

## DARK AGE: AN EXPLORATION OF THUGGEE IN INDIA AND ITS LEGACY

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### **Abstract**

*Indian history has witnessed a stained epoch expanding from 17<sup>th</sup> to mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the sun of the glorious past was setting at a swift pace. The Mughal Empire had disintegrated into crippling princely states suppressed by firmly instituted East India Company, subsequently colonizing the nation, leaving behind a grim legacy. Integral to uncertainties; anarchy, despair and dread of killings dominated every household and mind of the populace. Given the scenario of pitiably fragmented administrative machinery, sucked up state treasury, looted and snatched provincial states, crumbling defeated army men; the common man was perplexed and unsure of life with the gradually diminishing faith of journeying out. Reduced to doubt blurred social customs and religious norms, he looked out helplessly for the path of salvation. Disregarding bounteous spiritual and philosophical treasury, the wise and sagacious, devotional and dedicated cults, land tillers as well as some army personnel had taken up arms to survive. Branded as 'thug' or 'phansigar', some took to murdering innocent travelers as profession for sustenance. Instead of 'shaastra' they had 'shastra' in their hands. Founded on their confessions this study proposes to explore 'thuggee' notoriety on the pretext of their sacred faith. Beyond doubt, W.H. Sleeman, the resolute British who loved India, had achieved what he'd vowed then; to wipe 'thuggee' from Indian soil. However, does it not actually exist in a disguised and sophisticated form today?*

**Keywords:** Dark Age, Thug, Profession, Customs, Religious Rituals, Phansigar, Faith

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The term *thug* meaning 'deceiver' apparently recognized in central India and known to have been first reliably recorded by Ziya-ud-Din Barani in 1356, in the *History of Firuz Shāh*. William Crooke in *Things Indian* traces thuggee existence to the Epics, where *naga-pasa* was the strangling tool called the dragon noose and also to its depiction in the Ellora cave temples built in 760 AD. He reports the capture of some 1000 thugs near Delhi by Feroz Shah in the 14<sup>th</sup> century, and their deportment to Bengal thereafter.

Thugs were professional highway robbers, who moved in gangs. Belonging to both Muslim and Hindu faith, their common religious conviction was in *Kali*, a secret cult that thrived in the worship of the goddess of destruction. *Thuggee* efficiency of tricking and later strangling their victims without spilling blood depended on scrupulous and extensive training. The decline of the Mughal Empire and the notorious growth of 600 years old Thuggee cult to mighty proportions were simultaneous phenomena. Generations have tread upon the burial of "Dark Age" after the nuisance was considered seriously and stamped out completely from Indian soil around 1836 – courtesy the spirit of British officers working in Central India. Nevertheless, this hazard to unearth this historical transition and all that it stood for is confronted as a challenge in this study due to the legacy of undesirable forms it has left behind; demanding resolute fortitude to deracinate.

Thuggee augmentation between 17<sup>th</sup> to 19<sup>th</sup> centuries is usually impugned to the alien origin of the Mughals, deteriorating governance, political instability, warfare flaws, dwindling economy, religious intolerance and unhampered European inflow. Collapsed centralized system fragmented into indigenous regional powers. These rebelling princely states, bereft of endeavor to hold the nation together, were curbed mercilessly by the opportunity ridden EIC. Suresh Kant states in *Firangi*, 'In the initial stages of 19<sup>th</sup> century India was a country enveloped in darkness... So loot was becoming the only religion of that time.' (Kant 1997 34) Thus the overall condition of the native Indians was out rightly affected, amplifying thuggee all over India. Among existing chronicles, an assortment on thuggee menace, some authentic and few partly fictionalized, leave the reader spellbound. First-hand experiences of British Indian government employees, their associations, or travelers are the most illustrious. Referring to *dhaturie*, a form of thuggee, Crooke records,

*It has been remarked that an interesting book might be written on the crimes in India which have been "repressed," only to appear again in some novel form. This is the case with Thuggee, which, when put down by General Sleeman and the officers who worked with him,*

has appeared again in the form perhaps quite as dangerous of Road Poisoning.(473) Crooke uncovered a policeman turned noted poisoner, Sharaf-ud-din's, confessions on 69 cases; who had learnt the trick in jail. Advent of the rail facilitated *dhaturie* escape, a flourishing crime in the coming centuries. Disclosed in *Firangi* by Suresh Kant, this iniquitous variant, never even spared women. Crooke quotes Sir J. Hooker on river thugs who infested the Ganges between Benares and Calcutta, 'where floating corpses are too numerous to elicit even an exclamation.'(474) Kant describes; having identifying their victims, the *paangus* offered safe passage of ferrying them across, and at a given signal attacked, fractured their bones, slaughtered and dumped them in the river.

Thuggee profession had seeds in a conviction from a myth – Once the Hindu Goddess Kali was battling ceaselessly with the demon Raktbeej. When multiple demons rose from Raktbeej's blood droplets, the fight appeared interminable with the Goddess losing grounds. Producing two men from her sweat and handing a *roomaal* (handkerchief) she instructed them to strangle each demon with it. As a token of success the Kali gifted them the *roomaal* advising to continue killing the unholy, ensuring world cleanliness. Expounding Kali's continued blessings as spiritual guidance, 'They believed that it was their divine mission to lure and kill fellow men. Booty was their right, if not reward.' (Pran Nevile 216) Faithfully professing the cult piously; otherwise an excuse or a superstition for a rational being, devotees of Kali or Bhavani, visited her shrines once a year – one at Kolkata, the other at Vindhyachal. In her memorable book, *Begums, Thugs & Englishmen*, Fanny Parkes, who lived and travelled in India from 1822 to 1846, while visiting the Vindhyachal shrine near Mirzapur, wrote passionately about their marvelous unity in the faith, regardless of caste or religion,

*"Bindachul ka jae! Bhawani ka jae!" Everyone making use of precisely the same invocation, though four were Mahomedans, one a Brahman, and the rest Rajpoots, and other castes of Hindus; . . . the invocation of Bhawani at the drop was a confession of their guilt, for no one in such a situation invokes Bhawani but a Thug, and he invokes no other deity in any situation, whatever maybe his religion or sect... who go there to offer up a share of the booty acquired from their strangled victims in their annual excursions.(Parkes 82-83)*

Candidly confessing, a famed thug swore upon their unity as a 'glorious profession', where 'the Hindoo and the Moslim both unite as brothers.... blessed and sanctioned by the divine authority' and 'the only profession and brotherhood in which I could find good faith existing.' mesmerizingly in Philip Meadows Taylor's *Confessions of a Thug*. Taylor has allocated a good number of pages tracing the origin of the faith in 'Bhowanee' by both Hindus and Muslims, the related rituals, the appropriate time after Dushera festival to begin their exploits and the consecration ceremony elaborately.(14, 20, 33-39) In *Sahib's India – Vignettes from the Raj*, Pran Nevile refers to a French traveler, Thevenot (1630),

according to whom “the road between Delhi and Agra was full of thugs, ‘the cunningest robbers all over the world’. They were not ordinary criminals who murdered simply for monetary gain; their ritual murders and methods were supposed to have religious sanction.” (216) Nevile adds, ‘An interesting aspect of thuggee was its ability to bind Hindus and Muslims together under the canopy of crime. The thugs of both groups worshipped Kali in the Hindu way.’ (217) Thuggee was exposed when a whole band was captured near Bangalore after the seize of Seringapatnam in 1799. Later in 1810, a group of *sepoys* disappeared, travelling home on leave, followed by the murder of a British lieutenant. Taking charge of the operation in 1835, Sleeman launched an attack on suspected villages with an organized ‘body of sepoys as detective police and arrests were then made while others were induced to turn approvers.’(220) After unearthing and capturing the murderous guild of 3000 thugs, some hanged, others transported and the remaining sent to prison, Nevil writes about the claim Sleeman made, “‘I am satisfied,’ he wrote, ‘that there is no term, no rite, no ceremony, no omen or usage that they have intentionally concealed from me.’” (220) History traces these cruelest, unsympathetic and shrewd killers rampant all over India, identified variously as *thug*, *phaansigar*, *banjare*, *dhaturie*, *mekh-fausan*, *pindari*, *paangu* or *bhaagina*, *thengra*, and *tasmabaaz* or gypsy killers. Patronized by Indian stately Lords, most thugs were disciplinarians; strictly ritualistic and principled in taboos, omens and superstitions followed before and after an adventure or during internship. Kant has elaborately explored their various categories converging in 7 sections or families called *aadi gotra*, from where they had branched and spread out all over India, finding new identities.

Thugs took the victim by surprise creeping from behind using *phanda*; a regular killing method. Their sole weapon was the yellow *roomaal* skillfully flung around the neck of the victim, with a *sikka* (coin) bound in a knot, squeezed tight, breaking the atlas-bone with a brisk snap. ‘In fact that roomal was the hangman’s noose. Tied at one end was the vermilion painted coin meant for faultless performance, lest they miss the target.’ (Kant 1997 49) Their code signals, *shirnee*, *fhirnee* or *jhirnee dena* or *tambakoo lao* (bring the tobacco) meant instant action. Land thugs never blundered to abandon the bodies or left any trace after pillaging the valuables. Before burying they butchered them. On principle, most slayers never bothered women, children, the old and ailing, and travelers with cows. Regarding British officers, this is how Ameer Ali, a famous thug confessed, *No, sahib, you are wrong; we never feared you, but to attack any of you would have been impossible. For you never carry anything about your persons... surrounded by a host of servants,... always guarded... you are generally armed,... But, above all, if any of you were missing,... would assuredly lead to our detection.* (Taylor 232)

Thugs moved in a team, masquerading as a Brahmin cook, wandering *Fakir*, traveling *sadhus*, pilgrims, singers, entertainers or traders with common hunting ground; a *serai* or a shady tree. Draped in common clothes of a familiar Indian, they unreservedly mingled with other travelers, discoursing on world affairs and indulging in fun and frolic with an unsuspecting flair. Sharing meals and tobacco, they tactfully extracted personal information from unsuspecting groups along the journey. Anyone from a village craftsman, a land tiller, a court employee or a jobless soldier could be in the guise of a thug; a rapid, parasitic burgeoning, divulged by multifarious accounts. Leading a peaceful domestic life, charitable, honest taxes payers, none suspected their temporary absence; astoundingly different when they took to roads. Managing household affairs, a thug's daughter and a thug's wife posed ignorance of their whereabouts. A Multani-Thug's wife was a curious exception. Besides, shocking accomplishments by female thugs like Vaaruni, who accompanied her husband for assistance and a girl thug leader from South India have come to light. While wandering in Monghyr, on the Ganges, John Lang strolled to the camp of the most notorious thugs, turned informers, and witnessed an old man training boys, as small as an eight year old, in the art of strangling. Taking pride in disclosing the number of murders committed, one of the female thugs remarked on the heritable nature of thuggee, 'The mango always falls beneath the shade of the parent tree.' (Lang 60) A thug's instinctive choice for young boys sometimes even kidnapped, involved future planning. Accompanying the gang as initial trainee, the boy's career was secured after 3 journeys, with ritualistic *diksha* (convocation by the *guru*); an additional boost to the community. An intriguing basis of this business of deceit was a fabrication of deep faith in regimented preparations. Suresh Kant observes – it started with the purchase of a *phawra* (spade) followed by religious cleansing. Assisted by a *pujari* (priest), the morganatic ritual was faultlessly performed to please the goddess. If *sikka* was a symbol then *phawra* was a mark termed *maahi* or *kaasi*. Instilling life into the weapon and handing it over to the chosen intern, the *phawra* was attributed with *mantras* (holy spells) and carried with reverence for 7 days before and after the venture. Taking *gur* (course sugar) by the partaker, arrangement for goat sacrifice and feasting as a solemn responsibility completed an exploit. A portable magical charm, the *phawra* was also a direction indicator, security guard and destiny maker for the gang. To avoid infuriating the goddess that could lead to destruction, omens were observed dexterously. Thus every initiation of the deed depended upon how favorable the call of a jackal, braying of a jackass or the crossing of a hare was. An exhaustive list of codified rich vocabulary in *Ramaasi*; a thug verbal communication, occurs in *Firangi*. For e.g. a real thug was *bora* or *ola*, a non thug *bitto* or *kuj* and a killers name was *bhukot* or *bhurkot*.

A soldier in the British army, later a civil servant and a commissioner of the Nerbudda territory in central India, William Henry Sleeman disembarked in India in 1809-

10 when thuggee nuisance was at its peak. Getting acquainted with mass killings, arrests and even magisterial release of those guilty of heinous crimes on the pretext that it would be interference in religious matters, Sleeman had expressed disgust at EIC mind-set; 'Cowards! Our greed for land acquisition has taken away the courage to distinguish between what's religion and what's not religion, how shameless!' (Kant 1997 97). In a fit of fervent stimulation he devised a challenging action-plan, resolving to eliminate thugs from all over India, finally destroying them in 10 years.

This forgotten hero lying buried in the pages of history had tactically accomplished an implausible dream, none dared. Thorough study of Indian history, heritage, hospitality and respect for women, aroused Sleeman's curiosity to muse upon the causes of social deterioration, ensuing dangers to life and property. He refused to accept this land of great cultures as a land of killers. Finally he wrapped up ardently for his beloved India, 'If at all he had any right to its glory, so was he responsible for its darkness.' (Kant 1997 112) Reasons to liberate Indians from thuggee terror sheltered in religious conviction to justify their ways were sufficient for Sleeman. With due apologies to Shakespeare, a succinct utterance becomes relevant; "A devil can cite the Scripture for his purpose".

Caught unawares, members from many thug groups became Sleeman's informers due to fear of the noose. "Thugi Sleeman" became his iconic name, where hundreds confessed to him. Obsessed, he sat for hours at stretch learning details of operational skills, customs and lineage, painstakingly drawing their family tree and branches. Interrogations were queer; "Doesn't your heart bleed while killing people like this?" "Not at all. The goddess sends them to us for the very purpose of killing. We're just the medium." (Kant 1997 72) His knowledge of *Ramaasi*, tutored by one of the cruelest thugs, Moti, became a valuable qualification for getting clues. Before court proceedings, many mislead him to evade breach of faith with fellow thugs and subsequent punishment. For example, disappearance of a thug would be attributed to displeasure of the goddess due to 'laxity in performance', culminating in illness, eventual death or suicide. The interest of Sleeman's French wife, Emile in his "*thug daman*" program was a huge support when he would gallop off on his horse crazily for miles afar to lay his trap till he was worn out. Col. Smith, the Governor of Narsinghpur and Sagar districts of central India encouraged him. Later as the commissioner and also as District Magistrate in 1930 he filled the jail of Jabalpur each day with new bands of thugs after which he was made Superintendent General with his headquarters at Sagar. A law to arrest any individual as criminal found supporting thugs came into existence after Sleeman resolved to curb the greed of rich princely families patronizing them for commission.

Sleeman voiced impenetrability faced by aiding officers during investigations in the 1<sup>st</sup> volume of *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official*. "These are specimens of some

of the minor difficulties we had to contend with in our efforts to put down the dreadful of all crimes.'(105) Terrorized and to evade hassles of court, people affected ignorance of thug whereabouts. Recounting the investigating complications, officers of 'distinction' experienced, Sleeman reminisces,

*To obviate all these difficulties, separate courts were formed, with permission to receive whatever evidence they might think likely to prove valuable, attaching to each portion, whether documentary or oral, whatever weight it might seem to deserve. Such courts were formed at Hyderabad, Mysore, Jndore, Lucknow, Gwalior, and were presided over by our highest diplomatic functionaries, in concurrence with the princes at whose courts they were accredited; and who at Jubbulpore were under the direction of the representative of the Governor-General of India. By this means we had a most valuable species of unpaid agency; and I believe there is no part of their public life on which these high functionaries look back with more pride, than that spent in presiding over such courts, and assisting the supreme government in relieving the people of India from this fearful evil. (118-119)*

Among the greatest achievements of Sleeman was the surrender of the most dreaded thugs like Firangia and Ameer Ali, later his informers, who'd tricked him on several occasions. Citing Eugene Sue's *Wandering Jew*, Mark Twain mentions, 'One character in it was the chief of thugs – Feringhea – a mysterious and terrible Indian who was as slippery and sly as a serpent, and as deadly;'.(426) Twain has contributed two chapters on 'Thuggee business' in his *Following the Equator*, quoting several confessions from the *Report* made in 1939 by Major Sleeman, a 'giant task', accomplished with 17 assistants. Accordingly, the stupefying revelations by Feringhea became the turning point for Sleeman. Digging up a hundred bodies at the site of the graves, Sleeman's made his resolution, surrounded by thugs in his own jurisdiction

Twain quotes Captain Vallency's remarks from a Madras journal thus; "The day that sees this far spread evil eradicated from India and known only in name, will greatly tend to immortalize British rule in the East."(427) In his characteristic sneer Twain compares; 'lurid pleasures of hunting men,' (441) with 'The joy of killing! The joy of seeing killing done – these are traits of the human race at large'. Illustrating the slaughters at the Roman arena, burning of doubtful Christians in public squares and enjoyment of blood in the Spanish bull-ring, Twain spurts, 'We white people are merely modified Thugs.' looking down upon Indian Thugs, considering their elimination as white man's 'progress', which 'their posterity will look down upon in a similar way.' (437) Resounding in *An Era of Darkness –The British Empire in India*, Shashi Tharoor backlashes the British on reforms, 'strongly impelled by Indian social reformers whom the British acceded to, rather than initiated by the British themselves (with the exception of the suppression of Thuggee,

which the British undertook to solve a law-and-order problem rather than a religious one).’ (268)

Meanwhile John Masters, a General in the British Indian army, whose book, *The Deceivers* narrates a harrowing tale about an EIC British official, William Savage, who’s courageous yet strange strategy to be one of them, was guided by a firm resolution of capturing and eliminating the deceivers from Indian roads and also from the memory of man. Posted in Madhya and assisted by his equally courageous wife, Mary, who braved a lonely fight with her pregnancy, Savage was backed by one of his informers, Hussein; “Then how can you rule us, know us? I must speak in riddles because until you fear our gods you cannot understand me – or believe me.” (Masters 91) Savage impersonated a thug, Gopal, and joined a band when Hussein’s strangling demonstration on Savage became the defining moment. “I’m sorry. I had to show you. . . .’ “That’s how it is done.” (93) Stumbling upon and immersing in the secret cult of thuggee society, Savage was ‘Drawn to the ecstasy of ritual killing’ and fear of Kali at another, while travelling with them all over for five months, hiding recorded details of every ritual, deception, killing, plunder and division of spoils in 20 different locations.

Masters’s purpose was to ‘re-create the feel of a historical episode rather than write a minutely accurate report.’ evoking ‘tensions and conflicts with an authority unlike any other writer.’(*The Deceivers* back-cover) Citing Savage’s remark as ‘the greatest criminal conspiracy of history’ (Postscript 284), Masters wanted to fictionalize the actual thuggee cult and their operations, where the thugs had killed over a million people, keeping the historical facts intact in naming various locations. He weaves his plot of its existence and attack extensively around Jabalpur, Nagpur, Jhansi and Allahabad region visualizing the curious and strangeness of India under the Raj. Similarly Taylor’s,

*‘The Confessions of a Thug’ records the story of one such thug, Ameer Ali, who, according to official record, was involved in the murder of 719 people, and like he said, ‘. . . if I had not been in prison twelve years, the number would have been a thousand!’ From his early life, his initiation into Thuggee, his first murder to his final capture, this book catalogues Ameer Ali’s spine-chilling story, giving an inside look at the lives of these fearsome assassins. ( back cover)*

Short spells of contemplation over the grave episodes of the confessions became momentous. Before Ameer Ali every murder of the known world, past or present, was small. Most criminals, Taylor recalled, have had an unhappy ending with gnawing guilt, mental suffering, misery, disease and suicide but never ever did he see anything like these thugs who laughed it out loud.

*The man, the perpetrator of so many hundred murders, thinks on the past with satisfaction and pleasure, nay, he takes a pride in recalling the events of his life, almost every*



*one of which is murder, and glories in describing the minutest particulars of his victims, and the share he had in their destruction, with scarcely a symptom of remorse. (252)*

Finally, in a vain attempt he accounts, 'Thuggee seems to be the offspring of fatalism and superstition, cherished and perfected by the wildest excitement that ever urged human beings to deeds at which humanity shudders.' (Taylor 253)

Tharoor's disagreement to British reforms is a comprehensive reality. Nevertheless, Sleeman's task was singularly noble owing to his personal passion, recognized in his culminating gesture of their family rehabilitation, serving life imprisonment, who escaped *phansi* (hanging). From Jhansi *ghat* of the Narmada Valley to Mirzapur, thugs had planted shady trees for 86 kilometers on both sides of the highway. Sleeman opened vocational schools for their education and livelihood. Suresh Kant has aptly surmised that the "firangi thug" was not just content with snatching thug religion, but made sure he was a thug no more. While peeping into Jabalpur factory in 1847 he continues, one could witness hands spinning yarn, shaping candles, earthenware, thug child reading books or learning intricate handwork in school, hands that were used to nothing except holding the deadly *roomaal*, had mastered the art of a new religion of humanity. Initiating a new identity for them Sleeman ensured a new life before they ventured out.

Presently his welfare work is a big challenge although there is no trace of thuggee in India. Bands targeting victims with deception and murder do exist in other forms which have been markedly passed on genetically in their DNA. These bands or *giroh* of thieves/deceivers, move by several names and guises in small towns, in trains, highways and even as cyber hackers or international cell phone criminals. For instance, like *dhaturie*, there exist gangs who offer food or *prasad* that's poisoned, to unwary travellers in trains. Newspapers reporting *zeherkhurani* incidences in trains are routine. Shoolpan Jhadi in Jhabua district of west Madhya Pradesh is dreaded, where *Bhil* tribes rob innocent travelers mercilessly. Steeped in similar mythical beliefs *Bhil* profession permits killing if a traveler protests because efforts for exacting money is genuinely hard earned money. Among larger issues, this mounting menace without religious sanction is occasionally in news generating fear. In fact, where does deceit ridden activity not abound today? Nonetheless, there are graver crimes committed in the name of religion, blemishing the sacredness of religion today. The ultimate tribute to Sleeman's work in India would be to identify and then to annihilate such disconcerting pests, this undesired legacy, from human life.

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