

The Travels of M. de Thévenot through the Thug Archive

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From 1828 through to the end of the 1830s, the campaign against thuggee (robbery accompanied by strangling) in India occupied a growing share of the East India Company administration's resources, both financially and in terms of personnel committed to it. It also became the focus of public attention both in India and elsewhere, as the inherently sensational nature of the subject was exacerbated by the narratives which accompanied it. These narratives, products of the Thuggee Department (TD),¹ offered a series of accounts of the genesis of thuggee, the practices of thugs told 'in their own words' (i.e., the recorded and translated depositions of 'approvers' or informers), and the operations carried out against it by the British administration in India. Popular interest in Britain (and the USA) was met by the publication of a series of works on the subject, and it became part of the general knowledge and history of India current during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This public knowledge was the product of a very small 'data pool' of primary information. The works of the TD were its only source, and by far the most influential of these was the first report compiled by W.H. Sleeman, *Ramaseeana* (1836). This was quoted, pirated or simply raided for material by writers of history, literature and biography, both academic and popular. It is the wide circulation of material from one source that accounts for the phenomenon observed by Parama Roy, who notes that the diverse collection of texts produced by these writers, which she designates the thug 'archive', all repeat one another and use the same rhetorical mode; she concludes that there is 'very little significant difference' between them.²

While this description is broadly accurate, the differences between the texts, though small, are not insignificant. They may be categorized in three distinct groups, roughly chronological, corresponding to three phases of the production and dissemination of information about the phenomenon of thuggee. One phase begins with *Ramaseeana*, which was widely copied and imitated in the years immediately following its publication. The second spans approximately the second half of the

¹. This was instituted in 1835, under W.H. Sleeman; however, its work had been carried on within the general remit of the political agent in the Sagar and Narbada Territories and, in the beginning, the resident in Hyderabad since 1828. It became the Thuggee and Dacoity Department in 1839. For convenience, I have referred to the TD throughout.

nineteenth century, during which the work of the TD continued relatively unremarked, and the ‘Indian Mutiny’ and its aftermath replaced thuggee as a focus of public interest in Indian affairs; while the third coincides with the publication of several twentieth-century biographies of Sleeman which concentrate on his work in the TD. Through these three phases, alterations in the manner of accumulation and deployment of information (material which does not itself change) correspond to reformulations of the narrative of the history of thuggee, and the larger history of British India. This process is foregrounded by the sharp change of direction apparent in the later years of this century.

The focus of my analysis is one element of the thug archive, a paragraph from the work of a Frenchman, Jean de Thévenot, whose *Relation d’un voyage fait au Levant* appeared in translation as *The Travels of Monsieur de Thevenot into the Levant* in 1687.³ In one sense, this stands for all the mass of material contained in the archive, as many other motifs and stories were treated in the same way. Thévenot’s account differs from most of the archive in that it contains information that formed, for reasons that will become apparent, a vital part of the narrative history of thuggee. If it is by now a statement of the obvious to say that the gathering and dissemination of information may be a form of control, the force of such a statement was equally well recognized by the officials dealing with thuggee. The acquisition of ‘knowledge’ of the customs, lives, habits and rituals of the various Indian individuals and groups denoted ‘thugs’ at various times allowed the officers of the TD to establish their authority in progressively larger tracts of India (as intelligence of thug operations in more and more provinces was used to argue for a corresponding increase in the number and range of TD personnel).⁴ Such knowledge also enabled them to argue for more resources in legal powers and co-operation from other officials.⁵ Equally importantly, the TD’s equation of their knowledge of thug practices and individual

² P. Roy, *Indian Traffic: Identities in Question in Colonial and Postcolonial India* (Berkeley, 1998), p. 42.

³ Jean de Thévenot, *The Travels of M. de Thevenot into the Levant*, trans. A. Lovell, 3 pts (London, 1687).

⁴ In August 1834, for example, Smith’s report to the Bengal government requesting the extension of TD operations into southern India cites the ‘abundant evidences’ offered by Captain P.A. Reynolds ‘that the Provinces both of the Madras and Bombay territories ... abound in Phansejurs as cruel as rapacious but far more cunning than their brethren of the Deccan’ (Board’s Collection F4/1566/64216, 317-32, India Office Library).

⁵ See Sleeman’s letters of 8 and 10 September 1836, where the discovery of ‘new’ kinds of thugs is cited as the rationale for the changes desired by the TD in the laws regarding the judicial treatment of thugs (India Political Consultations, 26 September 1836, nos 81 and 82, IOL).

criminals, and their ability to defeat them, relieved the ‘information panic’ that C.A. Bayly identifies as the origins of the British encounter with thuggee.⁶ In a broader context, this process was continued throughout the nineteenth century: Sandria Freitag points to the selective organization of material in such works as William Crooke’s *North Indian Notes and Queries*, which presented thugs as ‘ethnographic curiosities’, objects of interest to be studied, and thereby controlled.⁷ Information is the currency in all aspects of British dealings with thuggee.

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At first sight, the information contained in a single quotation from Thévenot’s *Travels* does not appear to offer any great insight into thug practices, especially since it was written more than a hundred years before the commencement of the campaign against thuggee. The extract comes from the chapter treating ‘Of the Province or Town of Dehly, or Gehan-Abad’, and is here reproduced in full, spelling and punctuation as in the original:

Though the Road I have been speaking of be tolerable, yet it hath many inconveniencies [*sic*]. One may meet with Tygres, Panthers and Lions upon it; and one had best also have a care of Robbers, and above all things not to suffer any body to come near one upon the Road. The cunningest Robbers in the World are in that Countrey. They use a certain Slip with a running-noose, which they can cast with so much slight about a Mans Neck, when they are within reach of him, that they never fail; so that they strangle him in a trice. They have another cunning trick also to catch Travellers with: They send out a handsome Woman upon the road, who with her Hair deshevelled, seems to be all in Tears, sighing and complaining of some misfortune which she pretends has befallen her: Now as she takes the same way that the Traveller goes, he easily falls into Conversation with her, and finding her beautiful, offers her his assistance, which she accepts; but he hath no sooner taken her up behind him on Horse-back, but she throws the snare about his Neck and strangles him, or at least stuns him, until the Robbers (who lie hid) come running in to her assistance and compleat what she hath begun. But besides that, there are Men in those quarters so skilful in casting the Snare,

⁶ C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence gathering and social communication in India, 1780-1870* (Cambridge, 1996), p.174.

that they succeed as well at a distance as near at had [*sic*]; and if an Ox or any other Beast belonging to a Caravan run away, as sometimes it happens, they fail not to catch it by the Neck.⁸

While Thévenot's *Travels* retained its interest over the intervening century, this passage went unnoticed until Dr Richard Sherwood wrote an account 'Of the Murderers called Phánsigárs', based on a set of depositions taken by the Magistrate of Chittoor, W.E. Wright, in 1811-16.⁹ Sherwood combined prisoners' evidence, local hearsay and such historical material as he could lay hands on into a story of 'villains as subtle, rapacious, and cruel, as any who are to be met with in the records of human depravity' – a precursor to the same kind of narrative later produced in abundance by the members of the TD. The Thévenot passage is used in the context of a description of the kinds of thugs to be found in different parts of India, and is prefaced by Sherwood's assertion that 'Thevenot, in the following passage, evidently alludes to the *P'hánsigárs* or *T'hegs*'. Sherwood also amended the first line, interpolating 'from *Delhi* to *Agra*' to specify the particular road Thévenot had in mind. His article appeared in the *Madras Literary Gazette* in 1816, and was reprinted in *Asiatic Researches* in 1820.¹⁰ From this point on, the history of the circulation of information on thuggee can be traced, for the most part, through the reproduction and citation of Thévenot's account.

Sherwood's work is tentative compared to later productions: he does not attempt to depict his Phansigars as covering all of India in one organization; and he is willing to consider possible economic or social contexts for their actions, rather than stressing religiously-inspired murder.¹¹ By the time his article entered the thug 'archive' proper, however, negotiations between George Swinton, the chief secretary to the government of India, F.C. Smith, political agent in Sagar and the Narbada Territories, and Sleeman were producing a policy of expansion and centralization of operations against thugs which demanded a commensurate documentation of thug

⁷ S. Freitag, 'Crime in the Social Order of Colonial North India' *Modern Asian Studies* 25.2 (1991), pp. 242-3.

⁸ Thévenot, iii, p. 41.

⁹ See W. H. Sleeman, *Ramaseeana* (Calcutta, 1836), Appendix U.

¹⁰ R. C. Sherwood, 'Of the Murderers Called P'hánsigárs', *Asiatic Researches* 13 (1820), pp. 250-81; Thévenot is quoted on pp. 276-7.

¹¹ Sherwood suggests, for instance, that 'many persons, deprived by the declension of the *Mohammedan* power of their wonted resources, were tempted to resort to criminal courses to obtain a subsistence' (*Ibid.*, p. 271).

practices and origins stressing their ‘special’ nature compared to other criminals. One immediate result was the practice of circulating depositions of prisoners to magistrates and local authorities in the districts where they were captured, in the hope of alerting these to the extent and nature of the problem.¹² This was supplemented from October 1830 by the order to Residents and political agents of the districts at that time thought most affected by thuggee ‘to maintain a frequent correspondence with each other and communicate whatever new information they may acquire respecting [the thugs’] plans, and rendezvous on the return of the season for their annual excursions’.¹³ In response to this, H.S. Graeme, then Resident at Nagpur, suggested that Sherwood’s article, which he apparently remembered from its publication in *Asiatic Researches*, should also be circulated; and Swinton on 17 November 1830 ordered that 30 copies should be lithographed for distribution.¹⁴

This circulated version was the one reprinted by Sleeman in *Ramaseeana*, a compendium including approvers’ narratives, what the title page called a ‘vocabulary of the peculiar language used by the thugs,’ and correspondence relating to the apprehension and trial of various thug gangs. In the process of reproduction, the article underwent several changes: Sherwood’s spelling of ‘*P’hánsigárs*’ and ‘*T’hegs*’ was simplified, capitalization was modernized, and a substantial passage, relating the practice of killing with a noose described by Thévenot to accounts given in texts such as the *Ramayana*, was omitted.¹⁵ As well as reprinting Sherwood’s article, Sleeman was sufficiently impressed by the Thévenot passage to include part of it in his own introduction to the book, where the author is named as ‘Thievenot’, and the quotation cited to Sherwood. Here, it forms part of his link between the Sagartii, ‘a pastoral people of Persian descent’ mentioned by Herodotus, and his own prisoners. Admitting that ‘there is a vast interval of time between the Persian invasion of Greece and the travels of Thievenot, and of space between the seat of Sagartii and that of the ancient capital of India’, Sleeman declares himself ‘still inclined to think’ that Thévenot’s robbers ‘came from some wild tribe and country of the kind’, and furthermore feels

¹². See, for instance, the instructions of George Swinton, chief secretary to the government of India, to Major Stewart, the officiating Resident at Indore, 23 October 1829, *Ramaseeana*, ii, pp. 379-84. It is at this point that he famously designates the thugs as ‘like Pirates, to be placed without the pale of social law’ (380).

¹³. Swinton to G. Wellesley, Resident at Indore, 8 October 1830, in *Selected Records collected from the Central Provinces and Berar Secretariat on the Suppression of Thuggee* (Nagpur, 1939), pp. 8-9.

¹⁴. See Bengal Political Consultations 21 January 1831, nos 29-35, IOL.

¹⁵. Sleeman, *Ramaseeana*, ii, pp. 327-62. The passage omitted covers pages 278-80 in *Asiatic Researches*.

‘no doubt, that from these vagrant bands are descended the seven clans ... who, by the common consent of all Thugs throughout India ... are admitted to be the most ancient, and the great original trunk upon which all the others have ... been grafted.’¹⁶ In this shaky historical edifice, Thévenot’s account was a central plank, and so it remained as the contents of *Ramaseeana* were gradually disseminated.

While *Ramaseeana* was produced at government expense, and most of the print run of 750 were required for distribution to East India Company officials, just over a hundred copies were privately sold in the five years after its publication,¹⁷ and at least one or two made their way to London, where Edward Thornton’s *Illustrations of the History and Practices of the Thugs* appeared in 1837. A reorganization and popularization of the material contained in *Ramaseeana*, the book offers the Thévenot quotation in support of the contention that travellers ‘attest that the practice of Thuggee is not of recent introduction. Thevenot, in the following passage, evidently alludes to it’.¹⁸ The borrowing from *Ramaseeana* is apparent in Thornton’s retention of the misprint (‘misfortunes’ for the female decoy’s ‘misfortune’) introduced in Sleeman’s version.

The same misprint was perpetuated by Charles Trevelyan, reviewing *Ramaseeana* for the *Edinburgh Review* at about the same time. He was mainly concerned to argue that thuggee was proof of the evils of the Hindu religion, and to look forward to the time when English influence, and the ‘gradual infusion of English literature, English science, and English morals into the mass of Indian society’ would redeem India.¹⁹ He also found space, however, to speculate on the origins of thuggee, first quoting Seneca on Egyptian stranglers, and then disingenuously repudiating any intention to ‘trace a supposed emigration of [these stranglers] from the banks of the Nile to the shores of Western India. All we mean to suggest is, that as a system nearly allied to Thuggee prevailed at an early period in a country closely connected with India, it is not improbable that Thuggee itself has an equally remote origin.’ Predictably, he continues with the assertion that ‘Thevenot is the first European

¹⁶. Sleeman, *Ramaseeana*, i, pp. 9-11.

¹⁷. See India Political Consultations 26 July 1841, no. 120, IOL.

¹⁸. E. Thornton, *Illustrations of the History and Practices of the Thugs* (London, 1837), pp.18-19.

¹⁹. C. Trevelyan, ‘The Thugs; or, Secret Murderers of India’, *Edinburgh Review, or Critical Journal* LXIV (1837), pp. 357-95.

author who notices the Thugs', and quotes the familiar account from Sherwood's article, unattributed.²⁰

The following year, the *Foreign Quarterly Review* published another essay on 'The Thugs, or Phansigars.'²¹ This is a review of *Ramaseeana* written with the aim 'to lay before our readers a summary of information' on the subject; it quotes the passage from Sleeman's Introduction, together with most of Sleeman's own commentary on it, rectifying the misspelling of Thévenot's name in the process.²² Finally, in 1839, a pirated version of *Ramaseeana* appeared in America; it opens with a 'History of the Thugs or Phansigars', which is Sherwood's article, complete with the Thévenot passage.²³ By the time Philip Meadows Taylor's *Confessions of a Thug* made the subject of thuggee popular in 1839, readers wishing to pursue their new interest would have found every text pretending to a comprehensive account featuring Thévenot's warnings of the road from Delhi to Agra, home to wild beasts, mounted stranglers and deceitful women with dishevelled hair, and using this to bolster one version or another of the historical progress of thuggee.²⁴

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The appeal of Thévenot's account to writers on thuggee becomes clearer: it can, with a little ingenuity, be fitted into a narrative of thug depredations stretching back into the mists of antiquity – and, more to the point, beyond the British occupation of India. For Sleeman and the TD, this was of use in creating the sense of a difference between thugs and common criminals, thus allowing them to argue for special powers in dealing with them.²⁵ Perhaps by coincidence, *Ramseeana* had just been circulated at the point when Sleeman was soliciting the enactment of the landmark act XXX of

²⁰ Ibid., pp. 369-70.

²¹ 'The Thugs, or Phansigars', *Foreign Quarterly Review* 21 (April 1838), pp. 1-32.

²² Ibid., pp. 2-3.

²³ *The Thugs or Phansigars of India* (Philadelphia, 1839), pp. 45-6.

²⁴ The partial exception is J. Stevenson, 'Some Account of the P'hansigars, or Gang-Robbers, and of the Shúdgarsheids, or Tribe of Jugglers', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 1 (1834), pp. 280-84; this does not quote Thévenot directly, but includes a paragraph on thugs' use of 'a pretty-looking girl' to ensnare travellers, which is in its turn reproduced by W. H. Carey in his compilation of *The Good Old Days of Honorable John Company* (Simla, 1882), p. 86. Stevenson had certainly seen the Sherwood article in *Asiatic Researches*, which he recommends to his readers.

²⁵ See R. Singha, "'Providential' Circumstances: The Thuggee Campaign of the 1830s and Legal Innovation', *Modern Asian Studies* 27.1 (1993), p. 90; also Freitag, 'Crime in the Social Order', p. 243.

1836, making membership of a thug gang punishable by life imprisonment.²⁶ Similarly, Trevelyan's attack on the innate evil of Hinduism is sustainable only by ignoring any possibility that thuggee, like other forms of crime, was related to the social and economic conditions created by the East India Company's operations in India.²⁷ Indeed, such an idea is directly opposed to the 'reformist' tradition that produced the campaign against thuggee: it sits alongside the abolition of *sati* in the history of Lord William Bentinck's administration,²⁸ and its protagonists and historians were keen to stress the disinterested benevolence that motivated them to protect 'the native society of India from an evil which pressed on them so heavily, and on them alone'.²⁹ To adapt Gayatri Spivak's formulation on *sati*, white men were saving brown men from one another.³⁰

Nevertheless, Thévenot's story presented a difficulty to its users – a point underlined by the one notable writer on thuggee who never uses it. Taylor's *Confessions of a Thug* is a work of fiction, but its author based the thug lore it contains, and many of the incidents, on the researches of the TD – his first essay on thuggee, in the best traditions of the field, reproduces vast tracts of the 'Notes on the T'hags' by P.A. Reynolds, an officer seconded to the campaign against thuggee on Taylor's own ground of Hyderabad.³¹ Taylor also makes liberal use of Sleeman's

²⁶. See India Political Consultation 26 September 1836, no 116, IOL. The various acts dealing with thuggee and dacoity in the 1830s and 1840s are reproduced in Sleeman, *Report on Budhuk alias Bagree Decoits and other Gang Robbers by Hereditary Profession* (Calcutta, 1849), pp. 353-7; see also Singha, 'Providential Circumstances', pp. 84-6 for a description of some of the novel features of Act XXX.

²⁷. The argument that 'thuggee' (loosely described as the activities of the various social classes, communities and groups on whom the term 'thug' were imposed) was probably related to changes in East India Company policy in India from the late eighteenth century to the 1830s, and was in any case far from being the tightly-organized hereditary religion suggested by the TD's publications, is generally accepted in modern scholarship. See H. Gupta, 'A Critical Study of the Thugs and their Activities' *Journal of Indian History* 37 (1959), pp.167-77; S. N. Gordon, 'Scarf and Sword: Thugs, Marauders, and State-formation in 18th Century Malwa', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* vi.4 (1969), pp. 403-29; Freitag, 'Crime in the Social Order', pp. 232-5; Singha, 'Providential Circumstances', pp. 95-107.

²⁸. The equation between thuggee and *sati* was made at the outset by George Swinton, who said that the successful defeat of the thugs would be 'a source of no less satisfaction' than the abolition of *sati* (Board's Collection F4/1251/50480 (2), 669-72, IOL).

²⁹. Sleeman, *Ramaseena*, i, 14.

³⁰. 'White men are saving brown women from brown men'. See G.C. Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?', in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke, 1988), pp. 296-7. The essay has been widely reproduced.

³¹. See Philip Meadows Taylor, 'On the Thugs', *New Monthly Magazine* 38 (1833), pp. 277-87; and cf Reynolds's 'Notes on the T'hags', *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 4 (1837), pp. 200-13. Although it was the later published, Reynolds's paper was supposedly 'drawn up' in 1832, from his 'personal observations'; and Taylor's article includes some additional material, such as the footnote on the history of British knowledge of thugs (277-8); among these additions is the first mention of his *Confessions* protagonist Ameer Ali (286).

reports on the subject, including *Ramaseeana*,³² but his protagonist in *Confessions*, Ameer Ali, is disrespectfully skeptical of the picture evoked by Sherwood's description of Thévenot's robbers as thugs. One of his intended victims, a sahoukar, tells him as they travel of the stories he's heard of thugs: 'I have heard too that they have handsome women with them, who pretend distress on the roads, and decoy travellers who may have soft hearts to help them; then they fasten on them, and they have some charm from the Shitan which enables them to keep their hold till their associates come up, despite of all the efforts of the person so ensnared to gain his liberty.' But there's no such episode in the book, and Ameer Ali 'laughed inwardly at the sahoukar's idea of Thugs'³³. His reaction, if it is an expression of Taylor's own views on the subject, is understandable; because Thévenot's account, when read as a description of thugs at work, is not reconcilable to the other 'facts' about thuggee being established by the same writers who so sedulously quoted it.

The approver narratives collected by the officers of the TD reiterate endlessly the procedures and preparations for their murders; these do not include the use of horses, beautiful female decoys with dishevelled hair, or cowboy-style lassos. The question of precisely how victims had died was one on which information was deliberately sought by officials from the beginning, as the method of killing was one of the definitive attributes of thugs. So, Thomas Perry asked his prisoners in 1810 how 'professed Thugs' carried out their murders, and Captain Borthwick's interrogation of Poorun in 1829 elicited the information that he had never seen a cord used rather than a *rumal*, though he professed himself 'well aware of the general supposition that it is by such an implement people are strangled by us'.³⁴ In fact, the only coincidence between Thévenot's account and the descriptions of thugs built up by Sherwood, and later the TD, is the dealing of death by strangulation. This is not to say that the TD versions are more authentic; the confident recitation of thug practices that characterises the work of Sleeman and his associates masks widespread differences and uncertainties in the information they gleaned from approvers. Even the trademark *rumal* as a means of killing does not become established until the circulation of information which accompanied the campaign against thugs tended to

³². See D. Finkelstein, 'A Study of the Works of Philip Meadows Taylor' (PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1990), pp. 56-8.

³³. Philip Meadows Taylor, *Confessions of a Thug*, 1839 (Oxford, 1986), p. 294.

‘fix’ accepted views on their ways in the minds of the officials dealing with them. Before this policy was carried out from 1829 onwards, references to thugs, dacoits, and even ‘rebels’ seem often interchangeable, and thugs are described as employing ‘both the sword and the noose’ to finish off their victims.³⁵ In this sense, the question is one of semantics only: Thévenot’s criminals were not ‘thugs’, because they did not fit the definition of thugs later imposed by the East India Company administration’s attempts to categorise its enemies.³⁶ However, for Sherwood, Sleeman and the writers who followed them, the problem was very real: Thévenot’s value in creating a history of thuggee is undermined by the clear discrepancies between his account, and their other sources of information.

Even the terms ‘phansigar’ or ‘thug’ do not appear in Thévenot’s account, they are supplied by Sherwood in his preface to the quotation; and their appropriateness to Thévenot’s ‘robbers’ is taken for granted by every other writer following him. But doing so, they (or the more conscientious among them) also had to account for this discrepancy. Sherwood, who introduces the passage (like so many other motifs) to the thug archive, finds himself qualifying it even in anticipation of its iteration, by denying the applicability of his description to contemporary circumstances:

It is not improbable that formerly a long string, with a running noose, might have been used by *P’hánsigárs* for seizing travellers, and that they robbed on horseback. But, be this as it may, a noose is now, I believe, never thrown by them from a distance, in this part of *India* [Madras]. They sometimes use a short rope, with a loop at one end; but a turban or a *dot’hi*, (a long narrow cloth, or such worn about the waist,) are more commonly employed; these serve the purpose as effectually as a regularly

³⁴. See the Thomas Perry papers, Add Mss 5375, Cambridge University Library; and Borthwick’s proceedings in Sleeman, *Ramaseeana*, ii, 416. The latter is drawn on in the description of thugs in J. H. Stocqueler, *The Oriental Interpreter* (London, 1848), pp. 228-30.

³⁵. G. Wellesley, Resident at Indore, to J. Stewart, acting Resident at Gwalior, 25 June 1819, in Board’s Collection F/4/774/20972, 6-7, IOL. N. J. Halhed, stationed in the Western Provinces in 1812, described his encounters with large bodies of thugs/rebels, some of whom, he writes, tried to kill him using poisoned milk (F/4/389/9872). Even the later records contain traces of such discrepancies, as when Sleeman’s account of Sheik Inaent’s crimes tells of a victim stabbed ‘with knives and swords’ rather than strangled. *Report on the Depredations committed by the Thug Gangs of Upper and Central India* (Calcutta, 1840), p. 74.

³⁶. C. A. Bayly correctly locates the beginning of this process in Etawah, in the reporting of the magistrate Thomas Perry of his dealings with ‘thug’ prisoners (*Empire and Information*, pp. 174-5), but the categorisation of thuggee across India, and the endorsement and widespread circulation by government of the defining approver narratives, happened gradually during the 1830s.

prepared noose, with this advantage, that they do not tend to excite suspicion.³⁷

Sleeman does not comment on this particular problem, but the story of the female decoy clearly did not fit his picture of thuggee, and he omitted it from the quotation while writing his introduction to *Ramaseeana*. When reprinting Sherwood's article, he adopts a different strategy. Rather than omit the piece that does not fit, he turns it to his advantage by adding a footnote: 'This may have been the case in the sixteenth century [*sic*], but is so no where now I believe. The Thugs who reside in fixed habitations and intermarry with other people, never allow their women to accompany them or take any part in their murders. The only exception to this rule that I am aware of is the wife of Bukhtawur Jemadar of Jypore, after whom we have long been searching in vain.'³⁸ This note, like the many others Sleeman places throughout *Ramaseeana*, serves the purpose of establishing himself as the supreme authority upon the subject. Upstaging both Thévenot and Sherwood, he lays down the rule of thug conduct (establishing his bona fides with the obligatory exception), and reminds the reader of the scope of his knowledge, and the broad stage occupied by his Thuggee Department. The discrepancy between Thévenot's account and his own is never allowed to threaten the inclusion of these seventeenth-century robbers in the history of thuggee; instead, it becomes an irrelevance – whether or not it was true then, Sleeman is in indisputed possession of the facts as they stand in the present.

Others followed his lead, sometimes to the extent of perpetuating his placing of 1687 in the sixteenth century. The *Foreign Quarterly Review* article, while reproducing Sleeman's thoughts on the subject, adds its own surmise: 'The people mentioned both by Herodotus and Thevenot must have been very different from the present race of Thugs, and more resembling the Guachos [*sic*] with their lassos in South America...'³⁹ Trevelyan dismisses all discrepancies, paraphrasing Sleeman with insouciance: 'This may have been all true in the sixteenth century; but if so, a considerable change has since taken place in the habits of the order. The sash has been substituted for the noose, as being less open to detection; and the Thugs who have settled habitations, seldom permit their wives to accompany them on their expeditions.' He even manages to fit this change into an unconscious parody of the

³⁷. Sherwood, *Asiatic Researches*, p. 257.

³⁸. Sleeman, *Ramaseeana*, ii, p. 359.

³⁹. 'The Thugs, or Phansigars', p. 3.

nineteenth-century ideal of ‘progress’: ‘The substitution of a more secret method of strangling for the lasso, is what might have been expected in the progress of improvement.’⁴⁰ When Kaye wrote his own history on this theme, *The Administration of the East India Company: A History of Indian Progress* (1853), his presentation of the inevitable quotation indicates how far this approach had become the standard: ‘Thevenot, who travelled in India in the seventeenth century, has given an account of the Thugs, from which it appears that in those days they employed female decoys’ – by now, Thévenot is an accepted part of the history of thuggee, his cunning robbers are assumed without question to be thugs, and discrepancies are merely a matter of the change, or even progress, associated with the passage of time.

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Though the 1857 ‘Indian Mutiny’ provided new material, and in many ways a new outlook, for British commentators on India, this does not appear to have affected the pattern of narrative treatment of thuggee, except insofar as it was naturally relegated to a minor role compared to more recent events. The basic story described above, accompanied by the reproduction of Thévenot’s account, continues throughout the second and third phases outlined at the beginning of this paper; it would be tedious to trace the process of reproduction in detail. Like Kaye, other commentators in the second half of the nineteenth century (often aware of Sleeman’s increasingly triumphalist series of reports on his department’s dealings with thugs and dacoits⁴¹), are no longer concerned to establish the antiquity of thuggee; this has become an unquestioned fact. The invocation of Thévenot is used, at this point, as a familiar part of an old theme, the omission of which would indicate an oversight by the writer.

Often accompanied by a repetition of Sleeman’s gnomic statement that there is ‘reason to believe’ in a link between wandering peoples of history and contemporary thugs, Thévenot’s travels appear in texts as diverse as James Hutton’s *Popular Account of the Thugs and Dacoits*; Major-General Lake’s biography of Donald McLeod, once assistant to Sleeman in the TD and later Lt-Gov of the Punjab; Vincent Smith’s appendix to Sleeman’s *Rambles and Recollections*, where it forms part of his evidence for a contention that thuggee ‘existed continuously on a large scale...for

⁴⁰. Trevelyan, ‘Secret Murderers’, p. 370.

more than 5 centuries'; and the *Quarterly Review*'s 1901 account of 'A Religion of Murder'.⁴² By this time, the 'fact' of Thévenot's encounter with thugs has become so well integrated into the narrative that his name is no longer required: 'The system of Thuggee was found in India, by an adventurous European traveller, so early as the seventeenth century; but its previous history is unknown.'⁴³ He and the thugs are enduringly connected, and no incongruity will divide them: Reinhold Rost's entry on thugs in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* (11th edn) cites Thévenot as among the first European travellers to refer to thugs 'without mentioning their names'. Such unproblematic references continue to the present day, no doubt encouraged by the appearance of thug characters in several films, and the availability of the biographies discussed in the next section: the most recent, to my knowledge, is by Paul Elliott, who introduces his chapter on 'The Thugs – India's Dark Angels' by remarking that the earliest writer to mention thugs was 'a Frenchman named Thevenot' who wrote that 'the most cunning robbers in the world could be found on the road from Delhi to Agra...'.⁴⁴

* * *

In the twentieth century, *Ramaseeana* was revisited, together with the other nineteenth-century materials on thuggee, by the writers of a series of biographies of W.H. Sleeman. In terms of content, and of methodology, these do not vary significantly from the nineteenth-century accounts (though the content of George Bruce's work includes the results of his research in the unpublished papers of the East India Company, the format and focus conform to earlier models⁴⁵) – indeed, A.J. Wightman's reproduction of Thévenot is as faithful to its source in *Ramaseeana* as any of the nineteenth-century imitations, drawing on Sleeman's commentary even as

⁴¹. *Ramaseeana* was followed by *A Report on the System of Megpunnaism* (Serampore, 1839), the *Report on the Depredations committed by Thug Gangs* (1840), and the *Report on Budhuk Decoits* (1849).

⁴². J. Hutton, *A Popular Account of the Thugs and Dacoits, the Hereditary Garotters and Gang-Robbers of India* (London, 1857); E. Lake, *Sir Donald McLeod: A Record of Forty-Two Years' Service in India* (London, [1873]); V. A. Smith, 'Appendix' to *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official* by W. H. Sleeman (1844), rev. & ann. edn. (London: Oxford UP, 1915); 'A Religion of Murder', *Quarterly Review* 194 (1901), pp. 506-19.

⁴³. 'A Religion of Murder', p. 512.

⁴⁴. P. Elliott, *Warrior Cults: A History of Magical, Mystical and Murderous Organizations* (London, 1995), p. 116.

⁴⁵. G. Bruce: *The Stranglers: The Cult of Thuggee and its Overthrow in British India* (London, 1968); this is strictly speaking a history of thuggee, but shares with the biographies a narrative focus on the exploits of Sleeman.

far as placing Thévenot in the sixteenth century, and remarking that ‘there must have been some change in the organization’ since that time.⁴⁶ They exacerbate, however, a tendency already present in these earlier accounts: the placing of Sleeman’s work, and his knowledge, at the centre of the campaign against thuggee, sometimes to the exclusion of any mention of the contributions of others.⁴⁷ The appearance of Thévenot’s travels in these texts follows this trend, generally forming part of a narrative of Sleeman’s inevitable and inexorable eradication of his thug enemies. Wightman’s chapter on the origins of thuggee, cited above, ends with the climactic appearance of ‘the notorious approver, Feringhia’, who tells Sleeman all the thugs’ secrets.

James Sleeman set this trend in his biography of his grandfather. His account of the ‘Origins and Customs of Thuggee’ locates the quotation in the customary litany of thug antiquity, alongside the description of the pastoral Sagartii, the history of Firoz Shah, and the reign of Akbar. The historical summary is then revealed as the overture to James Sleeman’s main theme: despite these ‘unsystematic and spasmodic efforts’ to bring thuggee to light, its real nature was unknown until Sleeman’s industry discovered it. The structure of James Sleeman’s work underpins this explicit statement: Thévenot’s ingenuous narrative of ‘the cunningest robbers in the world’ is closely followed by another extract from *Ramaseeana*, a dialogue between Sleeman and some of his prisoners where he questions, and they supply him with the most authentic material possible: personal testimony. The subject of their discussion is the supposed depiction of thug activities on the walls of the Ellora cave, for which there is no evidence (as Vincent Smith points out in the note which forms the immediate source for some of James Sleeman’s information); but as this is not mentioned, the impression of Sleeman’s omniscience, and control, is sustained.⁴⁸

In James Sleeman’s work, Thévenot is cited separately from the Sherwood article, following the nineteenth-century trend whereby it has its own place in the archive, apart from its original source. This strategy is carried to its logical conclusion by Francis Taker in his biography, where the chronology of the introduction of Thévenot into the thug archive is reversed. In his narrative, Thévenot’s *Travels* is rescued by Sleeman from its dormant and moth-eaten state in the Fort William library,

⁴⁶. A. J. Wightman, *No Friend for Travellers* (London, 1959), p. 16.

⁴⁷. I am writing on this topic elsewhere.

sometime between 1810 and 1813, where it becomes the source of his interest in thuggee; this is later intensified by his equally fortuitous discovery of Sherwood's article 'among some old books' in the Collector's office in Allahabad.⁴⁹ Surpassing its longstanding status as a brick in the edifice of thug antiquity (whose cobbled-together shakiness is now concealed by the authoritative patina of citation in many histories), Thévenot's account becomes, in a sense, the founding text of the thug archive: the work which starts the entire campaign. And the credit of discovering this key text is transferred from Sherwood to Sleeman, the key figure. *The Stranglers*, by George Bruce, contains a corresponding, though less extreme, rhetorical inversion, where Sherwood's article in total, rather than Thévenot's account alone, becomes the key text: Bruce's reproduction of the main substance of the article is followed by his idea of probable civilian and military reaction to it: indifference or boredom. Sleeman, by contrast, is supposed to have 'understood its meaning', and in consequence dedicated his life to the campaign against the thugs.⁵⁰ Just as the writers on thuggee had long ignored the absence of any thugs in Thévenot's work, so both Tukes and Bruce ignore the fact that Sleeman nowhere cites Thévenot other than in Sherwood's version of the quotation (though he refers to the work later in his career for information on Christians in Agra⁵¹); there is no evidence that he knew of either Thévenot's *Travels* or Sherwood's article before the latter was circulated by government order in 1830, well after the thug campaign had started.⁵²

* * *

Although the latest of these biographies was written in 1972, they often appear, in style as well as in content, to be looking back to the nineteenth century. Nostalgia for Empire permeates them, as does an unquestioning belief in the good intentions, and good results, of the operations of the British in India; they end on Sleeman's death on the way home from the country he had 'served so well'.⁵³ The narrative they contain is essentially the same story of 'progress' put forward by Kaye or by Thornton, a

⁴⁸ J. L. Sleeman, *Thug:, or, A Million Murders* (London, [1933]), pp. 19-22. Cf Smith, 'Appendix' in Sleeman, *Rambles and Recollections*, pp. 652-3.

⁴⁹ F. Tukes, *The Yellow Scarf* (London, 1961), pp. 14-15, 29.

⁵⁰ Bruce, *Stranglers*, pp. 25-7.

⁵¹ Sleeman, *Rambles and Recollections*, pp. 11-12, 335.

⁵² Sherwood's article in *Asiatic Researches* is immediately followed by John Shakespeare's 'Observations regarding Badheks and T'hegs' (pp. 282-92), equally as relevant to Sleeman's topic but not included in *Ramaseeana*; this again suggests that Sleeman had not seen the *Asiatic Researches* issue, and had no acquaintance with Sherwood's work before its 1830 circulation.

⁵³ Bruce, *Stranglers*, p. 218.

‘master-narrative’ of history which is no longer the dominant mode, at least in the area of postcolonial studies, where the metaphors of ‘writing back’ and of the ‘marginal’ are the favoured vehicles for thought. Far from subscribing to the versions of thug history offered by Sherwood or Sleeman, Amal Chatterjee produces what is in effect a counter-narrative, a mirror image of the original, where the popular works of the archive are drawn upon in order to class thuggee as the invention of ‘three men alone’ (Sleeman, Thornton and Taylor).⁵⁴ At this extreme, all the information produced during the British administration of India is consigned to what Aijaz Ahmad has termed the ‘realm of pure untruth’⁵⁵ – but the building-blocks of this realm are still the motifs of the thug archive. Kathleen Gough, characterizing thugs as ‘social bandits’ and locating them within a long series of Indian peasant insurrections, dates their first occurrence to ‘about 1650 in the area between Delhi and Agra’.⁵⁶ No precise authority is cited for the statement, but the phrase contains the ghost of Thévenot’s account, mediated as usual by Sherwood. Radhika Singha, in her perceptive re-examination of the records relating to thuggee, directs the reader to ‘Sleeman’s citation of Thievenot’s *Travels*’ [*sic*], thus making a point about the constructed history of thuggee while perpetuating the kind of distortion of elements characteristic of that history.⁵⁷

Thévenot’s account no longer figures in scholarly discussions of thuggee (the brief mention by Singha is the only example known to me), for the valid reason that contemporary scholarship focuses on the local, political and social contexts for criminal activity in nineteenth-century India, rather than accepting an apocryphal tradition. But while this tradition may have had nothing to do with the incidence of murder and robbery on the roads of India, it is inextricably connected to the contemporary and later reading of such acts of violence, whether these readings follow an ‘imperialist’ narrative of progress or question it.⁵⁸ And, as is evident in Gough’s article on social bandits, any attempt to re-examine the records of British

⁵⁴. A. Chatterjee, *Representations of India, 1740-1840: The Creation of India in the Colonial Imagination* (Basingstoke, 1998), p. 126.

⁵⁵. A. Ahmad, ‘Between Orientalism and Historicism: Anthropological Knowledge of India’, *Studies in History* 7.1 (1991), p. 150.

⁵⁶. K. Gough, ‘Indian Peasant Uprisings’, in *Peasant Struggles in India*, ed. A.R. Desai (Bombay, 1979), pp. 103, 104.

⁵⁷. Singha, ‘Providential Circumstances’, p. 100.

⁵⁸. Singha, for instance, examines prisoners’ depositions for ‘points of distinction’ between their own views of themselves and their activities and those of the recording officials; this allows her to question

India from a new perspective is still influenced by the deliberate or unconscious decisions made by those who created and collected them. A study of the phenomenon of thuggee must therefore include not only an examination of the elements of the thug archive, but also the interaction of these elements in the formation of the archive itself. Thévenot's account has accumulated layer upon layer of significance since its genesis on the road in the province of Delhi, where there are robbers, but no thugs, because thugs have not yet been invented.