

“Thug: The True Story of India’s Murderous Cult” By Mike Dash Published by Granta Books  
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(Page 1) Bote hona- ‘to fall into the hands of the snares of Thugs.

(Page 5) “It was shortly after nine o’clock that Bunda Ali began to sense something was wrong. Dhunnee Khan’s men could not be bandits, he was sure; Dacoits were invariably direct in their attacks. But they were crowding a little close, and he became uncomfortably aware that his own servants were nowhere near him. He reached down for the sword he had laid at his feet, but it was gone - two of his companions had picked it up and were loudly admiring its workmanship. Seriously alarmed now, Ali stumbled to his feet, shouting for his men, and as he did, a voice called out “Tumbakoo lao” - ‘Bring Tobacco’- and there was a huge commotion over by the bamboos. Essuree had loosened the horses, and the night air was suddenly full of noise and chaos. In the next instant the moonshee felt Bwawanee Jemadar behind him, and something soft and twisted slipped over his head. He tried to turn, but another of Dhunnee’s men seized his hands and held them tight, while a third kicked his legs out from under him and brought him crashing to the ground. A length of cloth tightened around Ali’s neck and bit into his throat as Bhawanee crouched over him, one knee pressed into his back. The jemadar’s hands were crossed behind the moonshee’s head, and now he jerked them hard apart, brutally throttling his victim.”

(Page 7) Bajeed - ‘safe, free from danger’

(Page 9) “The one thing Perry knew for certain was that this had been no isolated crime. Ever since the magistrate had first arrived in Etawah two years earlier, he had been plagued by the discovery of unidentifiable corpses along the district’s dusty roads. No fewer than 28 had been found in 1808, and another 39 the next year - so many that, bizarrely, the number of murders committed around the town dwarfed the total of common-or-garden robberies, assaults and petty crimes reported during the same period. Half a dozen of the bodies had been found roughly concealed beside the roads themselves. The rest - 60 or more corpses- had been hauled, like this most recent discovery, from ‘wells adjacent to the High Road’. Not a single victim had been identified; nor had any of the murderers been caught. Every one of the dead men, Perry was compelled to admit, had been ‘murdered in circumstances which defied detection’. And there was no reason to believe that this latest mystery would prove any easier to solve.

‘Etawah had long possessed a reputation as a lawless place. It stood at one of the historic crossroads of India, just to the east of the parched lands of Rajpootana and to the north of the holy river Jumna. There at the high road from the great cities of Delhi and Agra met routes that led into the central (Page 10) provinces of India. Etawah was a natural gateway to the Doab - which, despite its inclement climate, was one of the richest and most fertile provinces in the Subcontinent - and to the wealthy Kingdom of Oudh, 50 miles to the east. But by 1810 the city’s great days were long past. Etawah had reached the peak of its prosperity in the time of the Delhi Sultanate, a state that had ruled much of northern India from the twelfth century to the sixteenth. After 1550 it had become a stronghold of the Great Mughals, Muslim emperors

belonging to the last and most magnificent of the dynasties of India, But the successive Mughal rulers pushed the borders of their empire east and south, until eventually they controlled nine-tenths of the Subcontinent, Etawah lost most of its *raison d'etre*.

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Even the immense and wealthy Mughal Empire could not grow indefinitely, and although the last of its great rulers, Aurangzeb, extended the boundaries of the state as far south as Mysore, his four decades of ceaseless campaigning drained the imperial treasury almost dry. When the old Man died, aged nearly 90, in 1707, he left his country weaker, in important respects, than it had ever been before.

The Empire had grown too large and too diverse. Its ruler's Muslim religion was alien to two-thirds of his subjects; its heavily equipped armies moved at a snail's pace; its finances were in a state of disrepair. Most important of all, so much power was reserved to the monarch himself that only a man of greatest ability and energy could govern successfully. Over six generations and 180 years, the Mughals had produced half a dozen such rulers, But Aurangzeb's successors were mere ciphers. With his death, the empire entered into deep decline.

(Page 11) The eighteenth century thus proved to be a turbulent time for India. In only a few short decades, Aurangzeb's creation disintegrated, to be replaced by a land of warring independent princedoms much like the one that had existed before the Mughals first appeared in Hindustan. As early as 1720, many of the imperial checkpoints on the Grand Trunk Road that ran all the way from the Afghan border to Bengal were lying empty, abandoned by officers who had received no pay and been deserted by their men. By 1750, the Empire's richest provinces had broken away altogether, their governors setting themselves up as rulers on their own account and paying little more than lip service to a feeble young Emperor whose writ now barely ran outside the walls of his capital. The Marathas- Warlike Hindus from Central India whom even Aurangzeb had never completely subdued - were busy carving out lands of their own east of Bombay. Dozens of petty rajahs and small city states scabbled over what remained of the old Emperor's inheritance.

(Page 12) The British were no strangers to India. Several European states - first Portugal, then Britain, the Netherlands and France - had long maintained a presence on the fringes of the Subcontinent. The first Englishmen had appeared along the coast during the sixteenth century, coming as traders to purchase spice and other eastern luxuries and even seeking grants of land on which to build their warehouses and forts. In time the merchants of the English East India Company established themselves at Madras, Bombay [Bombay became British in 1661, when it passed to Charles II as part of the dowry of his Portuguese bride, Catherine of Braganza. Finding the cost of maintaining the place entirely prohibitive, the Merry Monarch leased it to the East India Company in 1668. "The actual Transfer,' one historian records, ' was by letters patent which, presumably for reasons of bureaucratic convenience, described Bombay as being "in the Manor of East Greenwich in the County of Kent] and Calcutta. But for more than a Hundred Years, no European wielded any influence over local affairs. For all their wealth and grand ambitions, the few hundred Britons scattered across India were, as one of their own number admitted, no more than 'fleas on the back of the imperial elephant'.

All this changed with Aurangzeb's death. The decay of the Mughal Empire was bad for business, and as parts of the interior descended into civil war and chaos, the trading companies dotted around India became concerned for their profits. At the same time, rapid advancements in Western military tactics and technology began to offer even small detachments of European soldiers decisive advantages over local troops. Improved muskets, better doctrine and, in particular, rapid-firing artillery meant that a well-led force of a few thousand men could defeat an army 20 times as large and, by the 1750s, when the final disintegration of the Mughal state began, both the English and the French East India companies had transformed themselves into minor powers along the coast. Their actual possessions were still minimal: a few strips of land around their ports and a handful of isolated trading posts in the interior. But both companies were shipping regiments of their own soldiers out from (Page 13) Europe, and both recruited *sepoys* (native infantry) whom they equipped and trained to fight alongside their own troops."

The first British conquests in India dated from 1756, when, in one lightning campaign - the 'famous Two Hundred Days', as it became known - Robert Clive and a mixed force of British troops and *sepoys* routed a large Indian Army and took possession of Bengal. The Company ruled the province through a puppet *nawab*, who depended almost entirely on British arms to quash intrigue and oppose the horde of rival states emerging from the ruins of the Mughal Empire. Clive and his successors were happy to oblige him, maintaining a large standing army that was - at least in theory - at the new ruler's command. But British help came at a considerable cost. In order to fund the upkeep of his European regiments, the new *nawab* was forced to transfer ever larger portions of his dominions to the Company's control. The rising British Empire in India was thus based not so much on conquest as on gifts of land [Or to be exact, the right to raise revenues from designated tracks of land - which in eighteenth-century India amounted to much the same thing.] and trading rights made, reluctantly, by native rulers in return for military service.

(Page 14) As late as 1790 there was no great wish, either in parliament or in the Company's headquarters at East India House, to see British rule stretch across the whole of India. Indeed the costs of conquering and holding down the whole of the Subcontinent were so obviously colossal that streams of orders enjoining caution and strict economy flowed from London to Calcutta. The most valuable British territories, notably Bengal, were to be surrounded by pacified client states that would guarantee their security, but that was all. There were to be no further wars of conquest in the interior.

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Unfortunately for the company's directors, two substantial obstacles now arose to prevent this moderate policy from being carried through. The first, for which they themselves were responsible, was the appointment of the bellicose Richard Wellesley [He was the elder brother of Arthur Wellesley, later the Duke of Wellington, whose own military skills were largely honed campaigning in Central India.] as Governor General of British India. Wellesley, a brilliant and ambitious nobleman, was sent out the Calcutta in 1798 with strict orders to keep the peace. But - much to the company's dismay - he soon showed himself to be a determined empire-builder so anxious to destroy the surviving native states that he 'had barely touched Indian soil before he was preparing for battle'. In his path stood the second great barrier to peace in the Subcontinent: the Maratha warlords of the central provinces, whose aggressive posturing now

provided Wellesley with the excuse he needed to plunge the Company into another India Campaign.

The principle Maratha leaders were Sindhia of Gwalior - who had already conquered Delhi and subdued so many enemies that his lands now butted up against the British territories in Oudh - and the Holkar of Indore, whose own (Page 15) domain stretched as far as the borders of Bengal. Sindhia and Holkar were bitter rivals, and at least as likely to go to war against each other as they were to attack the Company's possessions. But both possessed formidable armies, and Wellesley quickly became convinced that the threat they posed was very real.

...The Marathas proceeded to devastate much of central India with such thoroughness that the land took decades to recover. By 1802, most of the territory east of Delhi had been ravaged by Sindhia's men, while Holkar's armies had left 'not a stick standing within 150 miles of Poona; the forage and grain were consumed, the houses pulled down for fuel, and the inhabitants with their cattle compelled to fly from the destruction that threatened them'. The Marathas' next target was Bihar, on the borders of Bengal. Inevitably, Sindhia's raiders soon exceeded their orders and crossed into British territory, too.

The consequences were catastrophic. Wellesley seized the longed-for opportunity to make war. Company armies from Bengal and Bombay drove into the interior and the Maratha's well-trained regiments were destroyed in a series of hard-fought battles. By 1804, both Sindhia and Holkar had been compelled to accept alliances with the British and the unwelcome presence of 'residents' - political officers whose purpose was to keep Indian rulers in line- in their capitals. Only the displeasure of the Company's directors, shocked by the horrific cost of Wellesley's campaign, saved their lands from outright annexation.

For the people of the central provinces, the wars were even more disastrous. Great swathes of territory had been looted and burned, often more than once. Crops had been seized and forts, workshops and looms destroyed. Mile after mile of countryside had been depopulated. And - With Wellesley recalled to London in disgrace - most of the lands overrun by the Company's armies were now abandoned so hastily that they fell into what amounted to a state of anarchy. The British did retain the Doab, and they guarded their flank by taking possession of Delhi, Agra and Etawah. But the thousands of square miles to the south were left effectively ungoverned, prey to famine, newly unemployed sepoys, rapacious local rajahs and bankrupt landholders forced to earn a living by their swords.

(Page 18) Kulloee - To steal

(Page 20) India had long been plagued by highwaymen and thieves.

The very earliest texts referred to it. The Vedas - that vast collection of Sanskrit hymns compiled around 1000 bc included several tales of the god Rudra that portray him as both a robber and lord of highwaymen, and the Chinese pilgrim Hsuan Tsang, whose description of the 15 years he spent crisscrossing Hindustan in search of Buddhist manuscripts is one of the earliest accounts we have of India, narrowly escaped a violent death at the hands of river pirates in the seventh century AD. Little seems to have changed in the millennium that followed, for bandits continued to loom large in the histories of the Subcontinent.

(Page 21) Most of these bandits were Dacoits, [The word derives from the Hindi 'daka parna', meaning to plunder, and perhaps ultimately from 'dakna', to shout.] members of large and well disciplined gangs of burglars and thieves who operated, more or less openly, in many towns and villages. Some were highway robbers, stealing from merchants and other travelers on the roads. Others again were both.

There is no doubt that the dacoits were more greatly feared than any other group. Although in no sense part of any grand confederacy, most dacoit gangs used similar techniques to terrorize their victims. They generally worked by night. A gang, numbering anywhere from 50 to 300 men, would assemble at a predetermined place, armed with spears, swords, guns and torches. Its target might be a specific house- perhaps the fortified home of a rich merchant or banker - or an entire village. Most were taken by a frontal assault, launched without warning and carried through with considerable daring. It was rare for such gangs to pay more than lip service to careful planning, or devote any effort to subtlety or concealment. They relied, instead, on sheer numbers and their own fearsome reputations to cow their enemies.

(Page 23) Since dacoits contributed a good deal to the local economy, bringing home quantities of loot and cash that could never be generated within their village themselves, they were often well respected in their own communities and in many cases robber bands doubled as a sort of local defense force, raiding rival towns and settlements, protecting their own homes from other gangs, and even collecting rents and taxes for their zamindars. As one policeman wearily explained: "A crime committed by an individual of a village is perfectly disregarded by the rest unless it be against the community. If a man perpetrates a highway robbery in sight of his village he is as well received as before, and if he gives away part of the plunder, he is a patron."

(Page 24) Before the advent of the Great Mughals, even the most important Indian highways were not much more than unpaved tracks, dusty and pitted and liable to turn into impassable quagmires during the rainy season. Travel through the mofussil was almost always slow and frequently uncomfortable. But the sheer size of the Empire made it important to ensure swift communication and the free movement of armies. By 1700 the busiest roads had been thoroughly surfaced with gravel, gathered from riverbeds, and stones collected from the fields to make them more resistant to the rains and to the grinding wear and tear inflicted by the wheels of bullock carts.

Several new routes were also opened up through the interior. Most were in the Mughal heartlands in the north and west of the Subcontinent; few led far into the south, and only a handful stretched as far east as Bengal. But the longest of them - the celebrated Grand Trunk Road, which ran from Dacca up to Delhi and then on to the Afghan border - was 3000 miles from end to end and thickly lined with trees to offer shade and shelter. All the most vital imperial arteries were provided with mosques and wells for the convenience of travelers; 30 foot pillars known as *Kos Minars* were thrown up to act as milestones, and comfortable inns and caravanserais were built every few miles so that messengers could change horses and wealthy travelers engage fresh relays of bearers. The Great Mughals were conscious of the importance of this work. For years, repairs to bridges and inns along the Empire's major highways were paid for by the Emperor himself, out of his private purse.

(Page 15) Hucarras [ These low caste confidential messengers began their training at the age of six with regular 'walking practice'. A year later, chosen boys started to run three miles at a stretch, moving at 'a handsome trot', and gradually increased this distance so that by the age of nine they could cross 10 miles of rough country without rest. Training continued for a further nine years until, at the age of 18, a freshly qualified hucarra would be issued with a water bottle, bread pan and other equipment and set to work. By then he would be capable of running anything up to 100 miles a day, and would be expected to possess a detailed knowledge of the sacred vedic texts, astronomy, music, five Indian languages and six varieties of script - not to mention being a master of disguise.]

...

Away from the handful of major roads, though, little changed during the Mughal period. Much of the terrain was arduous, and almost nothing was done to improve the web of minor tracks and paths that criss-crossed the mofussil. In poorer districts there was often 'not a vestige of a road to be found, and nothing but impoverished villages to be encountered' for mile after mile. Dried-up riverbeds were used as roads during the dry season, and such paths as did exist were dusty and uneven, being broken up by 'cracks, crossing, and recrossing one another, some so large that the soil in between was in isolated, loose, irregular squares, and the cracks difficult to jump over'. All were badly scarred by the wheels of innumerable carts. Thomas Bacon, a British officer making his way inland from Calcutta in 1831, complained bitterly of the impossibility of following 'in the ruts of what the natives call a road. When the traffic has been limited to one narrow line, be the soil sandy or swampy, the ruts are sure to be knee-deep.'

There were no milestones or signposts to guide men forced to travel on these lesser roads, and it was often difficult to persuade bearers or palanquin boys to venture away from the established routes. Other forms of transport were more or less unheard of. 'Such conveniences as stage coaches, public wagons, and boats' - London's Foreign Quarterly Review observed - simply 'did not exist', (page 26) and it was impossible to find 'any conveyances which a person might hire from stage to stage'. Even as late as 1840, those proceeding on foot or horseback through the central and southern provinces of India, or across the western deserts or the badlands of Hindustan, found it a most unpleasant business.

(Page 27) So it was scarcely surprising, all things considered, that the bodies of murdered men continued to appear in ditches and wells along the main routes leading into the city from both east and west.

There were no suspects, for the sheer ruthlessness of the murderers suggested they were not the work of dacoits or any ordinary criminals. And there were no precedents for how best to proceed, for homicide, even in (Page 28) Those violent times, was not especially common in India. Such cases as did occur were almost always the products of land disputes or domestic violence and were, as such, rarely difficult to solve. Cold-blooded murder - visited apparently, by one or two gangs on a succession of strangers - was more or less unknown.

The magistrate responded as best he could. He set up a checkpoint manned by a dozen policemen, one the main road between Mynpooree and Agra, where a good proportion of the bodies had been discovered. He offered a large reward - 1,000 rupees, the equivalent of well over 10 years earnings for most peasants of Doab - in exchange for information leading to the murders themselves. Then settled back to wait.

For the better part of 18 months, nothing happened - nothing, that is, but the discovery of more mutilated bodies in the Etawah wells. The new checkpoint proved utterly ineffective, no arrests were made, and no informants came forward with worthwhile information. Perry may even have begun to doubt that he would ever solve the mystery that tormented him. Then, in the first weeks of the new hot season, news came from nearby Shekoabad that 'private information of a very important nature' had at last been received from a police informant. Eight men had been arrested on suspicion of murder and questioned by local police officials. Each, in turn, had been asked his name and occupation. One, 20 years old, had talked.

'My name,' the boy confessed, 'is Gholam Hossyn. And I am a Thug.'

(Page 29) 'Kyboola- A novice Thug'

The word 'thug' [properly spelled thag and pronounced 't'ug'] is an ancient one. It first appears in India's sacred Sanskrit tongue- in which Sthaga means to cover or conceal - and crops up in a variety of guises in several other languages, including Hindi, and Hinustani, Gujerati and marathi. Its literal meaning is almost always 'robber' or 'cheat', but as early as the twelfth century the word was being used as a synonym for 'rogue', 'imposter' and 'deceiver' too, and over the next several hundred years it was employed to describe a wide variety of swindlers. A pair of counterfeiters were condemned as 'Thugs' in the first years of the seventeenth century, while in the western province of Gujerat, 'alchemists deservedly came to be classed with them'. Virtually all the 'thugs' encountered in Indian history and literature before the year 1800 turn out to have been members of this class of knaves and thieves.

When Gholam Hossyn identified himself as a thug, however, he had in mind a very different meaning. His Thugs were not so much tricksters and rogues as robbers and murders: men whose methods were quite distinct from those of dacoits, thieves and other common criminals and formed, indeed, a modus operandi of such startling and original brutality that it had had no exact parallels elsewhere in the world. The defining characteristics of (Page 30) these Thugs were that they wandered the roads of India, seeking likely victims among the travelers whom they met along the way; that they wormed their way into the confidence of these potential victims, stealing only from those whom they had befriended, and that they invariably killed their victims before they robbed them. It is not hard to see how a word used for centuries to describe minor swindlers came to be applied to these far more dangerous criminals; Hossyn's Thugs were 'cheats' and 'deceivers' in that they inveigled their way into the company of travelers, ' imposters' because they never openly declared themselves in the manner of dacoits, and 'robbers' and 'rogues' since they made their living from violence of theft. But they were also ruthless and cold-blooded killers, a meaning that was not reflected in the definition of the word until it found its way into the English language as a direct consequence of the Company's encounter with the murderers of Hindustan.

The young Thug did not volunteer his information willingly. Although he was taken to Etawah almost immediately, his interrogation continued for several days, Perry probing for information, his prisoner deflecting his questions or varying the answers that he gave, gradually admitting to more and more as the stunned magistrate pressed him on each point time and again. On the first occasion that the shackled prisoner was dragged into the courtroom, Gholam Hossyn confessed to nothing more than 'standing two fields off' while his companions had

robbed and killed a pair of travelers. On the second, he admitted taking an active part in those same killings. Under further examination, though, the number of his victims rose, to four at first then 14, until by the end of the day of relentless questioning, the young Thug had confessed to his involvement in nearly 60 killings. By the time Perry had taken Hossyn through his evidence for a fourth time, the total of his victims stood at 95, all murdered in a mere eight years of robbery. It was a confession so horrific to be without president.

“These examinations,’ the magistrate concluded, “Are undoubtedly the most extraordinary which ever came before a court of justice; they contain the avowal of crimes which could never be presumed to have had existence in one place under the protection of the British administration. They afford also an abundant proof of the shocking depravity (Page 31) and merciless unfeeling disposition of a great portion of the Inhabitants of the provinces. They are in fact 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.”

The thing that puzzled Perry most of all at first was the sheer mystery that surrounded the Thugs. ‘It is certainly a matter of astonishment that we should have held the administration of justice for so many years, without any information of this detestable association,’ he wrote. But as he continued his interrogations, gradually assembling the details of the Thug gangs’ methods and techniques, Perry came to understand the reasons for this silence. His prisoners were no ordinary murderers. They were, in fact, the strangest and most remarkable criminals of the day.

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These men’s gang had been led by a man named Ujba, who lived a few miles outside of Etwah and supplemented his income as an armorer with the proceeds of Thug expeditions into the Doab. Gholam Hossyn had joined this group after spending a short period as an agricultural laborer, perhaps because he found the prospect of life on the roads preferable to that endured by a peasant farmer. His most recent expedition, at the beginning of the cold season of 1809-10, had opened successfully; Ujba and his 15 men lured their first victim to a *nullah* - a short distance from the road,

“And murdered him in the following manner: Ramsooth, inhabitant of Dultua, 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, his belly so that no person might recognize the body. They then buried the corpse in nullah about a mile to the left of the road.”

The dead man was carrying 100 Benares rupees, two turbans and some other clothes, which Ujba’s men appropriated. The gang then left the area, going on by forced marches to evade any possible pursuit, until they met two Afghans, whom they befriended and persuaded to accompany them on the road. Having rested for the night, the gang and their intended victims arose very early the next morning, breaking camp four hours before dawn at a time when they could be sure there would be few if any other travelers on the road. [Rising early and persuading sleeping companions that the time was much later than it really was, in order to assuage any suspicion was a common Thug trick- one easily played on poorer travelers in an age when watches were only rarely carried.”] The little party walked a further six miles, halting for a rest at a spot well away from the nearest settlement. The Afshans were then cut down with



swords. The first was run through while he was relieving himself; his friend was hacked to the ground as he attempted to flee, then finished off with repeated stabs to his back and neck. On this occasion, however, the Thugs were almost immediately betrayed to the local police - Hossyn did not explain how this occurred - (Page 33) and brought back to Shekoabad. So ended the boy's short and unproductive criminal career.

Perry's man concern, having taken down the Thug's initial deposition, was to discover all he could of the methods of the gangs. Hossyn reluctantly obliged, describing in awful detail the manner in which the members of his gang had strangled their victims with cloth strips. Even that was not enough for Perry, who now asked his prisoner to demonstrate exactly how the strangling cloths were put to use. Hossyn called for an example and a dramatic scene unfolded. "The despondent," the clerk recorded, "Takes a handkerchief, being a piece of Guzzy Cloth, about two yards or less in length (which the natives throw over their shoulder), he twists the cloth and makes a knot at one end; a person in Court is called, and he shews on the person how the Cloth is passed twice round the neck of the Victim. The knot remains at the back of the neck, and serves as a kind of handle by which the cloth is screwed to its utmost tightness round the neck."

Why, the horrified Perry next asked, did Hossyn and his confederates stab their victims after strangling them? 'Because,' the boy replied, 'people have been known to recover after strangling partially, particularly a person who was recently strangled by Huittea, who, afterwards recovering, fled with the Cloth, and is now at Furruckabad, where he narrated all particulars... We therefore now stab, it was not formerly the practice, we used only to strangle and throw the bodies in to a well.'

(Page34) A strangler named Kalee Khan explained ' we have never murdered, for it is the custom amongst us to never commit a murder within a distance of 100 coss [200 miles] round our habitations.'

Having disposed of one traveler - they would move quickly on, often into a neighboring territory with a different ruler, before murdering again.

It was often possible to bribe a local Rajah or his men to permit Thug operations - or to release captured stranglers from Jail.

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The first hand recollections of the oldest stranglers ever to recount their histories date only to 1760, And contain no hint that these Thugs' methods and habits were not broadly the same in those days as those encountered in the nineteenth century. Many families, indeed, took great pride in their traditions and lineage, and could recite genealogies tracing their ancestry back through at least seven or eight generations of stranglers - which, if true, would place the Thug's origins somewhere in the period 1650- 1700. Gholam Hossyn told his interrogator that his fellow Thugs believed that their fraternity had existed since the days of Alexander the Great. A more plausible tradition, though, takes the story back not more than another century, for many of the men living in the first decades of the the 1800s firmly believed that their forebears had lived together in Delhi in the time of the third Mughal Emperor, Akbar the Great.

In those days- Akbar ruled northern India from 1556 until 1605 - there were said to have been seven great Thug families. All of them were muslim and most had their headquarters in the ancient city, and it was only when on clan incurred the wrath of the Great Mughal himself by

murdering one of this favorite slaves that 'the whole of the Thugs fled from the capital and spread themselves about the country'

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The captured stranglers questioned by Perry and the Company officers who came after him do seem, nonetheless, to have recognized the existence of a number of different groups of Thugs, and were insistent that each saw itself as 'distinct'. 'The hindu Thugs of Talghat,' for example, 'were admired by all,' one Deccan man explained. 'They are extraordinary men. They have painted lines on their foreheads extending up from a central point at the nose... They always wear them. They and the Arcot Thugs associate and act together; but they will never mix with us of the Teligana... They will never intermarry with our families, saying that we once drove bullocks and were itinerant tradesmen, consequences of lower caste.' The Lodahas, meanwhile, had left their original homes in Oudh around the year 1700 and lived, in Perry's time, along the border with Nepal, Restricting their activities to the provinces of Bihar and Bengal. 'They are' a Doab Thug recounted, 'descended from the same common stock as ourselves... Their dialect and usages are all the same as ours, but they rarely make Thugs of any men but the members of their own families. They marry into other families who do not know them to be Thugs, but their wives never know their secrets, and can therefore never divulge them.'

Men from Etawah often knew Thugs from Ough, Bengal, and the Decan, who could be recognized by 'certain signs' that may be of the gangs had in common, in much the same way that groups of vagabonds passed information to each other on the roads of rural England. Special phrases, or the particular shape of a purse or a campfire, were among the signals that identified a Thug. [Thug 'passwords' were said to include the phrase 'Peace to thee, friend'. 'This' claimed one British officer, 'to anyone but a Thug would seem a common salutation, but would instantly be recognized by a Thug. Anyone who should reply in the same manner would be quite safe.']

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"I was one day walking with some of our party near Jypore by and encampment of wealthy merchants from the westward, who wore very high turbans. I observed to my friends as we passed, 'What enormous turbans these men wear!' using our mystic term aghassee. The most respectable among them came up immediately and invited us to sit down with them, saying: 'My good friends, we are of your fraternity, though our aghassees are not the same.' They told us that they were now opulent merchants, and independent of Thuggee, the trade by which they had chiefly acquired their wealth, though they still did a little occasionally when they found in a suitable place a bunjj[merchandise] worth taking; but that they were now beyond speculating in trifles! We were kindly entertained, and much pleased with our new friends, but left them the same day, and I have never met any men of the same kind since... It was not uncommon for stranglers from one part of India to serve with those from another for a while, occasionally out of sheer curiosity as to the customs and methods of their hosts.

(Page 41) 'cheyns- Noise, confusion, clamor

(Page 53) 'tupjana- changing direction'

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The men responsible for dealing with the petty notables whose patronage was so vital to the Thugs were the leaders of the various Thug bands. Each of the 200 or more gangs scattered across India was organized along the broadly similar lines, being recruited and

commanded by leaders known as subadars and jemadars - titles that aped those awarded to native officers in the Company's armies. But it would be a mistake to imagine, because of this, that Thug gangs were rigidly obedient to the leaders or subject to military discipline. They were much more loosely organized than that.

The members of a Thug gang were never simply ordered out onto the roads; each man made up his own mind whether or not to join an expedition, and the depositions of captured stranglers are full of accounts of Thugs who decided to remain at home, working the land, for months or even years at a time, or who had to be talked into joining some planned foray into the Deccan. It was equally common for Thugs to break off an expedition and return home when they thought they had garnered enough loot, and for gangs to join together for a few days before breaking apart again. Similarly, rank-and-file Thugs were not beholden to any particular commander for more than a few weeks at a time; men only ever agreed to serve a leader for the duration of a single expedition. There were, certainly, cases of Thugs working together in the same band for decades on end- but jemadars who failed to accumulate sufficient plunder to pay adequately for the services of their men soon found their followers abandoning them to join more successful gangs.

The size of a band commanded by a given Thug thus offered an accurate reflection of his status and ability. The smallest that we have records of numbered as few as 5 or 10 men, but most were between 15 and 25 strong. This was a practical number; any more and the cost of maintaining the gang for a (page 67) period of several months would be excessive; fewer, and there would be insufficient men to tackle more than a moderately sized party of travelers. Thus while a handful of the richest and most successful Thugs were capable of mustering as many as 50 or even 60 followers, gangs containing more than 25 men were considered to be noticeably large, and the Thugs had a special vocabulary to describe them.

The title of Subadar was the grandest to which a Thugs could aspire. It seems to have been awarded by general acclimation, and was only bestowed upon the most respected and experienced Thugs - men capable of leading and coordinating the actions of several gangs. A Jemidar, on the other hand, was simply the self-appointed leader of a single band, or even the head of a small group of Thugs absorbed into a larger gang commanded by several leaders. The rank was not perceived as an especially distinguished one. Experienced Thugs sought many different qualities in their jemadars, but it was not necessary for a would-be leader to possess more than one or two in order to gather a small gang around him. The most important qualification, certainly, was to be 'a man who has always at command the means of advancing a month or two's substance' to his men, either from his own resources or in the form of a loan from the local Zemindar. But "A strong and resolute man, whose ancestors have been for many generations Thugs, will very soon get the title, or a very wise man, whose advice in difficult cases has weight with the gang; one who has influence over local authorities, or the native officers of the courts of justice; a man of handsome appearance and high bearing, who can feign the man of rank well- all these things enable a man to get around him a few who will call him jemadar; but it requires very high and numerous qualifications to gain a man the title of Subadar."

The members of the Thug band itself were divided according to their duties and paid according to their skills and seniority. Some worked as scouts. The best dressed, most plausible and eloquent were employed as inveiglers, the men responsible for befriending parties of

travelers and luring them into the clutches of the gang. The victims were actually murdered by designated stranglers, who were invariably Thugs of long experience and considerable strength, assisted by 'hand-holders' who restrained a victim and prevented their escape. (Page 68) Some gangs also contained specialist grave-diggers, responsible for the disposal of the bodies. Camp followers, in the shape of older Thugs past their prime, children and, in many cases, ordinary laborers and other villagers who were certainly not hardened murderers, but who had been recruited on a more or less casual basis in order to swell the ranks of the gang as a whole, generally took no part in the killing of victims, serving instead as lookouts or guards.

Scouts seemed to have been employed by only a few Thug bands, and then only occasionally; in most cases a gang's victims consisted of parties of travelers unlucky enough to fall in with a jemadar and his men on the road. There were, nonetheless, obvious advantages to employing men to scour the countryside for potential targets. For one thing, a single gang could cover far wider stretch of countryside with the help of scouts; for another, an experienced spy might be expected to distinguish between wealthy groups of merchants or treasure bearers and poorer travelers, thus greatly increasing the chance that his gang would seize a substantial quantity of loot.

A Gemadar who had decided to use scouts would usually halt the main body of his gang in some convenient grove near a large town or an important crossroads, sending out 'men chosen from among the most smooth-spoken and intelligent' members of his band. On rare occasions, when hunting for some known consignment of great value, Thug pickets might travel up to three or four days' journey from their temporary headquarters. It was more usual though, for scouts to 'parade the bazaars of the town near which their associates are encamped to pick up intelligence of the intended despatch or expected arrival of goods'. Frontier chokies and custom posts were also favorite places to intercept parties of potential victims, since travelers were forced to unpack and display their wares and possessions at such places.

Sometimes scouts would double as inveiglers and begin the process of luring a chosen group into the clutches of their gang; "Inquiry is also made for any party of travelers who may have arrived; every art is brought into practice to scrape an acquaintance with these people; they are given to understand that the [scout] is traveling the same road, an opportunity is taken to throw out hints regarding the insecurity of the roads, and the frequency of murders and robberies, an acquaintance with some of the friends or relations of the travelers is feigned, and an invitation given to partake of [a] repast... The result is, that the travelers are inveigled into joining the party of Thugs, and they are feasted and treated with every politeness and consideration by the very wretches who are also plotting their murder and calculating the share they shall acquire in the division of their property."

In general, however, the tricky job of seducing a victim was left to men with the experience and subtlety to attempt it successfully. Soothing the suspicions of wary travelers - many of them fully alert to the dangers of the road, if not to the existence of the Thugs themselves - required a considerable degree of charm and cunning, and only the most intelligent members of a gang were permitted to attempt it. [My companion Hyder, 'a strangler named Ramzan disposed; 'was a staunch Thug, fearing nothing, but he was not a good inveigler. To inveigle a man is no easy matter, to answer all his questions and act upon them.']] In many cases a gang's jemadar would himself act as inveigler; being better dressed and wealthier than his men, and often mounted on a tattoo, or pony, he would find it easier to effect an introduction

to the leader of another party. On other occasions, the task would be allocated to a specialist known as a sotha.

Most gangs of any experience possessed a variety of tried and tested stratagems for deceiving a traveler, and which was used depended largely on the destination, the job or the caste of the unfortunate men selected as victims. Probably the most common method was to overtake a party of travelers on the road and enquire as to the purpose of their journey. Once the strangers had disclosed that they were heading for Meerut, say, or for Benares, it was a simple matter for the Thugs to declare that they were traveling by the same road, and to suggest the two groups should join forces as a protection from dacoits and thieves. Other Thugs adopted appropriate disguises. 'When going south towards the Native States,' one explained, 'where many native soldiers found service. I used to assume the disguise of a native sepoy, and wear a sword, shield and carry a matchlock, pretending I was going to service. I had a large horse with me, and used to ride with English spurs; this disguise enabled me to deceive sepoys... On returning from the south, I used to assume the apparel of a table attendant of a rich man, or gave myself out at the darogah [police officer] of some Raja. In short I suited my disguise to the traveler I had to inveigle, so as to blind him and disarm his suspicion.' On the whole, however, Thug gangs cultivated an unremarkable demeanor that the company officials responsible for hunting them down plainly regarded as (Page 70) more terrifying than the more bloodthirsty appearance of the dacoits. "There was nothing to excite alarm or suspicion in the appearance of these murderers; but on the contrary they are described as being mild and benevolent of aspect, and peculiarly courteous, gentle and obliging."

The great majority of men and women murdered by Thugs fell prey to a device of this sort. But the best inveiglers were capable of even greater subtlety on occasion, and when in pursuit of a particularly rich prize the most skilled displayed a cunning and determination that Company officials came to regard as practically diabolic. It was, for example, common for a large gang to split into several smaller groups, strung out across several miles of road, in order to render its members inconspicuous and assuage the suspicions of any party met along the way. The various portions of the gang would move at different speeds, those in the lead pausing for a while so that their comrades could come up, those at the rear overtaking one another as they went. Then, if 'the travelers show any signs of disliking or distrusting the inveigler of one [group]... the inveigler of the one in advance learns of it by signs from the other as he and the travelers overtake him. The new inveigler gets into conversation with the traveler and pretends to dislike the appearance of the first, who, in turn, pretends to be afraid of the new one and lags behind, when the new man and the travelers congratulate each other on having shaken off a suspicious character.'

Possibly the most extraordinary example of the successful inveigling of a suspicious victim was related by a group of thugs imprisoned at Lucknow, the capital of Oudh, whom a sepoy officer overheard discussing their most memorable expeditions. The men had once encountered; "A stout Mughal officer of noble bearing and singularly handsome countenance, on his way from the Punjab to Oudh... Mounted on a fine horse with a small party of well-dressed and modest looking men going the same road. They accosted him in a respectful manner, and attempted to enter into conversation with him. He had heard of Thugs, and told them to be off. They smiled at his idle suspicions, and tried to remove them, but in vain. The

Mughal was determined; they saw his nostrils swelling with indignation, took their leave, and followed slowly.”

“The next morning he overtook the same number of men, but of a different appearance, all Musalmans. They accosted him in the same respectful (Page 71) manner; talked of the danger of the road, and the necessity of keeping together, and taking advantage of the protection of any mounted gentleman that happened to be going the same way, the Mughal officer said not a word in reply, resolved to have no companions on the road. They persisted- his nostrils began again to swell, and putting his hand to his sword, he bid them all be off, or he would have their heads from their shoulders. He had a bow and quiver full of arrows over his shoulders, a brace of loaded pistols in his waist-belt, and a sword by his side, and was altogether a very formidable-looking cavalier.”

“In the evening another party, lodged in the same inn, became very intimate with the butler and groom. They were going the same road; and as the Mughal overtook them in the morning, they made their bows respectfully, and began to enter into conversation with their two friends, the groom and butler, who were coming up behind. The Mughal’s nostrils begin again to swell, and he bid the strangers be off. The groom and butler interceded, for their master was a grave, sedate man, and they wanted companions. All would not do, and the strangers fell in the rear.”

“The next day, when they had got into the middle of an extensive uninhabited plain, the Mughal in advance, and his two servants a few hundred yards behind, he came upon a party of six poor Musalmans, sitting weeping by the side of a dead companion. They were soldiers from Lahore, on their way to Lucknow, worn down by fatigue in their anxiety to see their wives and children once more, after long and painful service. Their companion... hand sunk under the fatigue, and they had made a grave for him; but they were poor unlettered men, and unable to repeat the funeral service from the holy Koran - would his highness but perform this last office for them, he would, no doubt, find his reward in this world and the next.”

“The Mughal dismounted- the body had been placed in its proper position, with its head towards Mecca. A carpet was spread- the Mughal took off his bow and quiver, then his pistols and sword, and placed them on the ground near the body- called for water, and washed his feet, hands and face, that he might not pronounce the holy words in an unclean state. He then knelt down and began to repeat the funeral service, in a clear, loud voice. Two of the poor soldiers knelt by him, one on each side in silence. The other four went off a few paces to beg that the butler and groom would not come so near as to interrupt the good samaritan at his devotions.”

(Page 72) “All being ready, one of the four, in a low undertone, gave the signal, the handkerchiefs were thrown over their necks, and in a few minutes all three- the Mughal and his servants- were dead, and lying in the grave in the usual manner, the head of one at the feet of the one below him. All parties they had met on the road belonged to a gang of the Thugs of the kingdom of Oudh.”

In most cases the inveigled victim would be despatched relatively quickly- typically the night after he fell in with the Thugs, or early the next morning. But, in special circumstances, the members of some gangs were capable of displaying inhuman patience in order to disarm the suspicions of a large party of potential victims, or when no good opportunity arose to dispose of their prey discreetly. “They will travel,’ one British officer discovered in the 1830s, ‘with a party of unsuspecting travelers for days, and even weeks together, eat with them, sleep with them,

attend divine worship with them... and live with them in the closest terms of intimacy till they find the time and place suitable for the murder of the whole.' The most striking example of such persistence, dating to 1820, concerned a gang that accompanied its intended victims for 'about twenty days, on the most intimate terms', covering a total of 200 miles, before putting the entire party to death.

The business of murder itself fell to a Thug band's stranglers and hand-holders. These two positions were interchangeable, the hand-holders in one murder acting as stranglers in another, and vice versa; but, even so, only a minority of the members of any one gang actively participated in the killing of victims. Those who did so were invariably the strongest and most experienced men available- stranglers who were hardened to their grisly duties and well practiced in the surest techniques for despatching even well-built and sometimes suspicious travelers.

The Thug's preference for murder by strangulation needs some explanation. Throttling a victim is no easy task; as well as requiring considerable strength and coordination, it is also an appallingly intimate method of killing. To dispatch a man in such a way requires the murderer to close with his intended prey, to stand over him and physically restrain him, to feel him lose his struggle for life. Strangulation places no distance between the killer and his victim in the way that a firearm does; no weapon acts as an intermediary; even a murder (Page 73) committed with a sword or knife is less immediate than one carried out with a man's own hands. Few murderers experience the sensation of the last breath leaving their victims body in the way that a strangler does, and killing in this manner requires a ruthless, cold-blooded and protracted determination that comes naturally to few if any men. The Thugs themselves found it difficult to get used to. When other members of his gang were squeezing the life out of their victims, one deposed, 'I always stood at a distance and trembled.'

Some Company officials, baffled by the appearance of the murdered bodies in their jurisdictions, supposed that Thugs chose to kill by strangulation in order to leave no evidence of their crimes, and it is true that men who throttled the unfortunate travelers whom they had marked for destruction would not be slashed with blood in the way that a man who stabbed or hacked travelers with swords would be. But the Thugs had no compunction in shedding blood once their victim was dead, as they showed when mutilating the corpses of those they had killed prior to disposing of the bodies. The truth may well be much simpler. Owing to a peculiarity of Islamic law, murderers who killed by strangulation were not liable to the death penalty in Mughal India. [As one historian of law in the Subcontinent explains: 'According to the Hanafi school of jurisprudence favored in Mughal India, capital punishment could be awarded only if the homicide involved a weapon usually associated with the shedding of blood, and whether a particular weapon met this requirement was the subject of much legal debate.'] Convicted stranglers were merely flogged and imprisoned until they repented and paid blood money to their victims family. It seems possible that the earliest Thugs chose to throttle travelers in order to avert the risk of capital punishment.

The swift and efficient murder of a chosen group of travelers was crucial to the success of any gang, and able stranglers possessed considerable prestige within the closed world of the Thugs. 'Do you look up to or think more of these associates who have strangled many victims?' one group of captured jemadars was asked. 'We respect the expert Thug the most.' came the reply. 'He has his attendants from among the tryoes, several of them wait on him as servants.'

[others] carry his bundles. He often rides upon his horse, whereas the tryo is held in no estimation amongst us.' Attaining the rank of bhurtote, or expert strangler, might take years, and 'the office'. Another Thug explained, 'in these gangs is never allowed to be self-assumed but is conferred with due ceremony after the fitness of the candidate in point of firmness, bodily strength and activity as been ascertained'.

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Would-be stranglers were encouraged to acquire the necessary skills 'by long sham practice of the process among one another', and promotion to the ranks of those employed to murder travelers was neither automatic nor inevitable. A good many Thugs never achieved it; Henry Bevan, a British officer who spent three decades in the Subcontinent, talked to one 18-year-old Thug who 'stated that he could never acquire the requisite dexterity' and was 'frequently punished for his want of [it]'. Those who displayed some promise were - another Company man was told - given the chance to dispose of one of the gang's more weak and helpless victims:

"Favorable opportunities are given to the buttoats to make their first essay in the art of strangulation. When a single traveler is met with, a novice is instructed to make a trial of his skill: the party sets off during the night, and stops while it is still dark, to drink water, or to smoke. While seated for this purpose, the jemadar inquires what time of night it may be, and the Thugs immediately look out to the stars to ascertain, this being the pre-concerted signal; the buttoat is immediately on alert, and the unsuspecting victim, on looking up to the heavens in common with the rest of the party, offers his neck to the handkerchief, and becomes an easy prey for his murderer.

Further assistance was available to even the most expert murderers in the shape of one of more shumsheeras (hand-holders), Thugs whose duty it was to help the stranglers to overcome their victims. It was this 'ganging up' on doomed travelers that perhaps most outraged the British officers charged with pursuing the Thugs, offending as it did any sense of fair play. "Two Thugs, at least, are thought necessary for the murder of one man; and more commonly three are engaged,; one Company officer asserted, although almost all surviving depositions mention the presence of only a single hand-holder at the murder of each victim. In most cases a single shumsheera would perform precisely the role suggested by his title, seizing a traveler's hands to prevent him from struggling or loosening the cord around his neck. Where two were present the second man would kick the dying man's legs from under him and grasp him around the calves or thighs to stop him from thrashing about. In some cases, it appears, a shumsheera would also place a well-aimed kick 'in that part of a man most endowed with sensitivity' in order to further disable his victim.

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It was very rare for any Thug to attempt to murder a victim on his own. Those who proved themselves able to kill without any assistance 'attained a distinction that was conferred not only upon themselves, but on several successive generations'. But this did not mean that bhurtotes lacked either skill or determination. There were many cases of Thugs strangling travelers as they walked along a road, or even tackling a man on horseback. ['We strangled travelers on horseback in this way,' the notorious Thug Ramzan explained, 'It requires three men, each being at his post. One Thug...walks near the horse's head, ready to seize the reins - another Thug, the decoyer, walks by the side of the horseman, engaging him in conversation -



the strangler, all ready for his office, walks in a little to the rear by the flank of the horse. The decoyer in the course of conversation offers the horseman some tobacco, or anything else. When he puts out his hand to receive it, the decoyer seizes the victims hands, at the same instant giving the signal for the others to perform their offices, he himself dragging the horseman down. The strangler, the moment his hands are seized, and with the horseman's neck within reach, seizes him firmly by the throat and falls with him to the ground, when he completes the strangulation. The third Thug, having at the signal seized the bridle of the affrighted horse, secures him as a prize.] The one thing they invariably avoided was strangling a sleeping man, for it was difficult to apply a cord to someone whose head was resting on the ground. In cases where a gang found it impossible, for whatever reason, to murder their intended victims in the course of the evening, the unfortunate travelers might be woken at a very early hour in the morning 'with an alarm of a snake or scorpion' and promptly throttled.

Bhurtotes were well rewarded for their efforts. Jemadars always received the largest share of the gang's loot, usually claiming between 10 and 15 percent of all the cash and precious metals taken from their victims, and "a tithe of all pearls, shawls, embroidered cloth, brass and copper pots, horses, ect'. But stranglers were paid considerably more than the remainder of their fellows. When the proceeds of an expedition were divided up, each received not only the share that was due to every member of the gang, but an additional half-share for their service as killers. Typically this might amount to a half-rupee bonus for every murder committed in the course of an expedition- a considerable sum.

In the first third of the nineteenth century the bhurtotes' favored weapon was the rumal, the 'scarf' they used to strangle victims. 'This implement,' one Company official explained, 'is merely a piece of fine strong cotton cloth about a yard long; at one end a knot is made, and the cloth is slightly twisted and kept ready for use, in front of the waistband of the person carrying it.' The knot prevented the strangler from losing his grip at a critical moment, (Page76) and practiced assassins might also tie a small coin into the cloth halfway along its length. This pressed against their victims' windpipes, expediting the act of murder, but the coin made the rumal more difficult to handle and it was probably not often used. It was difficult in any case, to master all the various methods of strangulation. Strike too soon and the cloth would tighten around an intended victim's face rather than his neck; too late, and he might have time to scream or struggle. The correct technique, if it might be termed such, was to take the knotted end of the rumal in the left hand, to twist the cloth and hold the other, in the right hand, a few inches higher than the first, to throw the rumal over the victim's head from behind and then to cross the hands as the man was throttled, thus exerting greater pressure on the wind-pipe. Done properly, this gave the victim no time to speak or utter any sound; indeed, the ability to murder in complete silence was esteemed highly among the Thugs.

The rumal was a very inconspicuous weapon, and there are hints that it may have been a relatively late addition to the Thugs' arsenal. One of its great attractions was that it could be readily disguised, as a scarf, handkerchief or sash, thus, 'answering the atrocious purpose in view as well as a regularly prepared noose, and having the additional recommendation of exciting no suspicion'. It was, in any case, easy enough to add a slip knot to an ordinary length of cloth and so turn it into a makeshift noose, and some stranglers did so on occasion, tying the knot around their own knee or thigh in order to simulate the dimensions of a human neck. This made it an easy matter to finish off a victim who had been brought to the ground. At that point,

one Thug informer explained, the stranger 'makes another fold of [the rumal] around the neck; upon which placing his foot, he draws the cloth tight, in a manner similar to that... of packing a bundle of straw'. Long years of practice enabled an experienced Bhurtote to bring the ignoble art of strangulation to a pitch of perfection. Death, Wherever it occurred, usually came swiftly. 'In how short a time,' one group of thugs was asked, 'do you dispatch and bury a band of travellers after reaching your ground?' 'When we reach the appointed place,' came the reply, "we get the travellers to seat themselves. The inveiglers who have deceived and conducted them on the spot, when they have seated them summon the stranglers and the holders of hands to their posts by calling out in the (Page 77) Thug slang in the ordinary way. The travellers think it means an ordinary enquiry. If the stranglers are all ready they reply and the inveiglers see that all the murderers are at their posts near their respective travellers... Before the signal is out of the mouth, quick, like the pulling of a trigger, every man is strangled! Thus! [Here the assassin Ramzan, Smiling, showed with what energy it was done.] Jhut! Instantaneously are the whole party strangled, though there should be 20 of them. I have with my own eyes seen seven travellers thus dispatched@ It is the work of an instant! You are long in writing it- but in reality it is instantaneous.'

(Page 79) What distinguished the Thugs from dacoits and highway robbers was that they only rarely abandoned their victims where they fell. Stealth and security were important to them, not least because, proceeding barely armed, they could ill afford confrontations with the local militia or police.

The chosen method for the concealment of dead bodies depended on the circumstances and habits of the gangs themselves. Some were exceptionally well organized. When there was plenty of time, or a real risk of discovery, a grave pit might be prepared well in advance so that corpses could be disposed of quickly, and even the shape of the graves themselves was carefully considered. Many Thugs favored what they called gobbas, circular pits dug around a narrow pillar of compacted earth, believing that scavaging animals were less likely to find and dig up bodies buried in this way. Careful Thugs would also take precautions to disguise the patch of disturbed earth that betrayed a freshly dug grave, building a fireplace over the remains of their victims and cooking, eating and even sleeping at the spot in order to hide the traces of their crimes.

(Page 82) 'Burka- A leader or chief of the Thugs, or one thoroughly instructed in the art. The Thugs consider a burka as capable of forming a Thug gang out of the rude materials around him in any part of India.'

(Page 84) Children were generally introduced to the Thug's way of life quite gradually. 'At first they know nothing of what we do,' one strangler explained. "They accompany us and are allowed a pony, and soon become fond of the wandering life. At the end of the first year they know that we steal, and some suspect that we do more. At the end of the second year all know we murder, and in the third year they will see it.'

This careful introduction to the ways of Thuggee seems to have been intended to ease the shock that novice Thugs inevitably felt on witnessing murder for the first time. Such caution was necessary. Feringeea himself told the story of a nephew who was so terrified by the sight of men of this gang falling on a party of travellers that he collapsed in shock and never properly recovered.

Although it seems entirely probable that older Thugs instructed their sons in the methods and tactics employed by their gangs, many Thugs insisted that 'a father does not initiate his son to strangling'. This duty fell to a "Teacher of the Duties of a Thug", or *guru*, Usually a man of considerable experience. The novice murderer, one Thug Explained, "Proceeds to the fields, conducted by his Gooroo previously selected who carries with him the Roomal, or shred of cloth, and anxiously looks out for some favorable omen, such as the chirping of certain birds or their flight past the right hand. He knots the Roomal at each end the moment that either occurs, and delivers it to the candidate imploring success upon him... It is the seniors only who confer this office, generally old Thugs held in some estimation."

Some Thug informants made a great deal of the relationship between a novice strangler and his guru, insisting that a strangler would betray his own family before he allowed any harm to come to his mentor. There is no trace of such strong and mystical relationships in the surviving records of Thuggee. But if the depositions made by captured stranglers can be believed, the appointment of a guru may have been intended to benefit the teacher as much as it did his pupil. "The preceptor who initiated a novice," one jemadar explained, "it afterwards looked up to by the Thug so initiated, who through life will always give part of his spoil to the teacher." Other Thugs described how elderly stranglers of this sort, too old to be of any use out on the roads, were maintained into their old age by donations made by grateful formal pupils.

(Page 85) It was the guru who presided over the feast, or Tuponee, at which a boy was accepted into the fraternity. A key feature of this feast was the ritual consumption of unrefined sugar, or goor - a sacrificial meal that the thugs also consumed after each successful killing. "The leader of the gang and the other bhurtotes sat on a blanket with the rest of the gang around them. A little sugar was dropped into a hole and the leader prayed for the gods to send them such rich victims. The remainder of the dugar was divided among all present." This ceremony - unlike the majority of the religious trappings associated with the gangs - seems to have been unique to the thugs, although the members of many other castes and professions celebrated with ritual feasts at which other foodstuffs were consumed.

Novice stranglers attached particular importance to their first taste of goor. They were told that the consecrated sugar they consumed during the tuponee would prepare them for the grisly work they undertook in the course of their expeditions. Feringeea was no exception. His own initiation ritual, he firmly believed, changed his character fundamentally and for ever.

"We all feel pity sometimes," he explained two decades later. "But the goor of the tuponee changes our nature. It would change the nature of a horse. Let any man once taste of that goor and he will be a Thug though he know all the trades and have all the wealth in the world. I never wanted food; my mother's family was opulent, her relations high in office. I have been high in office myself, and became so a great favorite wherever I went that I was sure of promotion; yet I was always miserable when absent from my gang, and obliged to return to Thuggee. My father made me taste of that fatal goor when I was yet a mere boy; and if I were to live a thousand years I should never be able to follow any other trade."

(Page 218) Few British officers- brought up in Europe, raised as Christians, and sent out into the Company's lands in their teens with no practical experience of the Subcontinent- Ever felt truly at home in India. The majority found themselves flustered by the bustle of the cities, disgusted by the poverty in which most of the local people lived, and repelled by the strangeness of the language and indigenous religion... Adhering resolutely to British dress and

manners, and eating what passed locally for European food. [They] never entirely understood the nuances of Indian society.

The increasing isolation of the British community in India was, indeed, one of the principal features of Company history in the late eighteenth century. After 1800, it was perfectly possible- which it had scarcely been before- to serve for years in Bombay, Bengal or Madras while remaining blissfully ignorant of local languages and customs, and of the Indians themselves. A good many officers based in Calcutta were prone to boast that they knew 'just 16 miles of Asia, and no more', that being the distance between the town itself and the headquarters of the Bengal Army at Barrackpore. By 1810 it was no longer admissible in fashionable circles to admit a taste for curry or profess any interest in 'Persian poetry and Hindustani metaphysics', and a Mrs Graham (Page 220) regretted that every British officer she knew 'appears to pride himself on being outrageously a John Bull'. Another lady, asked what she had seen of India and its people since arriving in Bengal, replied: 'Oh, nothing, thank goodness. I know nothing at all about them... I think the less one knows about them the better.'

Real friendships between Indians and Europeans- which had been common in the eighteenth century, particularly between Company officers and the Muslim notables of larger towns- were rare in the nineteenth. One reason for this was the increasing size of the British community, which was large enough to be socially self-sufficient after about 1810. The appearance of European women in large numbers in the major Company towns had a decided impact. It became possible to enjoy a full, if very British, social life. But the women themselves were seldom content to leave local institutions as they found them. Those who had arrived in search of husbands naturally resented the arrangements enjoyed by many Company officers who found contentedly ensconced with local mistresses [Even in the eighteenth century, few British men would consider actually marrying an Indian girl. But the fact that most expected to keep mistresses is illustrated by the fact that a demi-official guide to the Company's service - intended for the instruction of young officer cadets freshly arrived on the Subcontinent- contained, as late as the 1790s a detailed explanation of the costs involved in running a zenana (Women's quarters)] and relationships between European men and Indian women- once so universal that they were considered scarcely worthy of comment- soon became to be regarded as shameful and wrong. This further limited the likelihood of newly arrived officers acquiring a proper understanding of local customs and religion.

The Company's ignorance was especially pronounced when it came to Indian religion. The British were familiar enough with Islam, the faith of the majority of India's ruling class. Hinduism was, however, a quite different matter. Its ancient and magnificent Sanskrit texts had attracted the favorable attention of a small group of scholarly Company administrators, who found much to admire in their literary quality and in the piety and morality of the high-caste Hindus whom they met. But for the great majority of British officers, and almost every Christian minister, Hinduism was a vile and pagan faith. It was generally perceived as a religion of 'prevalent idolatry and indecent ceremonies', one that encouraged 'obscene pilgrimages' and had created and sustained the horrible iniquities of the caste system. It permitted slavery and repressed women, who in the opinions of many writers on India were treated as little more than 'mere animals' by their menfolk. Its gods and goddesses, with their multiple arms and odd deformities, were dismissed as nothing more than hideous idols, the worst of them all being

Kali, the blood-drenched, sword-wielding mother-goddess who- as the patron deity of Calcutta - was especially familiar to British visitors to India.

With very few exceptions, Europeans showed little interest in the complexities of Indian society. They thought of Hinduism as simply a religion, rather than the social system that it was; they saw it as a monolithic and uniform faith, when really it encompassed the religious practices of numerous distinct districts; even the Hindu's fabled tolerance was interpreted as mere passivity, rather than an example of intrinsic good. Most of those who wrote or read about the subject preferred to devote much of their attention to lurid descriptions of the 'excesses' of Indian custom. By the early nineteenth century these excesses had come to be regarded as somehow representative of both the 'lust, injustice, wickedness, and cruelty' of Hinduism itself, and the inhumanity of the Indian people as a whole.

(Page 222) In many British minds, therefore, Hinduism became perceived as a barbaric religion. It was a faith that permitted infanticide- specifically the killing of unwanted female children- and suttee, the burning of widows who chose to join their beloved husbands in death, even though both practices were forbidden in its most ancient texts. Suttee was not, in fact, particularly common, and most widows who did choose self-immolation went willingly and calmly to their deaths. But that was not the impression Britons received from their newspapers and books. Prurient reports from India spoke of women being forced shrieking onto their funeral pyres by baying relatives, and dwelled on the agonies of a slow death by fire; a good many readers with no personal knowledge of India certainly believed that this was the common fate of all Hindu widows from Bombay to Bengal. The notion that innocent, healthy and perhaps beautiful young girls [The victims described in contemporary British accounts, the historian Amal Chatterjee wryly observes, 'fell into two broadly corresponding groups- officials saw and recorded suttees that involved "mature" women, while non-officials invariably encountered young women, in the bloom of their youth, being tragically destroyed by blind and tyrannical custom.' The latter image was given form by innumerable poems and romances. Mariana Starke's celebrated play *The widow of Malabar (1791)* featured a beautiful girl driven towards her death by evil Brahmins, only to be rescued by a gallant Englishman at the very moment all seemed lost] should be made sacrifices to an alien religion profoundly shocked public opinion at home, and when it was learned that the Company - bound by its solemn promise never to interfere in matters of religion- actually endorsed the practice if the woman concerned freely requested it, the howls of outrage that arose from liberal reformers and Christian moralists alike were heard distinctly in Calcutta. Even old India hands commonly believed that, in permitting the two practices, Hinduism made itself complicit in thousands of murders.

Worse yet, in some respects, was the Company's fear of the wild excesses displayed by Hindu devotees. This, too, was largely a product of ignorance, and of the growing distance throughout the Subcontinent between rulers and the ruled. But the concern itself was real enough. From the Himalayas to Cape Cormorin, it was increasingly believed, religious frenzy lurked just beneath the placid surface of Indian society - a frenzy so spontaneous and (page 223) unrestrained that it seemed all too likely it would one day be channeled into actual rebellion. The signs were there for those who wished to see them, not least at the famous temple complex at Juggernaut, on the bay of Bengal, where every March tens of thousands of chanting pilgrims lined the roads to watch the procession of four gigantic wooden carts, each bearing a 'monstrous idol' in the form of an ancient statue of a the major Hindu god. The carts

were dragged along by the brute muscle power of the faithful. Each one was 43 feet high, garishly painted, and mounted on 16 enormous wooden wheels, and it was widely rumored- and generally believed- that pilgrims sacrificed themselves to their gods each year by hurling themselves to destruction beneath the carriages. [In truth deaths of this sort were rather rare, and were generally accidents caused by the sheer press of people along the route; according to the British army officer Thomas Bacon, who wrote about Juggernaut in the early 1830s, there had been no genuine suicides there since 1821. It was true, he added, that the road leading to the temples was indeed lined with thousands of bleached human bones; but these, he was told, had been deposited not by suicides crushed beneath the wheels of the carts but by hundreds of terminally ill pilgrims who died in their desperate attempts to reach the temples.] ...

The Company's discovery, early in the nineteenth century, that Thug gangs were strangling hundreds of travelers in Hindustan, thus fitted neatly into the pattern of British expectation.

(Page 224) By his own account, Sleeman's initial purpose was to take down, codify and make available a glossary of Thug slang - an argot known as Ramasee that the stranglers used when in company with a party of intended victims in order to conceal their murderous attentions. [Ramasee has often been described as a 'language'. It was a form of low-class hindu cant, full of sly jokes and coarse double entendres. The majority of travellers do not seem to have understood its meaning at all. But there were several instances of some potential victim grasping the true significance of a phrase and hurriedly leaving the Thugs' company in the nick of time.] But the 'Conversations' soon strayed onto other subjects, and several excerpts, dealing with omens, religious belief and the organization and recruitment of the Thugs themselves, clearly stood out- Not merely in Sleeman's mind, but also in the memories of those who read through the captain's transcripts. In these passages, the approvers stressed that the principle Thug gangs were composed of hereditary stranglers, men who could trace their ancestry back through many generations of murderers. And they placed far greater emphasis on the Thug's religion - in particular their fierce devotion to the goddess Kali - than any earlier source.

We have already seen that Thug gangs took auspices and participated in religious ceremonies before departing on each expedition. Every member of every gang, whether Hindu, Muslim or Sikh, seems to have taken part in these acts of devotion. There was nothing at all unusual in this. Religious ceremonies designed to seek the blessing of the gods were an important part of Indian folk religion and a common feature of village life. Farmers attempted to invoke good harvests; merchants and travellers sought protection on the roads. Thugs - whose livelihood depended so heavily on chance, and whose expeditions were so inherently dangerous - naturally did likewise. [Thieves and housebreakers - the Thugs themselves pointed out - performed similar ceremonies. But the stranglers did not think them so punctilious: 'the housebreaker performs religious rites to the iron instruments with which he breaks through the wall much as the Thugs do to our instruments of murder... but they do not worship on every expedition - perhaps only once or twice a year.']

But there had been no hint, in any of the thousands of pages of depositions and trial documents taken down by Smith and Sleeman and their moonshees, that religion was of any special importance to the Thugs, nor that the beliefs they held influenced the manner in which they practiced their grim trade. On the contrary, numerous captured stranglers had implied that their motive for committing mass murder was financial. The few references to religion that do

appear in the statements of ordinary Thugs imply that it was simply a part of everyday life. 'Having performed the usual worship,' one strangler's account of typical expedition begins, 'We set out towards Sholapoor.'

Sleeman's approvers told a different story. For them, religion was a central feature of their lives and the goddess Kali (who also appears under the names Bhowanee or Davey [A corruption of 'Devi', the female energy force. Neither Bhowanee nor Davey are entirely synonymous with Kali, though Sleeman certainly thought they were.] in many of Sleeman's documents) was a special protector of the Thugs. Several respected jemedars recounted legends that (Page 226) emphasized the regularity with which the goddess with which the goddess had acted to shield them and their families. Not even the mightiest rulers, they said, could stand against her. The approvers firmly believed that Mahadji Sidhia, one of the greatest of Maratha warlords, had met his death at the Kali's hands after unwisely executing 70 Thugs in February 1794. And 'was not Nanha the Raja of Jhalone made leprous by Davey for putting to death Boodhoo and his brother Khumoli, two of the most noted Thugs of their day? He had them trampled under the feet of elephants, but the leprosy broke out on his body the very next day.'

The Thugs' legends reassured them that they had enjoyed the goddess's protection for many years. As long ago as 1775, the Rajah of Kundul, east of Hyderabad, received repeated warnings that he should release a group of Thugs he had had thrown into prison. But 'he was obstinate, and on the third night the bed on which he and his Ranee were sleeping was taken up by Davvey and clashed violently against the ground... they were not killed, but they were dreadfully bruised; and had they not released the Thugs, they certainly would have been killed the next night'. Kali was, moreover, capable of wreaking vengeance on lesser enemies as well. The Gwalior zamindars who seized Thugs fleeing from the destruction of Murnae in 1812 'were severely punished for giving us such annoyance', and - at least in the recollection of one of Sleeman's most trusted approvers- their loved ones all died, and 'not a soul of their families are now left to pour the libation at their funeral obsequies! [It is evident that these stories had their basis in myth and misapprehension. It is now generally believed that Majadji Sindahia, for example, died after either throwing himself, or being thrown, from a balcony in his palace.]

Indeed all of the Thugs' legends concerning the goddess featured exactly the sort of cautionary notes typical of folklore. In some Kali saved worthy stranglers from their enemies, but in others she deserted men who had not been faithful to her commands. A fable told by many Thugs related that they had for many years neglected to bury the bodies of their victims, leaving them lying on the ground so that the goddess could devour them - 'that Bhowanee may have her blood; she delights in blood!' This their protector did with such efficiency that the Thugs were never in any danger of discovery or arrest, and the members of each gang were strictly enjoined never to look back on the scene of the murder for fear of disturbing the deity's feast. But "On one occasion a novice of the fraternity disobeyed this rule and, unguardedly looking behind him, saw the goddess in the act of feasting upon a body with the half of it hanging out of her mouth. Upon this she declared that she would no longer devour those whom the Thugs slaughtered; but she agreed to present them with one of her teeth for a pickaxe, a rib for a knife and the hem of her lower garment for a noose, and ordered them for the future to cut about and bury the bodies of those whom they destroyed."

Sleeman's approvers thus used religion not merely to justify their actions but also to explain their failures and capture. They held that the real reason for the decline and fall of their gangs was to be found not in the Company's tactics, nor in their own faithlessness or poor organization, but their failure to pay proper attention to the proscriptions they had been ordered to obey. 'That Davey instituted Thuggee, and supported it as long as we attended to her omens, and observed the rules framed by the wisdom of our ancestors, nothing in the world can ever make us doubt,' observed an approver named Nasir. But the gangs of the early nineteenth century had failed to heed the goddess's orders to refrain from killing women and members of the various proscribed classes. 'Our ancestors were never guilty of this folly!' one strangler concluded in disgust. 'We murdered men and women of all classes. How then can Thuggee stand?

Captured Thugs claimed on many occasions that their crimes were simply a matter of fate; they were destined to commit them. They were 'merely irresponsible agents', no more liable to be held to account for their killings than were the tigers to whom they often compared themselves.

(Page 228) Such views were controversial then. Today, it is generally agreed that the conclusions Sleeman drew from his 'Conversations with Thugs' were distorted by the prejudices and misinterpretations so common at the time. In truth, the Thugs' worship of Kali and their veneration of the sacred pickaxe hardly constituted a religion. The gangs possessed no religious texts, had no agreed forms of worship, and while they certainly shared a belief that their goddess protected them, they held this in common with thousands of ordinary Indians. Kali was commonly invoked as a protector by all sorts of Hindus; and at this time she was - later anthropologists have noted - especially popular among criminals of all sorts and men of lower caste. Pickaxe worship arose merely 'from the common animistic belief that the tools and implements generally achieve the results obtained from them by their inherent virtue and of their own volition, and not from the human hand which guides them... Members of practically all castes worship the implements of their profession.'

The Thugs' beliefs, indeed, may be better understood as folklore than as a distinct faith. This may be seen most clearly in the manner in which members of various gangs differed sharply in the interpretation of even the most fundamental customs- as Sleeman discovered when he questioned his approvers regarding their obedience to omens:

- Sleeman- When you have a poor traveler with you, or a party of travellers who appear to have a little property about them, and you hear or see a very good omen, do you not let them go, in the hope that the virtue of the omen will guide you to better prey?
- Dorgha, Musulman- Let them go - never, never.
- Nasir, Musulman of Telingana- How could we let them go? Is not a good omen the order from Heaven to kill them, Should we ever get any more travellers?
- Fringeea, Brahmin- I have known the experiment tried with good effect- I have known travellers who promised little let go, and the virtue of the omen brought better.
- Inaent, Musulman- Yes, the virtue of the omen remains, and the traveller who has little should be let go, for you are sure to get a better.



- Sahib Khan, of Telingana- Never! Never! This is one of your Hindustanee heresies. You could never let him go without losing all the fruits of your expedition. You might get property, but it could never do you any good. No success could result from your disobedience.
- Nasir- The idea of securing the good will of Davey by disobeying her order is quite monstrous. We Duckun Thugs do not understand how you got hold of it. Our ancestors were never guilty of such folly.
- Feringeea- You do not mean to say that we of Murnae and SIndouse were not as well instructed as you of Telingana?
- Nasir and Sahib Khan- We only mean to say that you have clearly mistaken the nature of a good omen in this case. It is the order of Davey to take what she has put in our way; at least, so we, in the Duckun, understand it.

Most strikingly of all, the evidence so carefully recorded by Sleeman and his men makes it clear that Indian villagers did not engage in Thuggee because they worshiped Kali. Rather, Kali worship was a facet of life as a Thug- one that could safely be neglected or abandoned by a man no longer practicing the trade. The first hints that this was the case emerge from questions posed to Muslim Thugs: 'Do Musellman Thugs continue to follow the rites of their religion?' Paton asked. 'Or does Bhowanee supercede Mohammed?' 'What?' exclaimed the approver Allyar. 'Is Bhowanee the equal of Mohammed? He is the lord of our faith and of our religion.' 'Bhowanee' added his colleague Bagh Mohammed, 'is only for Thuggee.' but it was when Paton turned to the question of the religion practiced by the Thugs now they were in Company custody that the most instructive exchange took place:

- Paton- You paid great reverence to Bhowanee, but she deserted you. What do you think of her now?
- Futtu Khan- God is above, and what do we care for Bhowanee now? We get food from you now.
- Dhoosoo, Musellman- I think now that Bhowanee is a non-entity, for if she were not so, why should I be in trouble now?
- Allyer, Mohammedan- If I had the image of Bhowanee now, I would fling it into a well!
- Paton- You say so now- but if you ever went on Thuggee again, would you not invoke Bhowanee?
- Allyer- Yes. If I went on Thuggee I would still pay my devotions day and night to Bhowanee. She is the chief of that trade.

The emphasis placed by Sleeman and - through him- by the Company authorities on the role of religion in Thug life was thus enormously exaggerated. But in a country such as India, in which most Europeans felt barely at home, such exaggerations were accepted without question. To take only one example, references made by the Thugs to the pilgrimages some made to a temple to Kali maintained in the village of Bindachul, just outside Mirzapore, were built up to suggestions that the temple was itself an important headquarters of Thugs, maintained by Thug priests and funded by the proceeds of Thuggee. Sleeman formed this opinion at an early stage, writing in October 1830: 'Kali's temple at Bindachul... is constantly filled 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 excursion... The priests of this temple know

perfectly well the source from which they derive their offerings [and] they suggest expeditions and promise the murderers in the name of their mistresses immunity.'

Probably this impression of a harsh and murderous cult owed something to Sleeman's own religious beliefs, for he added: 'To pull down [Kali's] temple at Bindachul and hang her priests would no doubt be the wish of every honest Christian.' But the impact of such pronouncements- made, as they were, in the almost total absence of information to the contrary- on British consciousness in India was significant. By 1835 the impression that Thuggee was an alien religion of the most horrible sort was firmly established among the European communities in India. A few years later, with the publication of (Page 231) The sensational novel *Confessions of a Thug*, written by Meadows Taylor, Sleeman's contemporary in Hyderabad, a similar view was introduced to Britain. The consequence was a distinct loss of perspective. The determined criminal, anxious to provide for his family, seeking rich prizes and schooled in the ways of the Thug Trade by other members of his gang became 'that fiend in human form, luring his victims to their doom with soft speech and cunning artifice, committing the cold-blooded murder of every man he met'. The murder of potential witness became 'the taking of human life for the sheer lust of killing', and 'the plunder, however pleasant...a secondary consideration'.

The most unexpected consequence of this perversion of the Thug's religion was the romanticization of Thuggee itself. 'The histories of these men,' The Company magistrate Edward Thornton exclaimed, 'are as romantic as the most ardent lover of Oriental adventures could desire.' Men driven to kill by their beliefs were far more compelling than mere highway robbers, however lethal, and the stranglers were, it seemed clear to Sleeman and his men, no ordinary criminals. Their devotion to Kali could even be perceived as noble. Sharp distinctions could be drawn between the dacoits, who tortured their victims and killed indiscriminately, and the Thugs, who were forbidden- however nominally- from murdering the members of certain classes and castes, and who killed comparatively quickly and cleanly. 'However unscrupulous and treacherous the Thugs were,' Sleeman's grandson concluded, looking back, 'one thing at least stands to their credit, that while they sometimes killed women - though contrary to their faith - they never maltreated them beforehand.'