

Thuggee or Robin Hood? A Postcolonial Criticism of the Representations of the Thuggee in the 19th Century

Alisha Chandranath

Graduate in History with a Minor in International Relations, Shiv Nadar University,
Delhi NCR, India

Abstract

This paper examines the representations of the *Thuggees* in popular nineteenth-century colonial historiography and discourse by employing the lens of post-colonial critical analysis. The *Thuggee* archive's credibility regarding a valid historical undertaking as opposed to an oriental construct must be evaluated. This paper will question the veracity of claims made by the authors that coincide with Orientalist visions of backwardness and barbarity in colonial Indian society by underscoring the case of *Thuggees*. Moreover, the pertinent questions of race, caste, religion and notions of criminality will also be discussed.

Keywords: *thuggee*, post-colonialism, orientalism, discourse, historiographical enquiry

Introduction

The origins of the word '*Thuggee*' are widely speculated. Still, scholarship on the same claim has contradictory vantage points. According to Kim Wagner, the British presupposed using the term 'thug' as a derivation from the Hindi verb '*thag*', which means to cheat, be deceitful or con. The use of 'thug' as a person of a violent nature and one capable of causing grave injury is sometimes synonymous with indigenous connotations (Wagner 2004, 943). Pre-colonial indigenous sources, such as the *Janamsakhi*-texts, which depict the life of *Guru Nanak*, contain a story of '*Sajjan* the Robber'. This story provides more context about the etymology of the word '*thag*' as it was used in the text to describe *Sajjan*, allowing the reader to make a connection that the existence of such a group of people with similar attributes and meanings in the pre-colonial era corresponded with the later British sensibilities if not entirely (944). W.H Sleeman, the self-ordained authority on the Thugees in the 1830s, referred to the criminal category of the *Thuggees* as '*Phansigars*' derived from the then Hindustani word '*phansi*' that meant 'a noose' (Sleeman 1839, 14). The first encounters of the *Phansigar*s have been traced to 1799 in *Seringapatam* when a hundred were caught but not on apprehensions of being a separate class of hereditary murderers and plunderers found across various parts of India (14). Sleeman notes that this group of people were inconspicuous to the Company as robbers because of the protection offered by polygars and petty local authorities as they extracted interest from the former's plunders, and their ability to camouflage themselves with the peasantry afforded peaceful relations with their neighbours (15).

This essay questions the canonical and rigid essentialisations made about the *Thugees* in the colonial archives and the preliminary works of colonial administrators such as Sleeman. One contends that *thuggee's* ontological and colonial criminal category grossly and inaccurately grasps the entirety of their practices. This paper will offer a critical and subversive narrative of the *thuggee*. It seeks to highlight the praxis and the agency of these people counterposed to the theorisations made about them. Moreover, it aims to find plausible arguments for a Robin Hood-esque scenario regarding their complex socio-economic relationships within the village economies.

The ontological and epistemological question of the ‘*Thuggee*’

As the introduction states, W.H Sleeman began to intellectualise the ‘category’ of the *Thuggee* and began cementing the narrative around them in colonial texts. In his book, the *Illustration of Thugs* (2009), Edward Thornton asserts that they are conniving folk who were encouraged by people in positions of power or authority (Thornton 2009, 4). He corroborated this statement by using the examples of when the Company took over the Carnatic and districts which were won from the vanquished Nizam; the *thuggees* either ‘fled’ or changed names to take up other means of livelihood. Thornton’s interpolations about the *thuggee* suggest that the influence of the *polygar* legitimised the existence of the *thugs* through protection in exchange for a reciprocation of the interests from the plunder. Thornton further notes that the ‘peaceful pursuit’ was provided as an extension of the English Government, which appeared to be an honest and laudable industry despite its criminal nature (Thornton 2009, 5). Interestingly, he remarks about the numerous tactics and entrapments used by the *thugs*, which did not involve using females to capture the captives. The women of such communities would rarely participate in these exterminating activities or even accompany them. The European reader seemed utterly fascinated by the constant disappearance of such a massive number of such natives, which exalted little enquiry or fascination about the inner workings of the *thugs* within the country (6). It could also be attributed to the strategic operations of the *thugs* never occurring within their specific geographical location to avoid suspicion and to live in elusive disguise on the days they did not partake in crime.

Kim Wagner (2004) sets forth a riveting read in his book ‘The Deconstructed Stranglers: A Reassessment of *Thuggee*’ with views that align with the themes of this paper. His preliminary arguments in the paper begin with an anecdote of George Bruce in 1968, who wrote about the enigmatic and mythic *hugs* who were naturalised to be seen as members of the religious cult of the Hindu goddess *Kali* (Wagner 2004, 932). The fantastical aspect of the *thugs* that led it to become an episteme was how ‘covert’ they were in their murderous operations, which involved a ‘secret’ language and synchronicity with community leaders. The fascination with their operations led many British scholars and administrators to carry out campaigns to exterminate these groups by carrying out censuses, interviews and undercover missions. The campaigns against the *thugs* began in 1829 with the actions of W. Borthwick at Indore and F.C. Smith and W.H. Sleeman in the *Sagar* and *Narmada* territories. These campaigns expanded to cover most of India by the end of the 1830s. Sleeman, along with the help of informers and various legal interventions, was successful in imprisoning and ensuring capital punishment of many thugs. The popular four Calcutta-based newspapers that were circulated among the civil,

military and mercantile populations were *India Gazette, Englishmen, Bengal Harkaru* and the *Calcutta Courier* (Fhlathuin 1987, 124). The rapid spread of information concerning the *thugs* spread across a wide demographic of readers, from the affluent to people in need. According to C. A Bayly, the dearth of verifiable information and resources from the *Raj* made it inevitable for the *thugs* to be viewed as a distinct category of criminals. Martha McLaren also emphasised the ‘written’ word or textual sources in concretising public opinion and popular beliefs, which stemmed from supposedly ‘neutral’ records of the establishment (Fhlathuin 1987,127). The reports by Smith and Sleeman, and later officials, were viewed as canon because they were the only ones from the British *Raj* to claim expertise on the subject, followed the prescriptive writing style and methodologies of their superiors and gained the superlative amount of status and became canon for anyone studying *thugs*.

The anti-*Thuggee* campaign, headed by Sleeman, was a part of the ‘civilising mission’ of the British as they tried to get rid of all of the proclaimed ‘barbaric’ and ‘savage’ Indian customs or rituals. Most post-colonial scholars, in retrospect, are inclined to see the emergence of *thuggee* in the context of the political chaos and socio-economic disruption following the decline of the Mughal empire that was exacerbated by the expansion of the British Raj (Wagner 2004, 933). In recent years, many historians and litterateurs have also taken a more ‘radical’ position on the subject of *thuggee* by looking at them as the ‘subaltern’, which was accomplished with a much greater emphasis on literary theory and discourse analysis (Wagner 2004, 933). The two significant areas of thought that emerged in conjunction with the above are post-colonial theory and the British colonial discourse. The former claimed that *thuggee* was entirely a colonial construction, which had little to no basis in actual historical events. Moreover, this theory further claimed that Sleeman had misinterpreted a particular phenomenon, and the *thuggee* did exist but was limited to a fanatical religious practice. Scholars like Parama Roy, Amal Chatterjee and Marie ni Fhlathuin are concerned with the representations of the *thuggee* by emphasising the aspect of the ‘colonial encounter’ with the subject through the British colonial discourse (Wagner 2004, 933). Parama Roy focuses on the *thuggee* in the context of colonial identities and is interested in the broader discursive themes of the subject. Amal Chatterjee, on the other hand, underscores how the British evaluated the *thuggee* by subjecting it to the same critical lens with various other fixtures that they had adopted during reformation movements to abolish acts such as *sati* in which the immolation of widows was banned. Marie ni Fhlathuin convincingly argues that *thuggee* may have been a colonial stereotype but focuses in the fashion of an armchair scholar- on what a French traveller had written on the robbers in India in the 17th century; she utilised this as a primary source to provide a critical analysis of meaning-making exercises in colonial India. Other scholars have critiqued this and believe she was too preoccupied with the French text rather than focussing on the historical subject of the *thuggee* (Wagner 2004, 933-34).

Alexander Macfie's scholarship adopts a subversive counter-read regarding Phillip Meadows Taylor's ostensibly imperialist 1839 novel “Confessions of a Thug”. Macfie expertly identifies the historical inaccuracies that pervade the consciousness of the reader when one is not entirely well-versed in the subject, which is persistent in the orientalist interpolations of Taylor's novel. He described the text as one in which there

is an attempt to glorify the subaltern and invisibilised anti-hero but utilises the colonial lens of evaluation similar to Sleeman. In his words, the authority of the European observer in the narrative is omnipresent over the non-European native despite the intriguing nature of the central character (Macfie 2008, 385). It is apparent in Taylor's writing the need to emphasise the backwardness and criminality of the Indian people in order to justify the expansion of British power in India (385). Subsequently, he transposes the work of Mary Poovey (2004) on the same subject, which makes the connection that it is not necessary to read the book as a testament to British imperialism but as a critique of the East India Company and its existence as an establishment (385). She underscores the book's underlying themes that talk about the racial superiority of the English, the moral high ground bestowed upon Christianity compared to Indian religions, and the conscious labelling of Western bureaucracy as a more rational and effective alternative to its eastern forms (385). Macfie makes a personal assertion about Taylor's Anglo-Indian identity as his wife was half Indian and held the social status similar to a *nawab* (ruler of a tiny principality), owned a harem and perhaps, understood the nuances of the British and the Indians in a more objective light than his contemporaries (385). Admittedly, abundantly recurrent orientalist intercessions still plausibly dominate interpretive certainty. Irrespective of the liminal embedded author's lens, numerous textual ambiguities persist, undermining conclusiveness around the 'subconscious' and the 'subversive' instead of unconscious or essentialist biases. Nevertheless, Macfie commendably attempts to problematise Monolithic colonialist narratives by rescuing trampled voices through alternative vantage points.

Religion, caste and criminality in British India

B.R. Ambedkar, known as the Father of the Indian Constitution, wrote extensively about the perils of the propagation of the caste system in India. He lucidly maintains how the four-fold division of power in Indian society and polity based on birth into sects of society with the *Brahmins* (priests), *Kshatriyas* (warriors or nobility), *Vaishyas* (traders) and *Shudras* (untouchables) gives way to inequalities and repression. Any transgression in the means of livelihood or other social codes of conduct resulted in condemnation and expulsion from the society; this involved adhering to practising untouchability- a codified norm that purported notions of purity and pollution wherein the lower strata of the caste hierarchy were subjected to segregation laws in terms of dress, address and food (Ambedkar 2018, 1-5).

The historical context of caste once applied to the question of the *thuggee* implores the researcher to explore the intersections of religion, caste and criminality during imperial rule. A.R Kamble et al. (2023) wrote a convincing argument corroborated by the findings of prominent anthropologists and historians such as Arjun Appadurai and C.A. Bayly. They argue that in the eighteenth century, colonial institutions and individuals influenced the colonial ethnographic enterprise of data collection and the classification of Indian communities into tribes, castes and communities (Kamble et al., 2023, 3). The British officials recruited *Brahmins* as principal informants to gauge the Hindu caste order and understand the 'schisms' or attributes of other caste Hindus, tribes and communities living on the peripheries of the hierarchy (3). The Brahmanical cosmology, through codified ancient Sanskrit texts such as *Purusha Sukta* and *Manusmriti*, served as textual

evidence that sustained the ideologies of caste through its religious symbolism and didactic terms. These narratives further created ‘concrete’ tropes about certain tribes, which were then dubbed ‘criminal’ tribes (3). The British maintained that Hinduism and the caste system were the root of the lack of civilisation, yet accepted the codes of the caste social order and created the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 (3). This sectioning of tribes into criminal categories was legitimised through censuses, surveys, and archaeological and ethnographic accounts of the District Gazetteers (Kamble et al. 2023,4). The authors further utilise Bernard Cohn’s work to assess the reasons for relying on existing caste structures, which could be summarised in the following ways- they wished to collect empirical data through imperial surveys and censuses to facilitate an ‘organised’ social classification of Indian society; standardise their growing subject matter on the ethnology of colonised people based on customs, race or descent and customary habits towards the eighteenth century; and legitimising colonial rule as one that oriented and adhered to the conscience of the colonised subject by providing institutional support through laws and codes on specific parts of the community.

One can utilise Mrinalini Sinha’s work on colonial masculinity as an example of how orientalist iconography and narrativisation were created and perpetuated by the British Raj. Sinha’s work offers an exciting insight into the gendered binaries perpetrated by the British Raj in stratified Indian society. The imperial social formation in colonial India was where groups of foreign men ruled over both native men and women. In *Giving Masculinity a History*, Ann Stoler greatly inspires Mrinalini Sinha and, while studying colonial masculinity, applies the historical materialist approach. To study colonialism, one must also study culture and gender. “The cult of manliness” documented in the histories of Victorian and Edwardian Britain was connected with British imperialism through the ideals of Victorian manliness, athleticism and militarism in British and Anglo-Indian schools, translating into accounts of colonial Indian bureaucracy and army. A similar culture was prevalent in princely states and prestigious institutions of India, which were founded for the socialisation of the Indian elite in ‘acceptable manly behaviour’ (Sinha 1998, 3). The British Raj also popularised the colonialist stereotype of effeminacy or inferior men. The colonial gaze attempted to arrange Indian women and men into British masculinity or colonial ideas in which the so-called ‘manly’ people of Punjab and the North-West Frontier (Jat Sikhs and Rajputs) were pitted against effeminate Bengalis or the so-called ‘virile’ Muslims against the effeminate Hindus. This colonial trope of masculinity was not ‘imported’ as common sense would suggest but used as a tool to convince men and women that their political, economic and social suppression was only because of their ‘effeminacy’. This is particularly true when placing it in the context of Calcutta, which was the hub of political and economic affairs of the British Raj (Sinha 1998,3). Aiding the tropes of ‘masculinity’ and ‘effeminacy’, the meaning-making exercise present in colonial historiography also creates sections of race and criminality, with certain sections of society seen as ‘barbaric’ and ‘savage’. In contrast, others are seen as ‘tameable’ or ‘orderly’; ideas further borrowed from an existing hierarchy of untouchability and generational wealth.

Furthermore, the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, which was passed as legislation to label ‘habitual’ criminals such as the *Maghyar Dom* in Bihar, the *Kungurof Khangarin Bundelkhand*, the *Ramoshi* and the *Phardi* (Kamble et al. 2023, 6). The act enforced laws

that dictated adult male members of such communities to the local police weekly as well as the registration, monitoring and control of these ‘criminal tribes’ (6). These laws also permitted the government to force these tribes to seek permission when they decided to move out of their current location, as well as the power to expel the group to a different settlement (6). Scholars approach the study of these laws by utilising the historical and latent context of caste and tribe because these terms began to be used interchangeably in this context (6). Moreover, the British identified Indians not as individuals but as groups marked by caste, which denoted a person’s occupational status. In the case of criminality, the colonial discourse is equally imperative to assuage its impact on legitimising the Hindu scriptures or *shastras* to ascertain crime.

The discourse of misrepresentation

Bernard Cohn (2006) highlights how colonial forms of knowledge utilised investigative modalities to create an epistemological space by transforming the colonial past into history that suited their construction of knowledge (Cohn 2006, 12). This helps contextualise Sleeman’s narrative of the ‘barbaric’ and ‘savage’ *Thugees* as one that sought to codify and define them into a category that would aid the discourse on why India lacks a formal governing body. The underlying motive behind creating such narratives was to further the Company’s interests in garnering more political and military power over the Indians under the assumption of an apparent ‘threat’ that the natives posed to the security of the English citizens. Subsequently, after the English government renewed the Company’s charter, Act XXX or the “Thuggee Act”, was one of the first acts enacted in 1836 (Poovey 2004, 11). This infamous act granted more judicial authority to Company officials like Sleeman, which allowed them to try and convict any individual of the crime of *Thuggee* and provided the promise of ‘greater judicial efficiency’ despite the dubious evidence-gathering tactics, like the reliance on the testimony of a sole convicted accomplice, called an “approver” (Poovey 2004, 11). Another factor that is of immense importance is that most primary sources that constituted oral testimonies and journals were translated into English; there is a possibility that the translations might not have been able to adequately represent the context or establish the authenticity of the accounts as a result of which events that were recorded and published might have been distorted or exaggerated maybe even edited to an extent. The *thuggee* is described as brutal and merciless; however, the veracity of that claim is highly contested, and such a representation is erroneous to an extent as they are hardly backed by empirical evidence. However, it does raise questions on both the subject of enquiry and the role of the researcher or interpreter. Were the *thuggees* a bunch of conniving mobsters? Did the Englishman lack the adequate methodological techniques or the objectivity to procure reliable interviews? How does one approach a study of violence and deceit when it is shrouded in an orientalist gaze and the exploits of imperialism? While approaching the case of the *thuggees*, one must resort to a top-down narrative and instead evaluate the historiography without risking anachronism. A post-colonial analysis of this kind can be achieved when one understands the absence of the ‘agency’ or praxis of the *thuggee*, the disparity in power and authority in relaying their experiences and the specific context of the study (Poovey 2004, 6–7). On the other hand, the print media played a pivotal role in cementing the popular representations of the *thugs*. Most newspapers capitalised on rumours by highlighting the atrocities caused by the *thuggees* as bands of robbers or

thieves that were committing heinous crimes against the British while (Fhlathúin 1987,125)

The Modus Operandi of the ‘Robin Hoods’

The *Thuggees* would meticulously scope out their victims and form a disguise that allowed them to get close to the target. These disguises would involve impersonating wealthy merchants, even Company traders, and sometimes employing a beautiful woman in distress who would draw the victim’s attention and lead to their eventual demise (Thornton 1837,6). As the term *phansigars* suggests, they would most often use a noose from a *roomal*(handkerchief) to strangle their victim and dispose of their body in specific established disposal points like wells, rivers or shallow dug graves temporarily. Post-mortem, the body would either be left to face the brunt of dissatisfied villagers and band members, destroying the body in a way that accelerated decomposition (Thornton 1837, 11). The loot would initially be divided into funds for religious ceremonies and bereaved families. Then, the remaining booty would be divided among the band according to seniority and workload (12). Sleeman describes in his account how these groups acted similarly to East India Company merchants, who negotiated their opportunities, calculated their risks, and almost acted like “free traders”(Poovey 2004, 12). He describes how they organised themselves with a strict set of community laws related to trading operations. Using unique and coded language or dialect allowed them to con the British (Poovey 2004, 13). The former arguments also help us understand how the British negated their ability to organise themselves with tact into a highly organised strategic trading community that sought to sustain themselves through these skill sets, which the British underpinned as they did not consider them at par. The political disruption after the decline of the Mughal empire and the disintegration of indigenous armies led to people seeking alternative means of livelihood, protected and taxed by the zamindars (Wagner 2004, 957).

Conclusion

As one scans the colonial archives, there is a glaring hole that leaves a dent in historical enquiry when concerned with the subject of the *Thuggees*. It reveals racial prejudices and moral judgments and justifies legal ramifications on entire categories of people, as mentioned above, without explicitly decoding the reasons for their persecution aside from their criminal activity. There is a reductionist approach that the colonial scholarship surrounding this subject has avoided; they have failed to locate the systemic reasons that promulgated the *Thuggees* to resort to violence for subsistence or to contribute to the village economy. According to the sources, the reasons have been placed in religious or socio-political reasons, but little has been investigated of the individual ‘voice’ of the *Thuggee*. Ameer Ali in Edward Taylor’s (1916) novel, ‘Confessions of Thugs’, as representation subsumes all the *thuggees* and corrupts the historical narratives to be unidimensional. Those mentioned above can be explored further via phenomenological analyses and debate. To hold a substantive discussion on the majorly absent and misrepresented *Thuggee* in the colonial archive, one must attempt to ascertain their agency and praxis to commit such acts. Mona Gleason’s groundbreaking work attempts to situate the agency of those invisibilised, such as children, in historical scholarship. Inspired by her methodological techniques of empathic inference and structural or

relational analyses, we can ‘imagine’ the complex lives of the bandits and reconstruct their lives by reading ‘against the grain’ the non-traditional sources or alternative historical archives such as diaries or letters. Furthermore, in the context of the paper, it can be argued that the *Thuggees* did not represent social banditry in the ‘Robin Hood scenario’ or the Hobsbawm sense; instead, they were a taxable category which provided a regular source of income, both in the village and state level (Wagner 2004, 958).

The elitist historiography practised in colonial India permits these gaping holes to deter present-day research by eliminating the subaltern subject. Ranajit Guha (1988) underscores the inadequacy of elitist historiography that produces a narrow view of politics because of its class outlook (Guha 1988, 39). He further elucidates how this ‘un-historical historiography’ omits the politics of the people, which he evokes in terms of Indian nationalism but can be broadened to include the politics of the *Thuggee*—the absence of *Thuggee’s* consciousness in the historical archive challenges methodological techniques in historiography. An analogy can be grafted from the peasant’s consciousness, which is exhaustively explored by Guha, with the *Thuggee’s* consciousness just as Guha argues that the historiography of the Revolt of 1857 undermined the peasants as agentic beings who entailed the rebellion but simply as empirical persons of a class (Guha 1988,46). He elucidates how this consciousness is relegated to ‘reflex actions’ or a ‘spur of the moment’ that is further projected to be ‘external’ to the peasant’s consciousness. At the same time, ‘cause’ is seen as a substitute for ‘reason’ (47). Therefore, charting out the ‘consciousness’ or the lived experiences of *thuggees* becomes a task that cannot be achieved by historiography in isolation but must expand to include other multi-disciplinary approaches such as phenomenology or speculation. Gayatri Spivak (1988) also emphatically supports the cause of ‘deconstruction’ and how it enables one to question the ‘authority’ of the investigating subject without paralysing him, persistently transforming questions of impossibility into possibility (Spivak 2018, 9). However, Spivak also suggests that a deconstructive approach would ‘fail’ in the ‘historical sense’ for the multi-faceted subjects one undertakes to study (9). In conclusion, although a post-colonial historical narrative of the *Thuggees* can be assuaged as a radical but subversive narrative as the ‘missing voice’ of the *Thuggee* stalls cohesive and comprehensive historiography.

References

1. R., A. B. 2018. *Annihilation of Caste*. Rupa Publication.
2. Cohn, Bernard S. *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge the British in India*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton Univ. Press, 2006.
3. Gleason, Mona. “Avoiding the Agency Trap: Caveats for Historians of Children, Youth, and Education.” *History of Education* 45, no. 4 (2016): 446–59. <https://doi.org/10.1080/0046760x.2016.1177121>.
4. Fhlathúin, Máire Ní. “The Campaign against Thugs in the Bengal Press of the 1830s.” *Victorian Periodicals Review* 37, no. 2 (2004): 124–40. <https://doi.org/10.2307/20084002>.

5. Kamble, Rahul Ashok, Ritesh Kumar, and Arnab Roy Chowdhury. "‘Ostracized by Law’: The Sociopolitical and Juridical Construction of the ‘Criminal Tribe’ in Colonial India." *History and Anthropology*, April 27, (2023), 1–21. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02757206.2023.2204866>.
6. Macfie, Alexander Lyon. "Thuggee: An Orientalist Construction?" *Rethinking History* 12, no. 3 (September 2008): 383–97. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13642520802193262>.
7. Poovey, Mary. "Ambiguity and Historicism: Interpreting ‘Confessions of a Thug.’" *Narrative* 12, no. 1 (2004): 3–21.
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/20107327>.
8. Sinha, Mrinalini. "Colonial masculinity: The ‘manly Englishman’ and the ‘effeminate Bengali’ in the late nineteenth century." In *Colonial masculinity*. Manchester University Press, 2017.
9. Sleeman, W. H. *The Thugs Or Phansigars of India: Comprising a History of the Rise and Progress*. BiblioBazaar, 2009.
10. Taylor, Philip Meadows, and C. W. Stewart. *Confessions of a Thug*. London: Milford, 1916.
11. Thornton, Edward. *Illustrations of the History and Practices of the Thugs: And Notices of Some of the Proceedings of the Government of India, for the Suppression of the Crime of Thuggee*. London, England: W. H. Allen and Company, 1837.
12. Wagner, Kim A. "The Deconstructed Stranglers: A Reassessment of Thuggee." *Modern Asian Studies* 38, no. 4(2004): 931–63. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3876674>.
13. Guha, Ranajit, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, eds. *Selected subaltern studies*. Oxford University Press, 1988.