. See D. Richardson, 'An Account of the Bazeegurs, a Sect Commonly denominated Nuts', *Asiatic Researches*, 7 (1803), pp. 475-9; R. Sherwood, 'Of The Murderers Called Phánsigárs' (Communicated by Colonel McKenzie), *Asiatick Researches*, 13 (1820), pp. 266-8.

¹⁰³ Sleeman's dictionary of '*ramasee*' can be found on pages 67-140 of his *Ramaseeana*. See also van Woerkens, *op. cit.*, pp. 295-315.

¹⁰⁴ The ATC "was good for the Bengal press, and press publicity was, from the beginning, essential to the TD". Flathuín, *op. cit.*, pp. 126, 128.

¹⁰⁵ H. S. Graeme, Resident at Nagpur, in Bengal Political Proceedings, India Office Records, BL, P/517, 21 Jan. 1831, fos. 29-35, quoted in Flathuín, *op. cit.*, p. 127. One such 'public print' was that of the case of 'Ameer Alli', protagonist of Meadows Taylor's novel *Confessions of a Thug* (1839), which Swinton authorised in a letter to Smith: "With regard to the publication of Syyud Ameer Alli's narrative, it is proposed to communicate it to one of the Editors of the periodical publications". Swinton to Smith, 25 Jun. 1832, in *SRT*, p. 92.

¹⁰⁶ *Calcutta Gazette*, 21 Jan. 1837, quoted in Flathuín, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

¹⁰⁷ Meadows Taylor, *Story of My Life*, p. 54.

for mercy; whose thirst for blood is but rendered more strong by each succeeding sacrifice".¹⁰⁸

The publication of colonial knowledge about 'thuggee' in literature such as *Ramaseeana*, which was heavily plagiarised by authors such as Thornton and Hutton and more widely circulated in the metropole than in India, similarly served to embed the findings of the TD as truths.¹⁰⁹ For instance, the claim that 'thugs' belonged to an antique brotherhood was repeated in 1915 by the editor of a republication of *Rambles and Recollections*, who was convinced that "The Thug organization dated from ancient times", and recycled again in 1961, when the author of a glowing biography of Sleeman claimed that the general superintendent had overcome in a few years a 'system' that drew on "centuries of experience and practice".¹¹⁰ Russell and Lal cited the accounts produced by Sleeman and Hutton circa 1836-57 as the basis of the entry on 'thugs' in their encyclopaedic *The Castes and Tribes of the Central Provinces of India* (1916), attempting to sharpen what they perceived as the TD's hazy attempts to assign 'caste' identities to different people arrested for 'thuggee'. Yet the ultimately uncritical tenor of their 'modern', ethnography is confirmed by their wholesale assimilation of both the normative elements of Sleeman's 'science', which located 'thugs' as fundamentally immoral, and the TD's colonialist narrative of the righteousness of the ATC:

When the suppression of the Thugs was seriously taken in hand by the Thuggee and Dacoity Department under the direction of Sir William Sleeman, *this abominable confraternity, which had for centuries infested the main roads of India and made away with tens of thousands of helpless travellers, never to be heard of again by their families and friends, was destroyed with comparatively little difficulty.*¹¹¹

These accounts produced long after the ATC were written against the backdrop of the colonial administration's ongoing attempts to prosecute 'thuggee' and other, related forms of 'collective criminality' throughout the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth. Sleeman's register of 'thugs' still at large was maintained until 1879, and the TD continued to exist in various guises until 1904.¹¹² Therefore, the supposed affirmation of the existence of 'collective' and 'hereditary' crime in India obtained during the ATC through the co-option of 'thug'-approvers and their subsequent authentication of colonial suspicions continued to provide instructive and *widespread* models for reading indigenous criminality well beyond the 1830s. It was

¹⁰⁸ Extract from a letter entitled 'Thuggee', first published in the *Meerut Observer* and reprinted in *The Englishman*, 27 Sept. 1836, quoted in Flathuín, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

¹⁰⁹ It seems that the publication of information about 'thuggee' in Britain caused great interest and a degree of panic. Meadows Taylor's *Confessions* was a bestseller in Victorian Britain, there was an exhibit on 'thuggee' at the Great Exhibition in 1851, and, in the same decade, alarmed readers of *The Times* wrote in to warn others about instances of 'thuggee' on the streets of London.

¹¹⁰ V. A. Smith, footnote, in W. H. Sleeman, *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official*, (1915 edn., edited and introduced by V. A. Smith) (first published 1844; 1915 edn. repr. Asian Educational Services, New Delhi and Madras, 1995), Vol. I, pp. 109-110n.; F. Tucker, *The Yellow Scarf: The Story of the Life of Thuggee Sleeman* (J. M. Dent & Sons, London, 1961), p. 64.

¹¹¹ [My italics.] R. V. Russell, and R. B. H. Lal (asst.), *The Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India*, (Macmillan, London, 1916), Vol. 4, p. 587. Cf. Sleeman, *Ramaseeana*; J. Hutton, *A Popular Account of the Thugs and Dacoits, The Hereditary Garotters and Gang-Robbers of India* (W. H. Allen & Co., London, 1857).

¹¹² Dash, *op. cit.*, p. 246; Freitag, 'Collective Crime', pp. 150, 152. See also B. R. E. LaBouchardiere, 'A Note on the Thuggee and Dacoity Department, 1829-1904', in *Forms of Crime (Some Peculiar To India)*, Part 1, IOL, Mss. Eur. F161/172/2-20.

thus that in 1869, Charles Hervey, Sleeman's successor to the superintendency of the TD, could note that

...in India, we have to deal with criminal systems which have been the growth of all ages, and with criminal deeds the depths of which are utterly inscrutable. ...the progress of civilizations has been disfigured by the...existence of bands of plunderers by hereditary descent.¹¹³

Two years later the Government of India passed the first 'Criminal Tribes Act' (XVII), enshrining collective *and* hereditary criminality as 'facts' of Indian society, in line with contemporary understandings of 'caste'-identity:

A family of carpenters now [1871] will be a family of carpenters a century or five-centuries hence, if they last so long; so will grain-dealers, blacksmiths, leather-makers, and every other known trade. A carpenter cannot drop his tools and become a *banya* [trader], or a *lohar* [blacksmith] or anything else.¹¹⁴

Just as with 'thuggee' in the 1830s, knowledge of the various groups targeted by this legislation was drawn into the larger project of policing them, and, as I use the final section of my essay to demonstrate, the voices of the 'thug'-approvers of the 1830s became those of ghosts haunting criminalised groups 'found' across India in the later nineteenth-century.¹¹⁵

The resilience of the TD's models for reading indigenous criminality throughout the nineteenth century, and their legislative recognition in 1871, is reflective of the colonial administration's continued perception of them as reliable and efficacious means to confront the 'unique' – "extraordinary" – forms of crime found "In a country like India".¹¹⁶ Yet at the heart of these convictions lay the suspicions of the colonisers themselves, ingrained in the processes by which those supposedly possessing the purest knowledge about these crimes – the people who had been accused of committed them – were encouraged to affirm allegations made by their captors and to participate in the production of a particular penal truth that underlined not only the 'justice' of their own suppression, but the *need* for India to be ruled by the British. This pro-colonial metanarrative was intrinsic to the justification of the ATC: if India was to reach a renewed state of 'civilisation', 'thuggee' could not be tolerated, but it was down to the colonisers to set the example. I now turn to examine several of the ways in which the suppression of 'thuggee' in the 1830s contributed to British attempts to affect this reshaping of Indian society.

¹¹³ C. R. W. Hervey, General Superintendent of the Operations for the Suppression of Thuggee and Dacoity, to Secretary to the Government of India, Foreign Department., 30 Nov. 1869, in *idem.*, *Some Records of Crime (Being The Diary of a Year, Official and Particular, of an Officer in the Thuggee and Dacoitie Police)*, (Sampson Low, Marston & Company, London, 1892), Vol. I. p. 79.

¹¹⁴ J. M. Stephen, taken from his speech introducing the draft of the Criminal Tribes Act XVII to the viceroy's council in 1871, quoted in J. Pouchepadass, 'Délinquance de fonction et normalisation coloniale: les tribus criminelles dans l'Inde britannique', in *idem.*, *Les marginaux et les exclus de l'histoire* (Cahiers Jussieu 5, Paris, 1979), cited in van Woerkens, *op. cit.*, p. 106.

¹¹⁵ Cf. S. Nigam, 'Disciplining and policing the "criminals by birth", Part 1: The Making of a Colonial Stereotype – the Criminal Tribes and Castes of North India' *IESHR*, 27, 2 (1990), pp. 131-64; and *idem.*, 'Disciplining and policing the "criminals by birth", Part 2: The Development of a Disciplinary System, 1871-1900', *IESHR*, 27, 3 (1990), pp. 257-287, respectively. See also Freitag, 'Crime in the Social Order of Colonial North India', p. 260.

¹¹⁶ This is Sleeman's phrase: *idem.*, *Ramaseena*, Introduction, p. 52.

* * *

IV. 'THUGGEE', CRIMINALITY AND COLONIALISM

**"Walking in darkness and in the valley of the shadow of death"¹¹⁷:
'thuggee' as 'Hindu' Excess**

In his anonymously published letter to the *Calcutta Literary Gazette* of October 1830, Sleeman represented 'thuggee' as a vast, organised cult whose members brutally murdered unsuspecting travellers out of fidelity to a destructive goddess and a grasping priesthood:

Kali's temple at Vindhychal, a few miles west of Mirzapur on the Ganges, is constantly filled up with murderers from every quarter of India who go there to offer up in person a share of the booty they have acquired from their victims strangled in their annual excursions. ...The priests of this temple know perfectly well the source from which they derive their offerings and the motives from which they are made...and they promise the murderers in the name of their mistress immunity and wealth, provided a due share be offered up to their shrine, and none of the rites and ceremonies be neglected.¹¹⁸

Sleeman's letter thus reflected colonial distrust of the so-called 'priests' of 'Hinduism', Brahmins, which had increased throughout the first decades of the nineteenth century and included allegations that they were self-serving and debauched promoters of Kali-worship.¹¹⁹ Moreover, he had located 'thuggee' as 'another' gruesome 'practice' to be added to the list of terrifying visions of religious murder that seemed to fill the eyes of some colonisers at every turn in early nineteenth-century India. The victims of 'thuggee' joined in the danse macabre of devotees who had hurled themselves beneath Juggernaut's chariot, widows who had burned alive on their husbands' funeral pyres, unwanted baby girls slain by their parents, and convalescents whose friends and relatives had suffocated them by stuffing earth into their throats or leaving them to perish on the banks of the Ganges.¹²⁰

Amidst this grotesquerie, Kali, the goddess of destruction, retained an exemplary position for British writers throughout the nineteenth century, symbolic of the perceived depravity of 'Hinduism'. Writing in the 1810s, Ward described "The Hindoo system" as

¹¹⁷ E. P. Eddrup, *The Thugs; or, Secret Murderers of India* (Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, London, 1853), p. 47.

¹¹⁸ W. H. Sleeman, anonymous letter, published in the *Calcutta Literary Gazette*, 3 Oct. 1830, in Bruce, *op. cit.*, pp. 82-3.

¹¹⁹ John Malcolm had suggested that Brahmin priests orchestrated 'thug' attacks before Sleeman, in his memoirs published in the early 1820s. See J. Malcolm, *A Memoir of Central India, Including Malwa, And Adjoining Provinces. With The History, And Copious Illustrations, Of The Past and Present Condition of That Country*, (first published 1823: 3rd edn. published by Parbury, Allen & Co., London, 1832), Vol. II, p. 187.

¹²⁰ See Lieutenant Colonel Porderi (stationed in Benares) to Captain Benson (Calcutta), 25 Nov. 1828, letter no. 56, in C. H. Phillips, (ed.), *The Correspondence of Lord William Cavendish Bentinck, Governor-General of India 1828-1835*, (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1977), Vol. I, p. 101; J. Peggs, *India's Cries to British Humanity* (first published 1828; 2nd edn., Seely & Son, London, 1830).

the most PUERILE, IMPURE, AND BLOODY OF ANY SYSTEM OF IDOLATRY THAT WAS EVER ESTABLISHED ON EARTH. ...To know the Hindoo idolatry, AS IT IS, a person must wade through the filth of the thirty-six pooranus...he must follow the brahman through his midnight orgies, before the image of Kalee.¹²¹

Similarly, for Duff in the 1830s, Kali was pure excess:

Of all the Hindu divinities, this goddess is the most cruel...[her] supreme delight...consists in cruelty and torture; her ambrosia is the flesh of living votaries and sacrificed victims; and her sweetest nectar, the copious effusion of their blood.¹²²

Writing forty years later, Butler described Kali as “the female Moloch”, with a “horrid appetite for blood, and [a] hunger for human lives...that is insatiate”.¹²³ Like Ward, Duff and Butler, Sleeman was both appalled by the outrages committed in the name of Kali and fascinated by the goddess’s transfixing power over her devotees. In particular, he struggled to reconcile the discovery that ‘Muslim’ ‘thugs’, like the approver Sahib Khan, could worship this ‘Hindu’ goddess:

Sleeman: Does Mahomed, your prophet, anywhere sanction crimes like yours; the murder in cold blood of your fellow creatures for the sake of their money?
 Sahib Khan: No.
 Sleeman: Then do you fear any dread of punishment hereafter?
 Sahib Khan: Never. We never murder unless the omens are favourable; and we consider favourable omens as the mandate of the Deity.
 Sleeman: What Deity?
 Sahib Khan: Bohwani.
 Sleeman: Bohwani, you say, has no influence upon the welfare, or otherwise, of your soul hereafter?
 Sahib Khan: None, we believe; but she influences our fates in this world, and
 what she orders in this world, we believe that God will not punish in the next.¹²⁴

¹²¹ [Ward’s capitals.] W. Ward, *A View of the History, Literature, and Mythology, of The Hindoos*, (first published 1817-20; 3rd edn. repr. Low Price Publications, Delhi, 1900), Vol. 3, pp. 103 (ciii), 95 (xcv).

¹²² A. Duff, *India and Indian Muslims: Including Sketches of the Gigantic System of Hinduism, Both in Theory and Practice* (first published 1839; repr. Swati Publications, Delhi, 1988), p. 265.

¹²³ W. Butler, *The Land of the Veda* (Phillips and Hunt, New York, 1871), p. 399. According to the OED, Moloch was “a Canaanite idol to whom children were sacrificed”. Kali continued to transfix awed colonial sympathisers throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (making them strangely like their representations of her zombified devotees). Hugh B. Urban has drawn fascinating parallels between the colonial administration’s nineteenth-century responses to ‘thugs’ and twentieth-century responses to students participating in the *swadeshi* movement after the partition of Bengal in 1905, both of which located the protagonists as deluded devotees of Kali. In *The Underworld of India* (1933), MacMunn claimed that “To minds such as those of students...overstrained by the premature eroticism...the deity becomes a cult in which insensate and half mystical murder may be a dominant thought” (pp. 209-10; full references are included in my bibliography). Steven Spielberg’s *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984) continues the orientalisation of Kali-worship in Western culture: see van Woerkens, *op. cit.*, pp. 278-86, esp. pp. 282-4.

¹²⁴ Sleeman, *Ramaseena*, Conversations, p. 146.

For Sleeman, as for various supporters of the ATC of the 1830s throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, such contradictions were evidence of neither the syncretism of popular religion in India, nor of the poverty of the term 'Hinduism' when conceptualised as a 'world faith' with a scriptural basis and a political position analogous to Christianity in metropolitan Britain. Rather, they offered confirmation that 'thuggee' was a result of the religious paroxysms 'typical' in the practitioners of India's indigenous religions: "The Hindoo religion", wrote Sleeman, "reposes upon an entire prostration of mind, that continual and habitual surrender of the reasoning faculties".¹²⁵

Indeed, the threat posed by 'thuggee' as Kali-worship to Christians debating it at a theological level was the relativist challenge it issued to 'religion' as the basis of an ethical code, for here (admittedly in its most 'excessive' readings) was a 'religion' sanctioning murder. 'Thugs' were seen as "living proof that religion, if improperly inculcated, may be made the vehicle of the most detestable abominations which sin has introduced into the world".¹²⁶ In *Ramaseeana*, Sleeman made similarly generalised accusations about the cruelty and delusion caused in 'thugs' by their worship of a 'Hindu' goddess of destruction:

A Thug considers the persons murdered precisely in the light of victims offered up to the Goddess.... He mediates his murders without any misgivings, he perpetrates them without any emotions of pity, and he remembers them without any feelings of remorse. They trouble not his dreams, nor does their recollection ever cause him inquietude in darkness, in solitude, or in the hour of death.¹²⁷

This *remorselessness* made 'thugs' relentless killers, Sleeman suggested, mere ciphers for the bloodlust of their goddess. As in the case of Sahib Khan, devotion was the means for 'thugs' to abnegate responsibility for their attacks by shifting it onto the goddess: 'obedience' to Kali was immunity from conscience. Those people who stood trial for 'thuggee' in the 1830s were not only 'criminals', guilty of murder and robbery, but also the bearers of a malign faith and representatives of the potential for depravity inscribed in Indian social institutions. Part of the 'justice' of the ATC was the exposition and punishment of the criminality innate in Hinduism: the eradication of 'thuggee' – 'another' 'Hindu' 'excess' – was seen as proof of the virtues of the colonial presence, the colonisers' ability to shine a light into the "dark and cheerless night of superstition, which has long clouded the moral vision of India".¹²⁸ The TD would help effect a "national regeneration"¹²⁹, which would invigorate what was seen

¹²⁵ Sleeman, *Rambles and Recollections*, Vol. I, p. 213. Cf. J. N. Farquhar, 'Thags', in James Hastings (ed.), *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics*, 12 (T&T Clark, London, 1926), p. 261. It is well known that late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century colonial interpretations of religion in India favoured a scriptural approach, hence, Ward condemned the "filth of the thirty-six pooranus" and Butler's 1871 tract was titled *The Land of the Veda* – the *Veda* was understood to be the Ur-text of the Hindu 'religion'. Incidentally, a look at the OED's definitions of 'Hinduism', 'Purana' and 'Veda' shows the persistence of this approach. For an incisive exposition of the colonial conceptualisation of Hinduism as a 'religion', see R. King, *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial theory, India and 'the mystic East'* (Routledge, London and New York, 1999), pp. 98-109, esp. p. 109.

¹²⁶ F. Hollick, *Murder Made Moral; or, an Account of the Thugs, and other secret Murderers of India, who are made to believe, by their peculiar education, that Robbery and Bloodshed are virtuous actions and religious duties* (A. Heywood, Manchester, 1840), p. 18.

¹²⁷ [Sleeman's italics.] Sleeman, *Ramaseeana*, Introduction, p. 7.

¹²⁸ Thornton, *op. cit.*, p. 43 For Thornton on Kali, see *ibid.*, pp. 43-58, 65-6.

¹²⁹ C. E. Trevelyan, 'The Thugs; Or, Secret Murderers of India', *Edinburgh Review*, 64, 130 (1837), p. 395.

as an ancient civilisation that had been led into degeneration and stasis by a corrupt priesthood that had enfeebled the population and exploited a 'religion' liable to 'immorality'.

Moreover, Sleeman and his supporters were promoting these ideas to a European colonial society beginning not only to conceive of a more extensive, interventionist role for itself in India, but, by the late 1820s, believing it was in the process of realising it. Following the renewal of the Company's Charter in 1814, Christian proselytization had been permitted again in India, with a small fund provided for the "encouragement of education, literature and science".¹³⁰ Bentinck, who arrived as Governor General in 1828, had combined fiscal retrenchment with social reform in an attempt to stabilise the Company's rule. In particular, the abolition of *sati* (widow-burning) in 1829 had encouraged British Evangelicals' sense of destiny in India.¹³¹ Perceiving the 'savage' ends to which Kali-worshippers claimed they had been directed and the complementary 'civilising' project that was entailed by the suppression of 'thuggee', the ATC was endorsed by Evangelical writers as another opportunity for the colonial administration to *improve* India:

The very fact that these men ['thugs'] are made to be the characters they are, proves that we can make men *what we please*!! Our course then is plain—we have simply to discover what arrangements will make him VIRTUOUS and HAPPY and immediately put them in operation.¹³²

Hence, in 1836, the *Calcutta Christian Observer* praised Bentinck as "an angel from heaven to succour and comfort suffering humanity", entitled to "everlasting honour among men, to the gratitude of all India and of the world" for authorising the ATC.¹³³

This was the paradox of the rhetorical representations of 'thuggee' as 'Hindu excess': devotion to the goddess of destruction was held to predestine 'thugs' to a wretched life of murder in her name, to make them incorrigible, remorseless, relentless murderers who had to be confronted by a campaign aiming at nothing less than their permanent elimination from society, yet the same confrontation was capitalised upon by evangelical Christians as the means to further invigorate their mission to win converts, save souls, and *change* lives. Those accused of 'thuggee' had no place in this changed social and religious landscape, they were beyond 'rational' explanation or 'civilised' society. 'Thuggee' was fanaticism, extremism, excess, and a measure of the disparity between two possible destinies: where Indians might be led if they were left alone, to the mercies of Brahmin priests and bloodthirsty deities; where they might be led if the British immersed themselves in indigenous 'religion', unravelled it, exposed its cruelty and corruption, and provided an 'enlightened' alternative. In the course of the ATC, any notion that there were more than two possible destinies, let alone the validity of the assumption that Indians should, either way, be *led* to them, fell from scrutiny.

How to govern "persons floating loosely upon society"¹³⁴:

¹³⁰ Chatterjee, *op. cit.*, p. 18.

¹³¹ C. A. Bayly, *Indian Society and the Making of the British Empire* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1988), pp. 108, 120-1; L. Mani, 'The Production of an Official Discourse on *Sati* in Early Nineteenth-Century Bengal', in Francis Barker, Peter Hulme, Margaret Iversen, and Diana Loxley (eds.), *Europe and Its Others: Proceedings of the Essex Conference on Sociology*, I (University of Essex, Colchester, 1985).

¹³² [Hollick's italics and capitals.] Hollick, *op. cit.*, p. 35-6.

¹³³ *Calcutta Christian Observer*, V (1836), in M. N. Flathuín, *op. cit.*, p. 131.

'thuggee' and Colonial Attitudes to 'Wanderers'

In the course of the ATC, 'thuggee' became a depersonalised screen onto which the British projected their anxieties about those people to be excluded from their vision for colonial India. 'Thugs' became analogous to, even synecdochical for those members of the indigenous population that could not be described by the colonisers' 'regular' taxonomies, who lay beyond the purview of the colonial state's day-to-day surveillance technologies and were only rarely caught in its information-gathering webs. In particular, this unease was manifested in a wide range of memoirs, scholarly articles, and gazetteers published by colonial writers in the early nineteenth century in which criminality was ascribed and even seen as intrinsic to the peripatetic lifestyles of various nomadic and petty traders, shifting tribes and religious mendicants—India's many and various 'wanderers'. Thus, for Hamilton in his *East-India Gazetteer* (1815), it was apt to define the towns and districts surveyed both geographically and by the content and character of their 'wilder' inhabitants. In the case of the Doab region, it was "not surprising" to Hamilton that "criminal offences" had not been "wholly eradicated",

...considering the almost total anarchy that prevailed in this quarter before it came under British domination, and that the Jauts, Goojurs, Rajpoots, Aheers, Lodhas, Patans, Mewaties, Meenas, Buddicks, Thugs, Cozauks, Chumas, and Khaukrobes (who still form the bulk of the population), had been from time immemorial addicted to open and secret plunder.¹³⁵

Groups suspected of being both 'unsettled' and deviant—and the two are entwined throughout his *Gazetteer*—received Hamilton's specific attention, with "quiet and inoffensive" cultivators contrasted to the "savage and predatory" or "races of mountaineers" (or 'tribals'):

The inhabitants of the hills and jungles are more shy, sullen, inhospitable and uncivilized, and their chiefs are grossly stupid, debauched, tyrannical, and slaves to the most grovelling superstition.¹³⁶

The further one moves from centre to periphery, from settled plains to hills and jungles, and from colonial surveillance to the "hills and jungles", the greater the potential for political turbulence ("total anarchy"), social disintegration ("inhospitable and uncivilised"), religious decrepitude ("grovelling superstition"), and an absence of history ("from time immemorial"); that is, the further one moves from having a 'rational' existence and a 'justifiable' place in the world.¹³⁷

In metropolitan Britain, in the later nineteenth century, Henry Mayhew would make an identical contrast between the civility of 'citizens' of London and the savagery of the capital's 'vagabonds', while in a section of his *London Labour and the London Poor* (1861-2) entitled "Of wandering tribes in general", he claimed that such 'nomads' took "delight in warfare", possessed a "vague sense of religion" and had a

¹³⁴ W. H. Sleeman, *Report on Budhuk...Decoits*, p. 80, quoted in Singha, "'Providential' Circumstances", pp. 102-3.

¹³⁵ Hamilton, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 521-2.

¹³⁶ *ibid.*, Vol. II, pp. 79, 346, respectively (the indented quotation is from p. 346). Cf. Spry, *Modern India*, Vol. I, p. 17, Vol. II, pp. 139-40.

¹³⁷ Cf. A. Sauli, 'Circulation and Authority: Police, Public Space and Territorial Control in Punjab, 1861-1920', in C. Markovits *et al.* (eds.), *Society and Circulation: Mobile People and Itinerant Cultures in South Asia 1750-1950* (Permanent Black, Delhi, 2003), p. 225.

"repugnance to regular and continuous labour".¹³⁸ We can trace antecedents to this racist discourse by which the 'marginal' are first marginalised, first positioned as Other and 'outsider', by returning to early nineteenth-century India. In the late 1810s, both Elphinstone (the Governor of Bombay) and Malcolm (who had political and military command of central India) showed a similar concern for the "thievish habits" of "wild and predatory tribe(s)"¹³⁹ and the "loose characters of the country"¹⁴⁰ in western and central India, emphasising their marginality to and predation upon the 'mainstream' population. According to Elphinstone, "Gang robberies and highway robbery are common, but are almost always committed by Beels and other predatory tribes, who *scarcely form part of the society*".¹⁴¹ Malcolm was particularly concerned by the Pindaris, auxiliary horsemen to the Marathas' armies since the mid-eighteenth century, against whom the Company mounted a military 'pacification' campaign centred on the Narmada valley in the late 1810s: "[they] became, from the very looseness of their composition," he argued, "a nucleus to attract what was *floating and unattached* in the community".¹⁴² For Malcolm, it was precisely this *separateness* of suspect groups that was problematic for a government wishing to improve knowledge of the subject population. Anticipating Sleeman and Spry, among others, Malcolm noted how easily separateness could become *invisibility* in a "such a country as...India"—in a "theatre of anarchy", where actors disappeared against kaleidoscopic backdrops: some 'thugs' "have horses and tents and are equipped like merchants, some look like merchants, some like beggars and mendicants" he noted, "they assume, in short, every disguise".¹⁴³

The processes of the stereotyping and criminalisation India's 'tribals' (or *adivasis*) and the metropolitan poor of London takes us on a tangent that arcs well beyond the (albeit porous) boundaries of this essay.¹⁴⁴ However, the parallels between the mystery surrounding their lifestyles and those of 'thugs', the consequent anxiety this provoked in the colonisers, and the ongoing apprehension that characterised colonial attitudes to various traders, travellers, ascetics and 'predatory' groups gives a further insight into the ways that 'thuggee' came to constitute a trope for 'disobedience'; a signifier to represent people drawing the suspicions and

¹³⁸ H. Mayhew, *London Labour and the London Poor*, (first published 1861-2; repr. Cass, London, 1967), Vol. I., p. 2, quoted in J. Marriott, *The Other Empire: Metropolis, India and Progress in the Colonial Imagination* (Manchester University Press, Manchester and New York, 2003), pp. 114-5.

¹³⁹ M. Elphinstone, *Report on the Territories, Conquered from the Paishwa* (Government Gazette Press, Calcutta, 1821), pp. 2-3.

¹⁴⁰ Malcolm, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, p. 188.

¹⁴¹ Elphinstone, *op. cit.*, p. 55.

¹⁴² [My italics.] Malcolm, *op. cit.*, Vol. II, pp. 186-7. For more on the Pindaris, see M. P. Roy, *Origin, Growth and Suppression of the Pindaris* (Sterling Publishers, New Delhi, 1973), esp. pp. 1-36, 304-320.

¹⁴³ Malcolm, *op. cit.*, p. 188. An interesting aspect of Majeed's insightful reading of Meadows Taylor's *Confessions* is the argument that the novel was partly an attempt to convey and control the heterogeneity and polyglossia experienced during the author's lengthy and idiosyncratic career in India, and in many ways typified by the perceived multiplicity of 'thug' identities. See J. Majeed, 'Meadows Taylor's *Confessions of a Thug*: the Anglo-Indian novel as a genre in the making', in Bart Moore-Gilbert (ed.), *Writing India 1757-1990: The Literature of British India* (Manchester University Press, Manchester, 1996), pp. 87-97.

¹⁴⁴ For the criminalisation of India's tribes see S. N. Gordon, 'Bhils and the Idea of a Criminal Tribe in Nineteenth-Century India', in Anand A. Yang (ed.), *Crime and Criminality in British India* (University of Arizona Press, Tucson, Arizona, 1995); Nigam, *op. cit.*; and Marriott, *op. cit.*, esp. pp. 152-5, 190. For an innovative account of the discourse of 'wildness' in the nineteenth-century India, see A. Skaria, *Hybrid Histories: Forests, Frontiers and Wildness in Western India* (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1999).

disapprobation of the colonial administration and amenable to prosecution under the vague anti-'thug' laws, those represented as wild or savage predators on mainstream civilisation.¹⁴⁵

In the late 1830s, various groups of peripatetic renouncers, such as Gosains, Sannyasis, Nagas and Yogis—who combined asceticism variously with the complementary identities of traders, entertainers, and soldiers—were particular victims of the criminalisation of 'thugs'.¹⁴⁶ Sleeman used his leverage as General Superintendent of the TD to mount a campaign against these "monastic orders", whom—echoing Malcolm—he described as being composed "of persons floating loosely upon society, without property or character, with the object of acquiring the property of others".¹⁴⁷ "We have always had reason to believe that a great part of the Byragees, Gosains and other religious mendicants that infest all parts of India were assassins by profession", he told the Secretary General to the Supreme Government in 1838, announcing, a year later:

There is one great evil which afflicts and has afflicted the country, and which no government but a very strong one could attempt to eradicate. This is a mass [around 2,000,000 people, by Sleeman's estimate] of religious mendicants who infest every part of India, and subsist upon the fruits of all manner of crime.... [They] rob and steal, and a very great portion of them murder their victims before they rob them...[using] dutoora, or some other deleterious drug.¹⁴⁸

An instructive example of the complicity of the criminalisation of 'thugs' and 'wanderers', which further demonstrates vagueness of the anti-'thug' legislation, is J. R. Lumley's harassment of Yogis. Lumley, one of Sleeman's deputies in the TD, wrote to the magistrate at Ahmednuggur in 1838 to inform him that he had "the very strongest ground of suspicion for believing all the twelve tribes of Jogeas to be in truth Thugs but ostensibly Beggars and Peddlars who traffic in small wares".¹⁴⁹ "The Headquarters of the Jogeas is [a temple] at Sonaree", Lumley told the magistrate, where there are "some fifteen or twenty Goroos and three or four Muctiyar Jogee families I wish to seize". Lumley went on to arrest "50 or 60" Yogis, "among whom more than a dozen confessed or recorded Thuggee against their accomplices", and, despite his admission that he did not think the 'Goroos' had "any connection with Thuggee", he interned "a few of them to initiate us into arcana Jogeeana".¹⁵⁰ The example of the Yogis thus bears a striking resemblance to the ways in which the ATC had been initiated following the 'revelations' about worshippers at Kali's temple at Vindhychal in October 1830, the dialectical processes by which arrested suspects

¹⁴⁵ Cf. B. Neeladri, 'Predicaments of Mobility: Peddlers and Itinerants in Nineteenth-Century Northwestern India', in C. Markovits *et al* (eds.), *op. cit.*, p. 197.

¹⁴⁶ See B. S. Cohn, 'The Role of the Gosains in the Economy of Eighteenth and Nineteenth Century Upper India', *IESHR*, 1, 4 (1964), pp. 175-182; D. H. A. Kolff, Notes on 'Sannyasi Trader-Soldiers', *IESHR*, 8, 2 (1971), pp. 213-218; B. Neeladri, *op. cit.*, p. 168.

¹⁴⁷ Sleeman, *Report on Budhuk...Decoits*, p. 80, quoted in Singha, "'Providential" Circumstances', pp. 102-3.

¹⁴⁸ Sleeman to Macnaghten, 3 Feb. 1838, NAI, Thug and Dacoity, G5, p. 107, quoted in van Woerkens, *op. cit.*, p. 102; Sleeman, *Report on the System of Megpunnaism*, pp. 9, 11, respectively. "Datura poisoners", as they were widely called, had fallen under colonial suspicion since Perry's encounters with 'thuggee' circa 1810. Indeed, in a rare example of 'thugs' attacking non-Indians, it was suspected that N. J. Halhed (leader of the attack on Murnae) had been the target of a plot to poison him in 1812. See Wagner, *op. cit.*, p. 956.

¹⁴⁹ J. R. Lumley to the Magistrate of Ahmednuggur, Dec. 1837, Letters from the Assistant General Superintendent at Shorapur to the General Superintendent and others between October 1836 and December 1837, NAI, II, p. 261, quoted in van Woerkens, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 262-3, quoted in van Woerkens, *op. cit.*, pp. 101-2.

testified to being 'thugs', and the formalisation of esoteric and decontextualised information as 'truth'—such that in 1838, Sleeman could make the confident and generalised claim that "There are not anywhere worse characters than these Jogies, or greater pests to society...save the regular Thugs".¹⁵¹

Sleeman's suggestion that there were "regular Thugs" by the late 1830s was strikingly at odds with the diversity of people arrested on suspicion of 'thuggee' by this period, and the mass of heterogeneous information about their experiences of life on India's roads found in their testimonies and 'conversations' with TD officers. If anything, the *lack* of "regular Thugs" gave sustenance to the ATC; the difficulty of rationalising and categorising 'thuggee' had produced the legislation wide enough to permit the interrogation of people with fluid, multiple and diverging identities.¹⁵² In turn, these laws were used to prosecute this fluidity, this multiplicity, based on the claims that 'thuggee' was difficult to detect and often impossible to establish individual culpability for; that 'thugs' were masters of disguise and duplicity; that they were remorseless and relentless killers who must at the very least be detained on minor charges of 'association' with gangs; and finally that—despite all this—the TD had penetrated their mysterious subculture and *had* to fully unravel it and punish all practitioners. In 1848, Act XI equipped the TD with the power to punish

Whosoever shall be proved to have belonged, either before or after the passing of this Act, to *any wandering gangs of persons*, associated for the purposes of theft or robbery...with imprisonment, with hard labour, for any term not exceeding seven years.¹⁵³

With this legislation, the colonial administration gave judicial force to the topos of the road as a place of danger, where 'wanderers' could escape surveillance, harass travellers, practice unregulated commerce, and—worst of all—develop 'wild' and 'savage' cults inimical to the envisioned society of 'civilised', taxable cultivators.¹⁵⁴

***"All kinds of men have been made Thugs"*¹⁵⁵:
Resisting Rationalisation, Defying Categorisation**

Since they escape the deterministic formula of the judicial testimonies and contain instances in which different subalterns advance competing explanations of 'thuggee', the 'Conversations' between Sleeman and thirty-eight approvers constitute an albeit constrained example of 'thugs' negotiating their identity with the colonisers. To the extent that I am assessing the construction of 'thuggee' through the knowledge-gathering and disciplinary processes used by the TD, they provide a valuable supply of information to challenge colonial definitions of the phenomenon; to open up inconsistencies within the 'thug' discourse and situate its truth-claims as power-laden and contingent, rather than—as the authors of 'thug' 'science' attempted—the only conceivable description of the 'reality' of 'thuggee'. In the course of this exploration of

¹⁵¹ Sleeman to Macnaghten, 3 Feb. 1838, NAI, Thug and Dacoity, G5, p. 107; Sleeman to Reynolds, 6 Apr. 1838, NAI, G5, pp. 112, quoted in van Woerkens, *op. cit.*, p. 102.

¹⁵² For a detailed study of the criminalisation of bandits in Republican China, and of the haziness between boundaries of legitimate 'soldiering' and illegitimate 'bandit' violence, see P. Billingsley, *Bandits in Republican China* (Stanford University Press, Stanford, 1988).

¹⁵³ [My italics.] Sleeman, *Report on Budhuk...Decoits*, p. 357.

¹⁵⁴ Cf. B. Neeladri, *op. cit.*, pp. 193, 195; C. A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars in North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion 1770-1870* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983), p. 219.

¹⁵⁵ [My italics.] Zolfukar to Sleeman, in Sleeman, *Ramaseeana, Conversations*, pp. 153, 157.

the 'Conversations', we are confronted with evidence of the heterogeneity of indigenous society of the early nineteenth century, and the consequent prospects for inhabitants to enact multiple identities simultaneously or move fluidly between discrete subject-positions. Juxtaposed with the British representations of 'thuggee', which sought to reduce the phenomenon to a monadic account of 'native' criminality, this plurality illustrates the stark epistemic and cultural violence of colonial attempts to rationalise and categorise indigenous society. Nor should this epistemic, cultural violence be seen as somehow 'confined' to violence between competing representations of India alone: as the elaboration of the ATC demonstrates, it was the basis of and legitimation for social and physical violence waged against those members of indigenous society who most closely matched the model of a 'thug'.

In much of the rhetoric and published literature released by the TD, Kali was seen as the inspiration for the 'thugs'' violence, which was construed as 'religious murder' – a criminality only possible in India, with its depraved faith, corrupt priests and bloodthirsty deities. Yet the 'thugs' who speak in the 'Conversations' present an ambivalent attitude to Kali-worship, indicative of the *political*, and therefore *contextualised*, usage of popular religion throughout the subcontinent. When life on the road became too tough, or too good an opportunity presented itself, 'thugs' overlooked the supposed allegiance to the goddess that guided their actions:

Among us it is a rule never to kill women; but if a rich old woman is found, the gang sometimes gets a man to strangle her by giving him an extra share of the booty, and inducing him to take the responsibility upon himself. We have sometimes killed other prohibited people, particularly those of low caste, whom we ought not even to have touched.¹⁵⁶

Nor were 'thugs' alone in their devotion to Kali, or in looking for ominous signs of her will in nature. Kali worship was not coterminous with 'thuggee', but, according to Feringheea, who claimed "all men worship at her temple", was practised by much of the population.¹⁵⁷ Elsewhere in the 'Conversations' (as evidenced in the example of the 'Muslim' approver's relationship to Bhavani), 'thugs' refer to the goddess in terms that suggest that professed devotion to her allowed them to disavow responsibility for or sanctify their actions:

From the time that the omens have been favourable, we consider them [travellers] as victims thrown into our hands by the deity to be killed; and that we are the mere instruments in her hands to destroy them: that if we do not kill them, she will never be again propitious to us, and we and our families will be involved in misery and want.¹⁵⁸

Similarly, the approvers explained their capture by the British as punishment for their disobedience of omens sent from the goddess, which, they argued, had brought them 'misfortune', rather than conceding, as Sleeman urged them to, that it was the inevitable outcome of a well-directed suppression campaign.¹⁵⁹

Such assertions can be viewed as the approvers' attempts to regain the agency that the TD deprived them of, and to confer a legitimacy onto the actions for which they had been tried as criminals, in much the same way that many preferred to be

¹⁵⁶ Sahib Khan to Sleeman, in *ibid.*, p. 143.

¹⁵⁷ Feringheea to Sleeman, in *ibid.*, p. 150. Cf. Singha, 'Providential' Circumstances', pp. 101, 139. Cf. C. A. Bayly, 'Knowing the Country: Empire and Information in India', *MAS*, 27 (1993), p. 36.

¹⁵⁸ Anonymous 'thug' to Sleeman, in Sleeman, *Ramaseeana*, Conversations, p. 147.

¹⁵⁹ Cf. Nasir to Sleeman, in *ibid.*, pp. 141-2, 157-8.

described as 'thugs', rather than 'merely' thieves or murderers. "The denomination thief is one that is particularly obnoxious to them", noted Reynolds, "and they never refrain from soliciting the erasure of the term, and the substitution of that of T'hag whenever it may appear in a paper regarding them".¹⁶⁰ For the approvers, 'thuggee' represented an identity that required skill, bravery and cunning, and brought adventure, camaraderie, and even glory. In the 'Conversations', they describe instances of 'thuggee' in reverential and hyperbolic terms, and lament the 'denigration' of the practice by opportunists.¹⁶¹ Sahib Khan and Nasir blamed their downfall on the likes of "Mudee Khan from the Sindouse stock", who had presumably fled from Perry circa 1810-12 before creating a

...gang of fifty Thugs of all cast[e]s and descriptions...weavers, braziers, bracelet-makers, and all kinds of ragamuffins, whom he had *scraped together* about his new abode on the banks of the Herun and Nurbudda rivers, in the districts of Jebulpore and Nursingpore. ...They killed all people indiscriminately, women and men, of all cast[e]s and professions, and knew so little about omens that they entered upon their expeditions and killed people, in spite of such as [even] the most ignorant [person] ought to have known were prohibitive.¹⁶²

The purpose of Sleeman's inclusion of such 'conversations' was to provide further authentication of the extent to which he had exposed a 'thug' 'subculture', whereby 'thuggee' was represented as a deeply embedded, widely practiced and highly resilient 'system'. In the context of the approvers describing the 'pollution' and 'decline' of the 'thugs' 'system', the lamentable discipline of the gang described by Sahib Khan and Nasir serves Sleeman's purpose, corroborating the metanarrative of their being a 'system' to begin with. Yet to the extent that they indicate that 'thug' gangs were not the result of hereditary or collective allegiance to specific 'trades' – being casually constituted and heterogeneously composed – and furthermore that even individual members were not slavishly-bound to a single identity – since "weavers, braziers, bracelet-makers, and all kinds of ragamuffins" *became* 'thugs' – the homogenising ambition of the colonial representation is thwarted. To cite Sahib Khan again: "we once drove bullocks and were itinerant tradesmen...we have some usages [of 'ramasee'] and traditions that seem to imply that our ancestors kept bullocks, and traded".¹⁶³ Thus, in the 'Conversations', 'thuggee' was re-presented by the approvers as a relatively recent phenomenon, the means to overcome short-term hardship, and one identity among many open to the poorer members of Indian society.¹⁶⁴ By fashioning a pre-history to 'thuggee', the approvers subvert the colonisers' decontextualised conceptualisation of the phenomenon, whereby it was

¹⁶⁰ Lieutenant Reynolds, 'Notes on the T'hags', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, IV (1836), pp. 200-201.

¹⁶¹ The problematic issue of translation aside, an analysis of the language used in the 'Conversations' is telling of the approvers' grandiose and romanticized recollections of 'thuggee', as they speak of religion in terms of omens, miracles, rituals, secrets, oaths, and tombs; describe 'thug' adventures with reference to gold, jewels, pearls, and thousand-strong gangs; and describe their moral world in terms of fortune and betrayal: see Sleeman, *Ramaseeana*, Conversations, pp. 141-270. Meadows Taylor duly voiced this through the protagonist of his novel, *Confessions of a Thug*, Ameer Ali's. See *idem.*, *Confessions of a Thug* (1998 edn., edited and introduced by Patrick Brantlinger) (first published 1839; repr. Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1998). pp. 171, 226-7, 171, for Ameer's glorification of 'thuggee' and his contrasting of his adventurous life on the road to the "inactive and inglorious" 'settled' life.

¹⁶² [Sleeman's italics.] Sahib Khan and Nasir to Sleeman, in Sleeman, *Ramaseeana*, Conversations, p. 154. Cf. Zolfukar and Morlee to Sleeman, *ibid.*, pp. 157, 158, respectively.

¹⁶³ Sahib Khan to Sleeman, in Sleeman, *Ramaseeana*, Conversations, p. 144.

¹⁶⁴ Cf. Wagner, *op. cit.*, pp. 959, 963.

located *beyond* history, rationality and civilisation, as a crime so old that it dated from "ancient times", or even "time immemorial".¹⁶⁵

Sahib Khan's claim to have been descended from itinerant bullock-drivers accords with C. A. Bayly's description of the Banjara traders, who continued to circulate the subcontinent throughout the nineteenth century, fulfilling a variety of mercantile functions and in particular linking-up the islands of concentrated commercial activity in India's northern and central plains-economies.¹⁶⁶ Moreover, the colonial administration's responses to the information that some 'thugs' had links to Banjaras is again indicative of its antipathy toward the 'wandering' population. In the late 1830s, Banjaras became particular recipients of the TD's attention, as Sleeman and his assistant in Meerut, Lieutenant Mills, implicated them in a newly 'discovered' 'thug' conspiracy called "The System of Megpunnaism, or the Murder of Indigent Parents for their young children (who are sold as slaves)".¹⁶⁷ In the first piece of legislation in which 'thuggee' was defined – Act III of 1848 – *kidnapping* was specified alongside robbery as the specific goal of 'thug' attacks:

...the word "Thug,"...shall be taken to have meant and to mean a person who is, or has at any time been habitually associated with any other or others for the purpose of committing...the offence of Child-stealing, or the offence of Robbery. ...the word "Thuggee,"...shall be taken to have meant and to mean the offence of committing or attempting any such Child-stealing, or Robbery by a Thug. ...the expression "Murder by Thuggee," when used in such Acts, shall be taken to have meant and to mean Murder, when employed as the means of committing such Child-stealing, or such Robbery by a Thug.¹⁶⁸

The breadth of this legislation (which, like Act XXX of 1836, applied retrospectively, did not define *how* 'thugs' committed attacks, and applied both to the individuals who perpetrated them *and* their associates) is a measure of the flexibility required by the TD to prosecute 'thuggee' and of the capacity for the wide range of individuals arrested under it to exhaust colonial taxonomies, only for new definitions to arise according to the idiosyncratic tangents pursued by colonial policing agencies.

The case of Hurree Singh, although it does not feature in the 'Conversations', caused similar consternation for the colonial authorities by demonstrating the ease with which indigenous people could traverse different identities, to the point of becoming 'invisible':

When I resided in Omrowtee about seven years ago, I used to come to Hingolee and lodge in the house of Ram Sing, Thug, who has since been seized and sent to Jubulpore. Sometimes I came with the gangs on Thuggee and sometimes as a merchant with cloths for sale. ...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 jungles; and never dreamed that they were murdered by the men they saw every day about them.¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁵ Sleeman, *Rambles and Recollections*, Vol. I., p. 110; Hamilton, *op. cit.*, Vol. I, pp. 521-2. For the significance of 'having a history' to 'having a place in society', see Skaria, *op. cit.*, esp. pp. 7-14.

¹⁶⁶ C. A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars*, pp. 29, 52, 221.

¹⁶⁷ This was part of the title of Sleeman's report on 'Megpunnaism' of 1839. See Sleeman, *Report on the System of Megpunnaism*, esp. pp. 2-7, 17-23, 47-65, 85-105.

¹⁶⁸ Sleeman, *Report on Budhuk...Decoits*, p. 357.

¹⁶⁹ [Sleeman's italics,] 'Extract from the deposition of Hurree Sing', in Sleeman, *Ramaseena*, Introduction, pp. 36-7.

Sleeman was appalled that “one of the most respectable *linen drapers* of the cantonments of Hingolee” had been able to move seamlessly between his ‘ostensible’ life as a supplier of “broad cloth” and that of a ‘thug’ without arousing suspicion.¹⁷⁰ The TD could only resolve this by insisting that ‘thugs’ ‘screened’ their ‘real’ ‘trade’ behind all manner of everyday practices, including soldiering, farming, peripatetic trade and religious mendicancy. The potential for indigenes to hold simultaneous, complementary, or contingent identities, which they could change and switch between, was ignored.¹⁷¹ This capacity for mimicry and flux could not be incorporated within the TD’s definitions of ‘thuggee’, which relied on the colonisers’ perceived ability to *fully* delineate, singularise and objectify each aspect of the phenomenon. Colonial knowledge of ‘thuggee’ therefore became not a measure of the successful penetration of an indigenous subculture, but a self-exposing demonstration of its own partiality and preferentiality; its violent inability to perceive any vulnerability or limitation to its reach, and the simultaneous stimulus this gave to its obsessive attempts to classify and rationalise India:

There is an ongoing and strenuous endeavo[u]r in the discourse of *thuggee* to interpellate the thug as an essence, a move which attests to the anxiety of rupture that subtends the totalizing epistemologies of colonialism. Yet the thug as a discursive object is strikingly resistant to such fixity; he is all things to all people. ...The thug, through his capacity for disguise and impersonation and his skill at negotiating multiple and competing identities, usurps the colonizer’s privilege of complex subjectivity and of movement between subject positions and thus can be read to assume some control over both the construction and flow of colonial knowledge. So he never becomes fully naturalized as the disciplinary subject or, in other words, the knowable subject, of the colonial polity.¹⁷²

However, the realisation that colonial knowledge could not fully *know* ‘thuggee’ was precisely the source of the legitimation for the ATC. It was crucial for the colonial administration not to be able to fully *rationalise* ‘thuggee’, for this would have conceded a modicum of empathy, of identification with the ‘savage’, the ‘wild’ and the ‘irrational’. The civilising mission could never be about *erasing* wildness, so much as *policing* it, subordinating it: construing an element of the colonised population as wild and sustaining that construction.¹⁷³ Thus, in the late 1830s, the alleged devotees of Kali who inveigled travellers on India’s roads before strangling and robbing them now gave way to a proliferation of similarly pernicious and resourceful criminals—‘River Thugs’, ‘Tushma-Baz Thugs’, and ‘Oothaegeerahs’, as well as the ‘Dathura Poisoners’ and ‘Megpunniastic Thugs’.¹⁷⁴ All were allegedly

¹⁷⁰ However, Sleeman’s apparent outrage served a second purpose—simultaneously advertising the brilliance of the colonisers’ gaze, the TD’s ability to illuminate Indian society, and, ultimately, expose and suppress such ‘extraordinary’ criminals. Sleeman, *Ramaseeana*, Introduction, p. 34.

¹⁷¹ For the ‘complementarity’ of indigenous identities (especially, in this case, suggestive of the proximities between ‘thuggee’, ‘banditry’ and military service), see D. H. A. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy: The Ethnohistory of the Military Labour Market in Hindustan, 1450-1850* (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1990), esp. pp. 95, 117, 126, 189-99.

¹⁷² P. Roy, *op. cit.*, p. 55. Cf. Marriott, *op. cit.*, pp. 5, 150-152.

¹⁷³ See Skaria, *op. cit.*, p. 193.

¹⁷⁴ See D. J. Macleod to Captain Brown, 9 Oct. 1841, Jabalpur District Records, no. 331; Report from Inspector General of Police, Central Provinces, to Secretary to Chief Commissioner, Nagpur, 24 Jan. 1871, Jabalpur District Records, no. 394, both in SC; Hutton, *op. cit.*, pp. 98-104, 169-183.

characterised by their 'caste-like' adherence to their 'specific' 'trades' of robbery and murder, but above all by the *incomprehensibility* of their activities.

**'Thugs' as "Citizens of India"¹⁷⁵:
The ATC as Conquest**

A striking example of the incomprehensibility of 'thuggee', of the Otherness of the 'thugs', to the colonial mind, is found in Swinton's attempt to justify why the colonial administration 'ought' to take judicial responsibility for the gang of 'thugs' captured by Captain Borthwick in 1829. In considering this, we return to the moment in which the ATC of the 1830s was given full sanction by the Supreme Government:

These murders having been perpetrated in territories belonging to various Native Chiefs, and the perpetrators being inhabitants of various Districts belonging to different authorities, there is no Chief, in particular, to whom we could deliver them up for punishment, as their Sovereign or as the Prince of their Territory in which they had been committed. *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 [Bentinck] 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.*¹⁷⁶

The language used in Swinton's letter is significant, suggesting both the elusiveness and the enormity of 'thuggee' for the colonial administration. 'Thugs' could only be located 'outside' of the colonisers' universe – as "inhuman monsters...against every one...to be placed without the pale of social law". Yet this act of locating 'thugs' of course made them amenable to colonial discipline; they had been arrested, after all, and British colonial judges were as good as (if not better than¹⁷⁷) any others. The initiation of trials against 'thugs' was therefore not only a response to a 'law-and-order problem' (how to prosecute murderers), but an opportunity seized upon by the colonial administration to assert its 'right' to a permanent, governing presence in the subcontinent. As Swinton concluded, the Governor-General, Bentinck, had sanctioned the executions of 'thugs' for attacks committed outwith Company territories precisely upon the basis of "*the relative situation of the British Government as the paramount power*" in India.¹⁷⁸

The elaboration of British paramountcy in India during the 1830s accords with the view afforded by the lens Cohn uses to see the metropole and her prize colony as a "unitary field of analysis" during a decade characterised by a succession of economic and social reforms passed with the twin—and paradoxical—aims of making government simultaneously more streamlined and more of an 'everyday' presence in

¹⁷⁵ This is Smith's phrase. F. C. Smith, Agent to the Governor General in the Sagar and Narmada Territories, to W. H. Macnaghten, Secretary to the Governor General in the Political Department, 26 Jun. 1833, Home Dept., Thuggee and Dacoity, National Archives of India, Cons. B2, no. 4, quoted in van Woerkens, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

¹⁷⁶ [My italics.] Swinton to J. Stewart, Officiating Resident at Indore, 23 Oct. 1829, in *SRT*, pp. 12-3.

¹⁷⁷ See Sleeman, *Rambles and Recollections*, Vol. II, p. 22.

¹⁷⁸ [My italics.] G. Swinton, Chief Secretary to Government, to J. Stewart, Officiating Resident at Indore, 23 Oct. 1829, in *SRT*, pp. 12-3.

the lives of the population.¹⁷⁹ In metropolitan Britain, the ruling classes were still reverberating with the shockwaves of the French Revolution, which had invigorated radicalism, culminating with the 'Peterloo' massacre in 1819 and rural rioting between 1830-1 (the so-called 'Swing Riots'). This violence contributed to a heightened sense of urgency felt among the government to acquire accurate knowledge of the 'subject' population during the early and mid-nineteenth century.¹⁸⁰ Following the so-called 'Great Reform Act' of 1832, the Whig administrations of Grey and Marlborough passed a series of progressive Benthamite reforms designed to centralise local government, bring greater consistency to commercial practices and labour conditions, cheapen and homogenise the provision of poor-relief and widen the availability of rudimentary education.¹⁸¹ In India, Bentinck reduced military expenditure, reformed the judiciary, 'abolished' *sati* and slavery, and passed the infamous Education Act of 1835.¹⁸² The corollary of such legislation, in Britain and India, was the proliferation of recording and surveillance techniques designed to equip the 'central' state with reliable information about the population. Certainly, this accords with C. A. Bayly's thesis that 'thuggee' arose from an "information panic: the feeling of the fledgling colonial administration that it knew nothing of local society and the locals were combining to deny it information".¹⁸³ As such, an articulating principle of the ATC was a faith that knowledge-gathering was a cumulative, perfectible, finite process; that 'knowledge' could be 'improved' rather than reconstituted, a notion fully endorsed by Kaye's reading of the suppression of 'thuggee' in his *History of Indian Progress* (1853):

It is only in very recent times that we have thought it worth our while to *know* anything about the natives of India, and to turn our knowledge to profitable account. ... Little was it that we could do for India until we knew something of the people whom Providence had committed to our care. ... But now Sleeman and his associates, resolved that this trade of Thuggee should no longer be a mystery any more than tailoring or carpentering, began to initiate themselves into all the secrets of the craft, and were soon, in their knowledge of the theory of the profession, little behind the professors themselves.¹⁸⁴

Therefore, the elaboration of paramount rule in India, and the gathering of colonial knowledge were part of the same project of establishing the 'right' to govern the population, of which the ATC was one of the more striking examples.

In particular, the architects of the ATC argued that the suppression of 'thuggee' 'required' increased British intervention in the affairs of Indian states, whose rulers were denigrated as incompetent, untrustworthy, and unfeeling—and, by extension, 'unworthy' rulers. In a letter sent to Prinsep (his superior in the Political Department) in 1830, Smith outlined his "Plan for the eventual destruction of the

¹⁷⁹ Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, pp. 4-5. See also Marriott, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-6, 222-8.

¹⁸⁰ Marriott, *op. cit.*, pp. 113-5, 224, 227.

¹⁸¹ Specifically, the Municipal Corporations Act (1835), the Poor Law Amendment Act (1834) and the various and entwined legislation of the 1830s and 1840s intended to reform working-conditions and offer education to young factory-workers. The changes to voter registration, the establishment of the Register for Births, Marriages and Deaths, the national census (and ensuing reports), and the Factory and Sanitary Reports may also be seen as developments designed to provide the central state with classificatory knowledge of the population.

¹⁸² Chatterjee, *op. cit.*, p. 18-9, 26-7. See also Bentinck's minute on British prestige, 5 Aug. 1833, letter no. 418, in Phillips, (ed.), *op. cit.*, Vol. II, pp. 867-8.

¹⁸³ C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information*, p. 174.

¹⁸⁴ J. W. Kaye, *The Administration of the East India Company; A History of Indian Progress* (Richard Bentley, London, 1853), pp. 355-6, 371. Cf. Marriott, *op. cit.*, pp. 5, 194; Reitz, *op. cit.*, p. 36.

associations of Thugs which have of late infested Central India", suggesting that not only were the British generally as entitled to try 'thugs' as any other judicial powers in the subcontinent, but were in fact preferable to them: "no Thug should under any pretence be made over to a native Chieftain for punishment[,] experience having satisfactorily shown their utter incapacity to put [the 'system'] down".¹⁸⁵ The judicial objectives of the ATC therefore ran to a paternalist legitimising narrative of British colonialism in India: Indians were *incapable* of protecting themselves against a conspiracy like 'thuggee'; the colonisers would 'save' Indians from 'thuggee' and, by eradicating it, *improve* the state of their civilisation. Allegations of the corruption of indigenous rulers added to the growing sense that it was the 'responsibility' of the "paramount power" to suppress 'thuggee' in India. As such, Sleeman believed that it was

*the imperious duty of the Supreme Government of this country to put to an end in some way or other to this dreadful system of murder by which thousands of human beings are now annually sacrificed upon every great road throughout India.*¹⁸⁶

As the ATC grew in scope and the TD's 'successful' exposal of the 'thug-system' seemed to be confirmed—particularly by the co-opted voices of the approvers and the extracts from their depositions released to the press and published in scholarly literature—Sleeman and Smith pushed for sanction to retrieve those 'thugs' believed to be sheltering beyond the bounds of the Company's jurisdiction. In June 1832, Macnaghten, the Secretary of the Political Department, justified the intention for the ATC to become a "system of operations which embraces in its scope the whole of India", anticipating Bentinck's 'minute on the defence of India', which was published five days later and set out

1st That the whole of India from the Himalayas to Cape Comorin acknowledges the British supremacy.

2nd That within these limits there is not a native prince capable of making the least resistance to British power.

...6th [That]...the whole of India [may be considered]...as one British kingdom.¹⁸⁷

Therefore, when Smith argued, a year later, that "The Thugs...are Citizens of Indian and not of any particular division", he was indicating both the extent of the colonisers' intention to redistribute political authority in the subcontinent in the 1830s, and the means by which the ATC facilitated this project, with the TD claiming responsibility for the classification, interrogation and punishment of criminality specific to the indigenous population of India.¹⁸⁸

By simultaneously identifying 'thugs' as "Citizens of India" and beyond "the pale of social law", the TD maintained the ambivalence of its attitude towards

¹⁸⁵ Smith to Prinsep, 19 Nov. 1830, in *SRT*, p. 53. For more on Smith's antipathy towards Indian rulers, see Smith to Swinton, 5 Jul. 1830, in *ibid.*, p. 43.

¹⁸⁶ [My italics.] Sleeman's anonymous letter to the *Calcutta Literary Gazette*, 3 Oct. 1830, repr. in Bruce, *op. cit.*, pp. 82-3.

Freitag argues that "the British perceived collectively criminal actions to be either directed against, or weakening, the authority of the state". *idem.*, 'Crime in the Social Order of Colonial North India', *MAS*, 25, 5 (1991), p. 230.

¹⁸⁷ Macnaghten to R. Cavendish, Resident at Gwalior, 24 Jun. 1832, in *SRT*, p. 88; 'Bentinck's minute on the defence of India', in Phillips (ed.), *op. cit.*, Vol. II, letter no. 459, pp. 846-7.

¹⁸⁸ Smith to Macnaghten, 26 Jun. 1833, Home Dept., Thuggee and Dacoity, National Archives of India, Cons. B2, no. 4, quoted in van Woerkens, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

'thugs'. They were *representative* Indians, for like many others they allegedly worshipped insatiable idols, wandered the roads, and plundered their neighbours. They were also *extraordinary* criminals, for they appeared to be 'respectable', attacked 'remorselessly', and had matured a 'system' that had gone undetected since the time of 'pre-history'. By making all Indians all-Indian, by preaching the notion of *citizenship*, the TD implied that all victims of 'thugs' had the same 'right to life'. As attackers of their fellow 'citizens', the 'thugs' broke the imaginary contract between 'civilised' people, and deserved to be punished accordingly. The ATC, led by the British, could not be justified unless the TD represented 'thuggee' as a pan-Indian system, and 'thugs' as 'indiscriminate' killers motivated by Kali and by their socialisation into a 'caste-like' identity – as "inhuman monsters...against every one". A *localised* perception of 'thuggee', as developed *circa* 1810, would not do, for 'thugs' might then seem more like 'conventional' bandits or retainers, with a degree of legitimacy to the extent that they attacked specific targets on behalf of their rulers (as a soldier does). By refusing to acknowledge the perceptual or subjective dimension of the classification 'thug', by objectifying 'thuggee' rather than reading it as a phenomenon, the British denied the possibility of alternative perspectives and so asserted the righteousness of their suppression campaign. The elaboration of paramountcy similarly entailed that agency be removed from indigenous rulers, who were now seen to be failing in their protective 'duty' to the subcontinent's population; but only if the various polities of the subcontinent were imagined as components of a supranation could the '*need*' for a corresponding suprajustice be insisted upon.¹⁸⁹

* * *

V. CONCLUSIONS

In condemning violence as savage...[we] endorse the very notion of the savage. In other words, the imaginative range essential to the execution of colonial violence...was an imagining drawn from that which the civilised imputed to the [savage]...and then mimicked.¹⁹⁰

The violence of the ATC was myriad in its elaboration and functioning, but what sustained its application was the simultaneous and paradoxical confidence in and anxiety over the homogenising representational project that, its authors proclaimed, gave them total—and so perfect—knowledge of 'thuggee'. People arrested for 'thuggee' repeatedly subverted the efficacy of this colonial knowledge-gathering project, enacting heterogeneous, hybridised, subaltern identities that are only fleetingly preserved in the surviving documentation produced by the TD to record the disciplining of them. By contrast, the judicial envisioning of 'thuggee' dominates, revealing the processes by which the TD produced a stereotype in which the tropes 'thug' and 'criminal' were collapsed into one another; a stereotype sustained by the colonisers as the model for prosecuting 'Indian' criminality—that is, extraordinary, collective, hereditary, and violent—throughout the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. The TD's recourse to approvers, as the only and ultimate 'proof' of its suspicions, and as authentication of the righteousness of their criminalisation of 'thugs', was indicative of the extent to which its architects were forced, by their position as bearers of alien and imposed rule, to co-opt those natives alleged to be the

¹⁸⁹ Cf. van Woerkens, *op. cit.*, p. 47.

¹⁹⁰ Taussig, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

most elusive, deceptive and malignant of all into the heart of its operations to suppress them. The liminality of these 'thugs' relative to the legal discourse aimed toward their eradication, empowered them to enact the roles that their lives depended on by recalling and deposing imitations of the savagery of the savages they were alleged to represent, aiding the colonisers to construct their constructions of 'thuggee'. By extension, these constructions enabled the British to elaborate new visions of "the theatre of anarchy", in which that which was truly Other, monstrous, and irrational – thuggish – would be subordinated to colonial knowledge, thereby making the newly imagined 'India' amenable to colonial rule.

* * *

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Abbreviations used in the dissertation, footnotes and bibliography

ATC	Anti-Thug Campaign.
BC	Board's Collections (OIOC).
BL	British Library, London.
CUL	Cambridge University Library.
<i>IESHR</i>	Indian Economic and Social History Review.
IOL	India Office Library (at the BL).
MAS	Modern Asian Studies.
NAI	National Archives of India, Delhi.
NZ	<i>Nagpur Zamindars</i> , Central Provinces.
OIOC	Oriental and India Office Collections (at the BL).
RZ	<i>Report on the Zamindars</i> etc., Central Provinces.
SC	<i>Sleeman Correspondence</i> , Central Provinces.
SRT	<i>Selected Records...[on] Thuggee</i> etc., Central Provinces and Berar.
TD	Thuggee Department (later, Thuggee and Dacoity Department).

NB. Articles from journals are entered in the form: Author, 'Title of Article', *Title of Journal*, volume number, issue number (year), pages.

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