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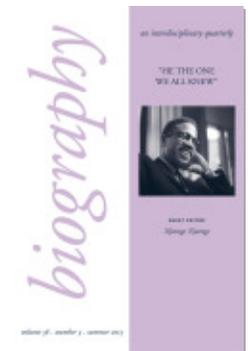
Thugs and Bandits: Life and Law in Colonial and Epicolonial India

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THUGS AND BANDITS: LIFE AND LAW IN COLONIAL AND EPICOLONIAL INDIA

S. SHANKAR

The conjunction of life narratives and discourses of law-and-order is well illustrated in colonial thuggee (identified by the British as the practice of ritual murder and highway robbery) and postcolonial banditry. As histories and cultural studies (including my own *Textual Traffic*) have argued, nineteenth-century British colonialist discourse constructed (or, better, invented) Thugs as ritual killers in the interest of the elaboration of a law-and-order state. However, little attention has been paid to the reliance on life narratives in this discourse, beginning with the recording of the lives of Thugs in alleged informant testimonies in the 1820s by British administrators such as William Henry Sleeman (1788–1856). Subsequently, nonfictional book-length accounts, especially Sleeman's autobiography in 1844, similarly drew heavily on sensationalist purported life-accounts of Thugs. In postcolonial India, these renderings of thuggee are echoed in the discourse around dacoits (bandits).¹ Here too life narratives play a prominent role, as easily evident in the spectacular career of the most famous of these dacoits, the “Bandit Queen” Phoolan Devi (1963–2001).

In this essay, I scrutinize the reliance on life narrative genres such as witness accounts, judicial proceedings, approvers' (informants') testimonies, biographies, memoirs, and autobiographies in the construction of thuggee and the public Phoolan Devi persona. I include references to fictional print and cinematic accounts of thuggee to demonstrate the extraordinary tenacity of narrative elements first established in the life accounts. My interest is in recognizing influential themes relating to notions of law and the state in thuggee—themes that I show in the penultimate section to have similarities as well as differences with the postcolonial discourse on Phoolan Devi. While postcolonial narratives are generally more conflicted, they too provide opportunities to figure the state's subjection of marginalized identities

(often lower-caste). I conclude by sketching the ways in which life narratives, because of their appeal to authenticity and lived truths, play a crucial role in both advocating for and criticizing a law-and-order state under colonial as well as what I refer to as epicolonial conditions. As I argue in detail below, I employ the neologism *epicolonialism* to convey the persistence within postcolonial social formations of colonial structures which often lie dormant until activation under the right circumstances. While the postcolonial phenomena I gather under the rubric *epicolonialism* have certainly been previously recognized in criticism, I suggest that the neologism offers a way to further sharpen distinctions worth making *among* postcolonial phenomena, and thus produce an ever more adequate account of the postcolonial. The life narratives generated around Phoolan Devi are potent cultural texts for the exploration of the notion of epicolonialism.

Writing of the difference between life narratives and novels, Sidonie Smith and Julia Watson note, “they [life narratives] are distinguished by their relationship to and claims about a referential world. We might helpfully think of what fiction represents as ‘a world,’ and what life writing refers to as ‘the world’” (10); they go on to note, “Unlike novelists, life narrators have to anchor their narratives in the world of their own temporal, geographical and cultural milieu” (11–12). Not all the life narratives I consider below are autobiographical in the way Smith and Watson mean the term; nevertheless, a similarly anchored referentiality may be said to mark all of them, indeed all life narratives. It is this referentiality that is at issue in the discourses of and about law-and-order reviewed below.

HORRIBLE PROFESSION

A commonly used word, *thug* means, the *OED* informs us, a “cutthroat, ruffian, rough.” It is a word with common associations of criminality, violence, and loutishness. But before *thug* descended to the banality of signifying soccer hooligans, it had a more adventurous history originating in nineteenth-century colonial India, in a discourse inaugurated by an East India Company official named William Henry Sleeman. The discourse on Thugs, like the discourse on sati with which its origins are roughly contemporaneous, played a key role in defining the shape of British power in colonial India.² As the *OED* indicates, *thug* entered the English language in India in the early nineteenth century from Hindi, where the word meant “a cheat, swindler.” The *OED* also gives a meaning for the word rarely known to the general reader. In the *OED*, the entry after *thug* is for the related word *thuggee*, whose meaning is given as “[t]he system of robbery and murder practiced by the Thugs.”

“With capital T,” the *OED* notes, the word indicates “[o]ne of an association of professional robbers and murderers in India, who strangled their victims; a p’hansigar.” *Thuggee* and *thug* entered the English language, then, as identifications respectively of a monstrous and criminal “system” and of those who were members of it. Such are the uncommon origins of a common word—one that contains, as we shall see, a fascinating colonial history.

Beginning with William Henry Sleeman and his accounts of thuggee, a varied discourse on Thugs was generated through a range first of life and then other kinds of narratives. The discourse’s depth in time (colonial as well as after) as well as its breadth in influence (demonstrated by the generic heterogeneity of the texts) is discernible here. In my book *Textual Traffic*, I examined how the Steven Spielberg film *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* makes clever use of the forgotten history of Thugs. There, I explored how the colonial relationship between power and discourse is updated after the supposed dismantling of colonialism, whereas here I analyze the discourse on thuggee to show the crucial role played by life narratives in the elaboration of this discourse.

Thuggee, then, is the name given to the activities of certain robbers called Thugs. William Henry Sleeman, who arrived in India as a cadet of the Bengal army in 1809 and spent forty-seven years in various official capacities under the East India Company government, is credited with suppressing the activities of these robbers. However, as we will see, growing doubt exists that thuggee, defined as a specific, ritualized, and gruesome form of criminal activity—ritual and gruesomeness are not indicated in the *OED* definition provided above but were commonly asserted by British observers—ever existed. From a skeptical perspective, thuggee refers not to a criminal practice but to a discursive colonialist construction of criminal behavior in nineteenth-century India.

A comparison of the *OED* entry for *thug* with the entry in *Bhargava’s Hindi-English Dictionary* for ठग, the root Hindi/Hindustani word from which the English word is derived, supports such skepticism. *Bhargava’s* defines the word (pronunciation is closer to *tug* than *thug*) in the following way: “a cut-throat, cheat, pilferer, a robber, a trickster, a sharper, a pick pocket, a swindler, a cunning fellow; - ठगना to be infested by Thugs in a journey.” Thus, late in the entry, *Thug* does make an appearance, but only in an indirect manner that may itself bear the marks of a usage introduced by the British colonial authorities. The salient point is that as late as the 1961 edition of *Bhargava’s*, the word in Hindi/Hindustani does not reflect in a more direct way the specialized meaning of *Thug* recorded by the *OED*. In fact, in the sixteen entries in *Bhargava’s* for ठग and related words, neither murder (ritual or otherwise)

nor thuggee as a system makes any appearance. For ठगगी (thuggee), we find only the following: “cheating, trickery, swindling, larceny.” How is it that the Hindi language offers no direct record of a meaning of such importance to British colonialism in India, a meaning that British observers claim to have uncovered (that is, not invented)? In this peculiar discrepancy between English and Hindi, we can already find evidence for the growing doubts about British accounts of thuggee.³

Sleeman’s “suppression” of thuggee is generally accepted, in biographies and histories, to have been accomplished between the mid 1820s and the early 1840s. One well-known biography is Sir Francis Tukur’s *The Yellow Scarf*. The chief details as they appear in the biography are as follows. William Henry Sleeman is a man obsessed by thuggee. He develops an uncommon interest in it that possesses him from the moment he comes across a passing reference to what he will later label thuggee while reading the account of a French traveler in India named Thevenot (14–15).⁴ From this moment, Sleeman looks for information about these murderous criminals wherever he can find it. A key moment—“which was to change the whole tenor of his life”—in Sleeman’s obsessive quest is his gleeful discovery of Dr. Richard C. Sherwood’s account of “Phansigars” (or Thugs) “among some old books” in Allahabad (*Yellow Scarf* 29). Sleeman’s friends treat his obsession with amusement. Nevertheless, he continues his unflagging pursuit of thuggee and, finally, begins to uncover instances and evidence of such a practice in Central India. At last Sleeman is vindicated—the horrifying reality of India is made clear. In 1826, Sleeman “was given the chief responsibility for tracking down and bringing to justice all thugs over a wide region” (*Yellow Scarf* 60). In 1835, Sleeman was made “General Superintendent for the Suppression of Thuggee” with an extensive all-India organization under his command (88).

In the colonialist accounts of thuggee (and accounts derivative of them), Sleeman is a heroic figure. He is commonly credited with almost single-handedly eradicating the practice. William Henry Sleeman’s grandson Captain J. L. Sleeman, who wrote on his grandfather’s exploits as the foe of thuggee and who was himself an India official, asserted in a note appended to the 1915 edition of Sleeman’s autobiography *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official*: “Within seven years of his first commencing the suppression of Thuggee it had practically ceased to exist as a religion; and he had the privilege of seeing it entirely suppressed as such before giving up this work for the Residency at Lucknow.” So closely is the name of Sleeman linked with the suppression of thuggee that Tukur says “[h]is success earned him the sobriquet of ‘Thuggee’” (xi). Through his success, not only was the world of thuggee

invented, but it was subsequently ironically reduced to an appendage of Sleeman's personal identity.

The details of the history of thuggee and its suppression by Thuggee Sleeman have been told and retold in a number of life writing texts since the beginning of the nineteenth century. The central works in the construction of this history are those written or edited by Sleeman himself during the 1830s. *The Thugs or Phansigars of India*, published in 1839, gathered together the most important of this material in two volumes, which are ascribed to Sleeman but also include Sherwood's account of the Phansigars, written in 1816, much before Sleeman's actions against the Thugs.⁵ Sherwood's treatment of the Phansigars or Thugs, though it presents in preliminary form some of the features of Sleeman's discourse on thuggee, focuses on the Phansigars as simply robbers. It is Sleeman who, through numerous footnotes, firmly locates Sherwood within the discourse on thuggee that he inaugurates (see, for example, 1: 17n, 44n, 47n). In Sleeman's editorial gesture we find further evidence for Stewart Gordon's claim that thuggee is virtually the invention of an ambitious colonial officer (413). The textual nature of Sleeman's original engagement with thuggee as it emerges in Tucker's biography—as encounters with a series of documents, leading up to the discovery of allegedly actual instances in Central India—supports Gordon's claim. The discursive reality of thuggee precedes its existential "reality" and predetermines what Sleeman "discovers" in Central India.

British observers of the growing empire in India found thuggee and its alleged suppression a compelling subject. Edward Thornton's *Illustrations of the History and Practice of the Thugs*, an influential summary of thuggee published in 1837, offers a straightforward, "factual" narrative that draws heavily upon Sleeman's own texts. It posits itself as a convenient documentation of the lives of Thugs, the history and practice of thuggee, and its alleged suppression by Sleeman. Philip Meadows Taylor's 1839 *Confessions of a Thug*, perhaps the most popularly consumed account, on the other hand, is a novel. But even here the centrality of life narratives in the construction of thuggee is evident. The novel purports to be based on the experiences and exploits of a "real Thug," Ameer Ali. Meadows Taylor writes, "The tale of crime which forms the subject of the following pages is, alas! almost all true. What there is of fiction has been supplied only to connect the events, and make the adventures of Ameer Ali as interesting as the nature of his horrible profession would permit me" (ix).⁶ By the mid-1850s, the Thugs had made their sensational entrance into *The Home Friend*, put out by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, unsurprisingly to underscore the heathen brutality of India ("Thugs"). I have already mentioned other works,

written or cinematic, from later in the nineteenth century or the twentieth. As recently as 2005, Mike Dash's *Thug: The True Story of India's Murderous Cult* reproduces the racist clichés of nearly two centuries of commentary on thuggee, albeit with nominal concessions to the considerable scholarship that now exists contesting this discourse. Most importantly for my purposes, the life narratives at the center of this discourse do not just take the factuality of thuggee and its suppression for granted but, because of the nature of the claim on reality that life narratives make, play an inordinately important role in establishing this factuality. Following recent exemplary scholarship regarding thuggee, the status of this alleged factuality is what I wish to place under scrutiny.

The practice of thuggee that these texts chronicle (in narratives claiming the status of "fact") is above all presented as religious murder. Their discourse defines thuggee as the ritualized murder of travelers for the propitiation of Kali, the tutelary deity of the Thugs. The originary myth of thuggee is as follows: Once upon a time there was a demon Rakta-bija-dana, who terrorized the earth. The goddess Kali took form to destroy Rakta-bija-dana and rid the earth of this evil. However, Kali found that every time she cut the demon with her sword, more demons sprang up from the drops of blood that fell to the ground. Soon the battlefield filled with innumerable demons and Kali had to stop in exhaustion. To circumvent this problem of proliferating demons, Kali created two men from the beads of her sweat, gave them each a handkerchief, and bade them kill the demons by strangulation so that no blood was spilt. When this mission was accomplished and the men came to return their handkerchiefs to Kali, the goddess told them to keep them and use them to practice their profession. These men were the ancestors of Thugs. The murder of human beings in thuggee was therefore, according to this myth, enjoined by divine authority, and the acquisition of plunder was only incidental. The victims were sacrifices to Kali.

This story of the divine origin of thuggee is repeated in virtually every colonialist text on the subject after Sleeman, who receives the story from his Thug informers (2: 99–100).⁷ Significantly, in his account of Phansigars written before Sleeman, Sherwood remarks that "Cali or Marriatta . . . is regarded as their [Phansigars'] tutelary deity," but makes no mention of the originary myth of thuggee as it appears in the tale of Kali's battle with Rakta-bija-dana (1: 26). Only after Sleeman does the myth itself become a consistent feature of thuggee accounts.

The practice of thuggee as portrayed in these texts involved the departure of various gangs after the festival of Dussehra (around October) on annual expeditions of murder and robbery. The texts describe these gangs, which

contained both Muslim and Hindu members, as befriending travelers on the roads and then, at a convenient spot, murdering them, using handkerchiefs. The travelers were buried in prepared graves, their stomachs ripped open (to keep their bodies from inflating and bursting out of the shallow graves), and their property removed. The Thugs then continued on their way until they fell in with more potential victims. After an expedition typically lasting many months, each Thug gang returned to the area from which it set out, the spoils were divided, and the individual Thugs disappeared into their villages to resume the alternative lives that they lived as farmers, craftsmen, and professionals of other, more conventional, trades. The Thug gangs took care never to kill near the places from which they set out, so they could return unsuspected to the lives that they lived most of the year. Such, in summary, are some of the important features of thuggee as they have circulated in colonialist British accounts.



"A Traveller being Strangled by Thugs." Victoria and Albert Museum. Mid-nineteenth century; plaster, moulded and painted; artist unknown. © Victoria and Albert Museum, London.

THE “SIMPLE FACT” REGARDING THUGGEE

In the conclusion to his essay on thuggee entitled “Scarf and Sword: Thugs, Marauders and State Formation in 18th Century Malwa,” Stewart Gordon notes that “[w]e cannot and will not know the nature of the ‘Thugs’ or any other marauding group until we return them to a historical and geographic setting, and view them in the context of the ongoing structure and processes of power” (429). He questions whether thuggee existed as anything like “a national fraternity of murderers” (429). He points out that Thugs were predominantly found in Malwa—that is, Central India (415). Noting the extreme social dislocation in this area following the collapse of Maratha power at the beginning of the nineteenth century (especially after the British defeat of the Marathas in 1803), Gordon describes at length the social conditions in Central India at that time, and makes a convincing case for Thugs as “locally-organized, small-scale marauding groups” emerging out of social dislocation, rather than “a hideous widespread religious conspiracy, somehow typical of India and Indian national character” (429).⁸ Gordon also argues that “the unsupported theories generated by the Thagi and Dacoity Department,” established by the ambitious officer William Sleeman, were responsible for this transformation of local marauding groups into an all-India organization (413). Noting that “[t]he only distinctive and *unique* features” he found in all Thug groups are the use of a scarf or handkerchief and the eating of gur, Gordon concludes that “[a] sticky bowl of sugar and limp yellow scarf are slim evidence indeed for calling ‘Thugs’ a ‘trade union’ or a ‘fraternity of murderers’” (414–15, italics in original).⁹

Building on Gordon’s arguments, Radhika Singha in “‘Providential’ Circumstances: The Thuggee Campaign of the 1830s and Legal Innovation” demonstrates at length how the “suppression” of thuggee and the accounts of it that were produced at the time were closely linked to administrative debates regarding legal reforms and the expansion of “a centralized police bureaucracy” (146). She suggests that the development of British policy regarding thuggee reveals the tensions and contrary pulls arising from different conceptions of law and policing in a colonial setting.

Further analysis of thuggee in relationship to the social conditions in the area in which it is said to have been discovered in the nineteenth century is provided by Iftikhar Ahmad, whose analysis leads him to conclude that “representations of social reality—and the ‘facts’ and ‘texts’ customarily used as the basis of these representations—are constantly created and recreated, indeed manufactured, to serve the interests of state power” (160). But since he does not pursue the implications of this insight much further, he neither analyzes in great detail the specific characteristics of thuggee as presented in

this discourse, nor questions the idea put forth by writers like Sleeman that thuggee existed in India before the advent of the British. Ahmad tends to rely, often in an uncritical way, on colonialist writers whose representational practices he questions in other places.¹⁰ A similar criticism may be made of Singha's otherwise exemplary essay.¹¹

I am concerned here with a more skeptical analysis of the discursive transformation of the localized practice of robber gangs into the cultic ritual of a "fraternity of murderers" in life narratives produced under the imperative of colonialist logic. Two characterizations of thuggee, to which Singha too draws attention, that recur in the fictional and "factual" accounts that I have already mentioned—thuggee as a system and as ancient—bear further examination for what they can tell us about thuggee in this regard.¹²

Although Sherwood applies the term "system" to the Phansigars (1: 26, 47), it is in Sleeman that the word begins to acquire the status of a fundamental descriptive term for thuggee. Sleeman refers to "the peculiar system of the Thugs" (1: 52), to thuggee as "an organized system of murder" (1: 62), and to the development by the Thugs of "their system to deprive all governments of every other kind of direct evidence to their guilt but the testimony of their associates" (1: 111). Indeed, thuggee is named a system in the full title of the work: "The Thugs or Phansigars of India—Comprising a History of the Rise and Progress of That Extraordinary Fraternity of Assassins; and a Description of the System Which It Pursues and of the Measures Which Have Been Adopted by the Supreme Government of India for Its Suppression." Sleeman makes explicit reference to thuggee as an all-India system (1: 88), and describes thuggee as having a special vocabulary all to itself, called "ramaseena," through which Thugs from all the different parts of India can be mutually intelligible to each other. As such references make clear, Sleeman uses the word *system* to convey a sense of thuggee as a vast and willful criminal organization, rather than as the contingent responses of different subordinated social groups to contemporary chaos and dislocation.

The "ramaseena," crucial in its guise as a secret shared language found all over India for the elaboration of thuggee as a system, also illustrates how dependent Sleeman's description of thuggee is upon a misappropriation. Sleeman goes to much trouble to provide this elaborate vocabulary of thuggee (2: 35–122). However, a great many of the words in this "secret" vocabulary seem to be perfectly common Hindi (or Hindustani) words with perfectly common meanings—for example, "chuk" translated as "suspicion" (2: 52); "kanthna" or "kanth dalna," translated as "to cut" (2: 75); "neera," translated as "water" (2: 91); and "phank dena," translated as "to throw away" (2: 96). There are indeed many unrecognizable terms. But detailed research into this vocabulary, comparing it with Central Indian dialects of Hindi/Hindustani

(especially of that time) as well as closely analyzing Sleeman's system of transcription, would have to be done to ascertain the actual uniqueness of this "secret" vocabulary.¹³

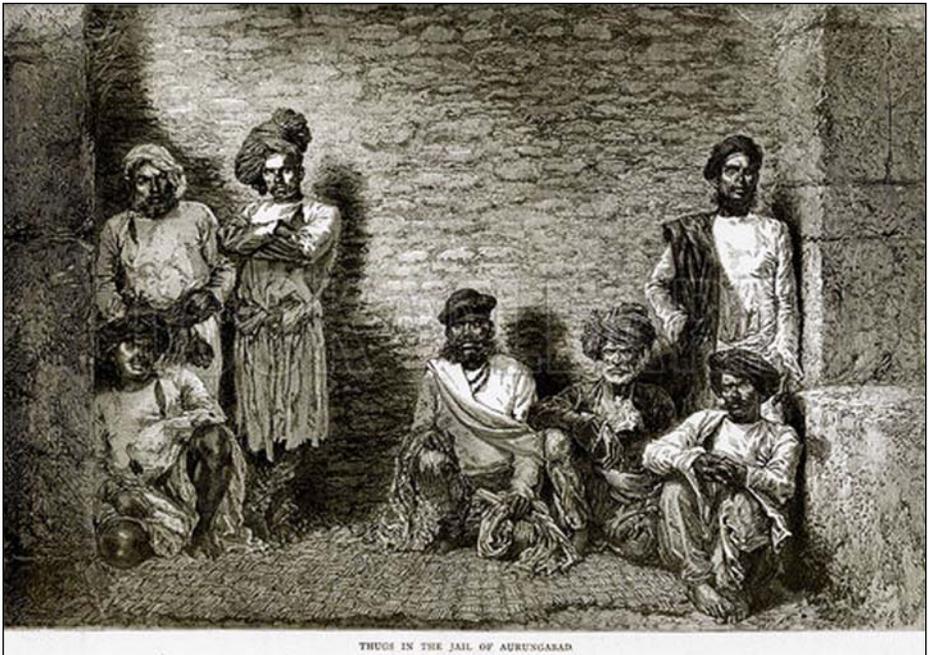
Thuggee emerges in Sleeman's *Thugs* as a hierarchical system (with officers known as "subedars" and "jemadars," which are also military terms) whose regional divisions reflect the map of India. Although Sleeman highlights the "systemic" aspect of thuggee throughout his account, its logic is especially evident in his conversations with his informers (1: 119–27, 2: 6–33). Some Thug informers, for example, are shown providing evidence for thuggee as an all-India operation with geographical divisions (1: 143). The testimony of these informers, provided under compulsion, is of course severely compromised and of uncertain validity. At one point, the Thugs speak of being tortured and maltreated in custody (1: 202).¹⁴ The testimony furthermore appears in Sleeman's words, translated and arranged by him. Such testimony is less useful for what it tells us of the actual thoughts of the Thugs than for how Sleeman chooses to present thuggee.¹⁵ And it is as a willful, well-organized all-India system of murderous devotees of Kali that Sleeman elaborates thuggee.

This elaboration of thuggee as a system is complemented by the elaboration of its antiquity. Sleeman goes to great pains in *Thugs* to establish the long tradition of thuggee—to the extent even of suggesting that the practice is mentioned in Herodotus (1: 80–81). I have noted above how Sleeman refers to a passing mention in the account of a French traveler named Thevenot to establish the antiquity of thuggee. Having suggested the possibility of a millennia-long history for thuggee, Sleeman proceeds to find evidence for it at the slightly more modest distance of a few centuries in the past (1: 81–82, 2: 36). In this more recent history of thuggee, Sleeman repeatedly emphasizes the failure (with rare exceptions) of "interested native chiefs" to eradicate "such well-organized villainy" (1: 68–69). Native chiefs are described as extending patronage to thuggee and as disinclined to act against it (1: 107). He also advances the lack of "any paramount power" in India "for a century and a half or more" as one reason for the unbroken history and unrestricted activity of thuggee (1: 54). "In the official presentation of the 'history' of thuggee," Radhika Singha notes, "the immediate chronological and political background was evaluated but there was also an effort to push its origins into the remote past" (100).

The systemic and ancient character of thuggee, established in Sleeman, passes over with gathering force into the discourse on it as a whole. The Herodotus connection that Sleeman suggests is put forward, to take one example, as virtually certain in Hutton: "There is some reason to believe, that in later times the descendants of these Sagartii [the Persian stranglers mentioned in Herodotus] accompanied one of the Mahommedan [sic] invaders of India" (6). The colonialist logic at work in this elaboration of thuggee as

an ancient system is well illustrated by, again, Hutton towards the end of his account: “It must seem incredible, but it is nevertheless the simple fact, that this terrible system of murder flourished for nearly two centuries under those native governments of whose excellence so much has been said in certain quarters” (88). Flourished for two centuries, but existed for millennia?—the lack of clarity is Hutton’s, as is the lack of clarity regarding the cultural origins of thuggee (is it quintessentially Indian from the beginning or a Persian import that then becomes quintessentially Indian?). In this characteristic, Hutton’s statements are not atypical of the discourse on thuggee.

A complex social phenomenon thus is reduced by inexorable colonialist logic (backed by the material power of armies and political and economic exploitation) to a “simple fact”—which is repeated again and again in colonialist accounts of thuggee until it acquires the status of ostensible historical truth. And then this truth is asserted in a manner similar to Hutton in other “factual” accounts reliant on life narratives, such as those by Thornton, Toker, and in contemporary times Mike Dash. Within the self-referential colonialist discourse on thuggee inaugurated by Sleeman, the systemic and ancient character of thuggee achieves self-evidential status.¹⁶



“Thugs in the Jail of Aurungabad.” From *India and Its Native Princes: Travels in Central India and in the Provinces of Bombay and Bengal*, by Louis-Theophile Marie Rousselet. Ed. Lieut.-Col. Buxton. (London: Bickers and Son, 1882).

POSTCOLONIAL INCARNATIONS

The powerful discourse on thuggee reviewed above continues to exert its baleful force in postcolonial India, as evident in the representation of the contested life and legacy of the Bandit Queen Phoolan Devi. In *India's Bandit Queen: The True Story of Phoolan Devi* (published in 1991), thuggee discourse provides the crucial explanatory framework by which author Mala Sen seeks to understand Phoolan Devi's geosocial context—that is, Central India, once at the heart of Sleeman's campaign against Thugs, now returned to prominence in postcolonial India in the campaigns against dacoits or bandits. Treating thuggee as the prehistory of that banditry of which Phoolan Devi is a part, Sen quotes liberally from Sleeman and Toker. It is clear that Sen views bandits such as Phoolan Devi as descendants of Thugs. Just as important, she recognizes the police force dedicated to fighting bandits as a postcolonial incarnation of Sleeman's department (which, as we have seen, in colonial times had come to be called the Thagi and Dacoity Department). As early as the preface to her book, Sen quotes Sleeman's account of the origins of thuggee (the Kali legend given above) as a way of explaining the motivations of men and women like Phoolan Devi (xxi–xxii). Once again the centrality of Sleeman in establishing key features of the discursive construction of a certain kind of criminality in India is made evident.

Underscoring this continuity between the colonial and the postcolonial, Sen is directed to thuggee and Sleeman by Ayodhya Nath Pathak, the Deputy Inspector-General of Police at Gwalior, where Phoolan Devi is held after her surrender in 1983. Later, describing her experience reading Toker on Sleeman, Sen notes, "I saw immediately why Pathak felt he [Sleeman] was, historically, such an important figure. The record of his experience is invaluable to anyone attempting to understand the cults and traditions of present-day baghis [dacoits]. Much remained unchanged. Living replicas of the protagonists of old existed on both sides of the law" (26). Over the following pages, Sen draws on writings by Toker as well as Sleeman himself to tease out the parallels between colonial and postcolonial versions of both the officers of the law and their adversaries (for example, 98, 101–102, 119–20). Sen's account is often sympathetic to Phoolan Devi and the other baghis, but this does not keep her from relying, with encouragement from Pathak, on an essentially colonialist system of Indic knowledge inaugurated so powerfully by Sleeman. Nor is Sen alone in succumbing to the power of Sleeman. In a journalistic article also discussing banditry of the same period, Taroon Coomar Bhaduri takes Sleeman as an exemplar of good policing. Extolling Sleeman's achievement, Bhaduri asserts that "in the crime statements attached to the

police administration reports of the Central Provinces, there was a separate column for ‘murder by thuggees’ [sic] upto [sic] the year 1904. It was invariably blank except for two cases in 1846” (42).

The centrality of life narratives in these postcolonial iterations of Sleemanesque criminality is easily exemplified by the case of Phoolan Devi, whose life Sen sets out to narrate. Phoolan Devi was certainly the most spectacular of the postcolonial bandits whom Sen sees as succeeding Sleeman’s thugs. Phoolan Devi’s life was told and retold in multiple forms over the years—in newspaper reports, folk songs, film, biographies, and an autobiography. The public hunger for authentic information about her extraordinary life was satisfied through life narratives. This is not, of course, to say that these texts are necessarily authentic representations of the so-called Bandit Queen’s life. The many discrepancies among the different accounts, ranging from the reason for her joining the dacoits to her participation in a key event such as the Behmai massacre in 1981, clearly make evident the problematic nature of any quest for authenticity here.

Nevertheless, the basic details of Phoolan Devi’s life are easily summarized. Phoolan Devi was born into a Mallah (low-caste but not Dalit) impoverished family locked in a feud over land with relatives. She was married as a child to a much older man, who abused her sexually and physically. When still young, she was abducted by a dacoit gang (she might already have had significant dealings with dacoits) and was once again sexually and physically exploited until she struck up a liaison with Vikram Singh Mastana, a leader of the gang. From Vikram’s paramour she progressed to a leadership position in the gang until he was killed and she was gang raped in the village of Behmai. On her escape, she formed another gang with the support of influential dacoit gang leaders and returned for revenge to Behmai, the scene of her greatest violation. Most accounts hold Phoolan Devi responsible for the massacre that followed in Behmai, though Phoolan Devi herself in her autobiography denies her participation. The consequence of the massacre was heightened law enforcement activity, leading to the surrender of most dacoit gangs. On February 12, 1983, Phoolan Devi and her gang too gave themselves up in a negotiated surrender that was watched by enormous crowds and covered as a major news event. Most deeply researched accounts of Phoolan Devi end with the surrender, apparently deeming the subsequent portion of her life as irrelevant. Phoolan Devi spent eight years in Gwalior Jail. Released in 1991, she went on to a career in politics that ended when she was shot dead in 2001 by assailants generally taken to be enemies from her dacoit days.¹⁷ Not surprisingly, the life of Phoolan Devi has generated an immense amount of popular and scholarly interest. Bringing

together aspects of gender, class, and caste discrimination in rural Northern and Central India during the Seventies, her life story serves as provocation for analyses of hierarchical Indian social systems. Despite her criminal record of murder and robbery, there is widespread acknowledgment of her ferocious struggle against relentless oppression.

In different ways, the three most well-known accounts of her life—the biography by Mala Sen, the biopic *Bandit Queen* by Shekar Kapur, and the autobiography—balance Phoolan Devi the criminal against the victim. Though Kapur’s film is based on Sen’s biography, it departs from its source in significant ways, most notably in its relentless sexualization of Phoolan Devi’s persona. The film generated considerable controversy on its release because Phoolan Devi herself objected to her representation in it. Anuradha Ramanujan, Leela Fernandes, and Bonnie Zare have offered useful feminist reviews of this controversy, which largely touches on the depiction of Phoolan Devi’s rape. Their essays are also attentive to the film’s status as life narrative. Phoolan Devi’s autobiography, written later than the biography and the film, differs significantly from its predecessors—for example, in it Phoolan Devi, aside from denying her participation in the Behmai massacre, portrays her father much more sympathetically. At issue in these representations is the transformation of a willful albeit “criminal” subject into a (rape) victim.

It is unnecessary for my purposes to try to ascertain the truth in Phoolan Devi’s story. Just as the guilt or innocence of individual thugs in Sleeman’s accounts is beyond recovery, and indeed irrelevant, so too the truth of specific details in Phoolan Devi’s life is beside the point. What is evident in these life narratives and in the journalistic reporting on Phoolan Devi is the reiteration of a discourse of law-and-order. This discourse shares much with thuggee—I have indicated similarities above—but there are also important differences.

If, as I have suggested, the discourse around thuggee produced under colonial conditions shows a remarkable, even suspicious, uniformity, the discourse around Phoolan Devi and dacoity is far more fractured, revealing thereby the fractious reality of India’s postcolonial democracy. It would be false to say that the discourse on Phoolan Devi is hostile to her in the way thuggee discourse is to Thugs. While hateful casteist and sexist commentary on Phoolan Devi exists, as evident in a blog in support of her killer (“Tag”), most accounts at least concede the oppressive conditions that produced her. This is true even of Kapur’s film, which has invited the most controversy.¹⁸

We should acknowledge here the distinctive aspects of life narratives in India. Writing about such narratives from both before and after independence, David Arnold and Stuart Blackburn propose that we think of the majority of them as advancing,

a formulation of self-in-society that is more complex and subtle than a mutually exclusive opposition between an all-subsuming collectivity on the one hand, and a rampant individuality on the other. . . . [N]early all of them [life narratives in India], in one way or another, demonstrate that Indians present individual lives within a network of other lives and that they define themselves in relation to larger frames of reference, especially those of family, kin, caste, religion, and gender. (19)

The life narratives on Phoolan Devi reveal this conflicted articulation of self-in-society. In the autobiography, Phoolan Devi herself continually places her emerging self in relationship to the society around her. Indeed, the extended space given to her girlhood before she is kidnapped and irrevocably becomes a bandit—nearly half of a four hundred page book—might be seen to be an attempt to stage this self-in-society. The controversy surrounding Kapur's biopic too is comprehensible as a charged debate over the manner in which it does violence to the depiction of a self-in-society, that is, a relational self. Possibly it is because she saw the film disarticulating her relational self from society that Phoolan Devi objected to the film so strenuously.

In multiple ways, then, the life narratives on Thugs and Phoolan Devi differ. The variety of life narratives produced on Thugs, originating mostly as bureaucratic documents, show scant regard for either their individual selves or their selves-in-society. Rather, Thugs are social ciphers—simply convenient clues to the essential nature of India. Thug identity—established through the truth claims made possible by life narratives but referring in fact to no truth worth the name—finds its function in the logic of colonialism. In contrast, the contested identity of Phoolan Devi finds representation in postcolonial life narratives that betray none of the seamless nature of the colonialist representations of Thugs. Much has changed with the *post* in *postcolonialism*—produced largely for a domestic audience of Indians, the discourse on Phoolan Devi does not portray the same obsession with cultural otherness and racial/civilizational superiority that we find in thuggee discourse. Nevertheless, as we have seen, thuggee does find an afterlife in the discourse around Phoolan Devi. To what purpose? The answer is to be found in the persistence of deep-seated ideas about law and order, and in the distinction I want to make between postcolonialism and epicolonialism.

LIFE NARRATIVES, THE LAW-AND-ORDER STATE, AND EPICOLONIALISM

In his discourse on thuggee, Sleeman exploits two important kinds of life narratives—confessions of Thug informants and direct witness accounts—to put in place such a powerful mechanism for articulating the relationship between a disciplining England and a chaotic and evil India that successive

colonialist and neocolonialist writers transport it wholesale into their own texts. Beginning with Sleeman, both the great “antiquity” of thuggee and the great extensiveness of its “system” are repeatedly asserted. The disarticulated practice of small robber gangs, found mainly in Central India at a time of social chaos, is discursively transformed into the cultic ritual of a well-organized “fraternity of murderers.” The reason for this transformation is to be found in the response to thuggee that the two words “system” and “antiquity” make possible. As a response to the “system” of “thuggee,” we find in Sleeman’s *Thugs* the assertion that only “a general system which shall be in operation all over India” will be effective in “the suppression of Thuggee” (1: 62). Thus, he suggests, a system of violence should be countered by a system of discipline. In *Thugs*, we repeatedly find statements which put forward this idea: “Even a system of Thug police, such as has now been established, if confined to the British provinces, could have been of no permanent use” without jurisdiction over “native states” into which the Thugs could emigrate (1: 63); and even more explicitly, “nothing but a general system, undertaken by a paramount power, strong enough to bear down all opposition by interested native chiefs, could ever eradicate such well-organized villainy” (1: 68–69). Within a few years of the establishment of this system of policing, as we have already seen, thuggee is “suppressed” and Thugs disappear. The efficacy of the colonial “system” is thus amply demonstrated. British power is established as superior to that of “native” states, and the benevolent effects of its rule are proven—what centuries-long rule by native states has not been able to accomplish, British power achieves in a matter of years.

The crucial advantage for colonialist discourse of the “demonstration” of the geographical extensiveness and historical length of the phenomenon of thuggee is that it allows colonialist accounts reciprocally to elaborate colonial power along the two axes of space and time. It is along these two axes that colonial power expressed in a particular state form must exert its superior force to legitimize its interventionist presence in India. Thus, we are led to a rather obvious truth—that power, to be effectively exercised, must colonize the dimensions of both space and time. Not only must such power colonize the land, the territory, the geography—the “space”—but it must also colonize the chronicles, the tradition, the history—the “time”—of the society that it wishes to conquer.¹⁹ What the comments on thuggee in Sleeman (taken up and repeated by writers who follow him) reveal are an elaboration and legitimation of a particular kind of social control. The all-India operation of thuggee as an ancient system is to be countered by a reciprocal modern system of disciplinary power whose name can only be the colonial law-and-order state.²⁰

This assessment of the discourse on thuggee, as it is constructed in colonialist and neocolonialist accounts, is borne out by growing evidence from recent work on not only thuggee but also crime and criminality in India. Radhika Singha argues that “‘Rule of law’ was crucial to certain ideological and institutional imperatives of colonial state formation, for instance to the expansion of the claims of the state at the expense of other jurisdictions of social authority, to the maintenance of stable, centralized mechanisms of rule and to an assertion of the superiority of a ‘despotism of law’ over that of ‘arbitrary’ native despotism” (90). Sandria Freitag has argued that it was crime of a collective nature that came in for special attention from the British, for it was this form of criminality that was perceived as a challenge to the authority of the colonial state. “[T]his characterization of thugi as an organized conspiracy,” she notes, is what causes it to be subject to particular attention from the British (148). The tenor of the colonialist discourse on thuggee is well contextualized by Anand Yang in his comments on criminality in colonial India in general: “British definitions of crime in India were related to their larger ideas about the structure and functioning of Indian society and culture as well as to the ideology of rule which justified British domination and Indian subjection” (13).

Evident here is the power of the colonialist logic that constitutes such a discourse of criminality in the interests of a law-and-order state. Such logic has its affinities to totalitarianism. Yash Ghai, Robin Luckham, and Francis Snyder have noted that the colonial state may be characterized as similar to Nicos Poulantzas’s “exceptional” state—“the fascist version of the capitalist state”—and that “the total subordination of law to politics which is exemplified by the exceptional state is also characteristic of the colonial state” (179). While numerous important differences certainly demarcate the fascist state from the colonial state, the transformation of a liberal capitalist “law” into “law-and-order” signals accurately totalitarian colonialist desire. In the case of India, as David Arnold notes in *Police Power and Colonial Rule*, “by 1947 a Police Raj of a kind had come into being, a regime in which the police occupied a crucial position in the ordering of rural and urban society, in the suppression of political opposition, and in the maintenance of state and class control” (231). In this emergence of a Police Raj, the discourse on thuggee played a crucial, originary role.²¹

And it is this Police Raj that we find disclosed again, post-1947, in the discourse around Phoolan Devi. The postcolonial state—I will argue in a moment that in the context of the present discussion it is better characterized as an epicolonial state—may no longer be a British Raj but, as the inheritor of structures of governance only partially transformed by independence, it continues to manifest aspects of a Police Raj. The postcolonial state’s experiment

with democracy remains incomplete to the extent that it continues to reproduce unthinkingly prejudices and stereotypes regarding the criminality of social groups that it regards as a threat to its authority. That Phoolan Devi, a “low-caste” Mallah woman, ended her life as a Member of Parliament suggests how different postcolonial and colonial state structures are; and that she had to become a dacoit before she became a politician suggests how little had changed in the way colonial and postcolonial governance structures target marginalized elements in Indian society, for it is through this “criminalization” that her rebellion was sought to be contained.

In thuggee, discourse founds disciplining practice. Thuggee inaugurates an elaborate justification of law-and-order and a concomitant colonialist state through a *discursive* production of lives. In postcolonial India, the discourse around the spectacular career of Phoolan Devi the Bandit Queen echoes thuggee, though unlike Thugs, whose individuality is subsumed under a collective label, Phoolan Devi’s identity remains a conflicted self-in-society. Phoolan Devi’s contestations of state power during her years as a bandit, her well-publicized surrender to the functionaries of the state, her imprisonment and subsequent career as a politician, her death by assassination—these and other incidents suggest, in a manner similar to the discourse on thuggee, the overdetermined conjunction of life and law in her extraordinary story, which obsessed a nation for decades.

In this context, however, is *postcolonial* an adequate term to capture the persistence of colonial structures and influences after decolonization? Certainly, scholars of the postcolonial, emphasizing the *-colonial* rather than the *post-*, have routinely observed such persistence. In their readings, the postcolonial is rightly characterized not only by disjuncture but also by continuity. In consonance with such readings, one might aver that when a society moves conclusively beyond the influence of its colonial past a term such as *postcolonial*, which continues to reference the colonial and to take its orientation from it, becomes unnecessary. Aijaz Ahmad’s argument about English in *In Theory* might be taken as representative of this view of the postcolonial: “In so far as the metropolitan language—English in the case of India—was the chief cultural and communicational instrument for the centralization of the bourgeois state in the colonial period, the continued use of this instrument in the dominant systems of administration, education and communication is, among other things, an index of the profound—almost genetic—cultural link between the colonial and post-colonial phases of the bourgeois state” (74). In *The Scandal of the State*, which includes an insightful critique of the media reception of Phoolan Devi’s surrender, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan similarly notes the “colonial legacies” of postcolonial state institutions (86).

It might easily be argued that in its persistence beyond decolonization the law-and-order discourse initiated by Sleeman is perfectly comprehensible as postcolonial in the above sense. However, such a persistence might also more fruitfully be characterized otherwise—as epicolonial rather than postcolonial. In making this point, there is no need to discount the reading of the postcolonial of which Ahmad and Sunder Rajan are representative. Rather, by introducing the term *epicolonial* into the discussion, my objective is simply to sharpen our tools of analysis with regard to postcolonial phenomena. As a term *postcolonial*, caught between disjuncture and continuity, successfully conveys the *general*, let us call it existential, ambiguity that accompanies the historical and ongoing (non)transcendence of the colonial. It is perhaps less effective in bringing into view *particular* aspects of this ongoing (non)transcendence, as seen in the law-and-order discourses reviewed here. These particular aspects, I want to suggest, are better indicated by such a term as *epicolonial*, which brings more sharply into view the particular nature of the persistence.

Among other things, the prefix *epi-* signifies “on, upon” and “over, above,” as in a secondary elaboration—seen, for example, in *epiphenomenon*.²² In this sense, *epicolonial* might alert us to a secondary elaboration of colonialism, not a departure from or persistence of colonialism as such, but the persistence of aspects of colonialism within (or on or over) structures no longer colonial. A term such as *epicolonial*, then, might alert us to the zombie-like nature of some types of colonial persistence—that is, the term might indicate the ways in which colonial structures persist beyond the death of colonialism in a kind of half-life. Accordingly, deeming phenomena epicolonial is to draw attention to the ways in which the phenomena persist though the circumstances that brought them into being have been transcended, even if only partially. What I am attempting by recourse to the term *epicolonial* is to direct attention to the *disjunctive continuities* between the colonial and the postcolonial. Often enough, colonial structures persist in postcolonial societies not in a seamless manner but rather as discrete and ill-fitting remnants that postcolonial societies have neither entirely superseded nor retained with original force.

It should be evident that I am proposing this notion of the epicolonial especially with my argument about thuggee and Phoolan Devi in mind. It is precisely the valence of the reference to Sleeman in the hunt for Phoolan Devi that a term such as epicolonial is meant to explicate. While postcolonial structures of governance cannot be said to be a simple continuation of colonial law-and-order machinery, aspects of a Police Raj first elaborated under colonial conditions do find manifestation when the right circumstances call them forth. Confronted by the challenge of dacoits in central India, the postcolonial

state activates epicolonial structures—structures that persist as deformations within a transforming society—of law-and-order. *Epicolonial* thus identifies a discrete manifestation of features inherited from colonialism. It signifies a *dimension* of postcolonial experience. The persistence around Phoolan Devi of law-and-order discourses and mechanisms of governance first elaborated with regard to thuggee, then, is better characterized as *epicolonial* rather than either *postcolonial* (for this term might be best retained for the constitutively ambiguous nature of the decolonizing process as such) or *neocolonial* (for this term might best capture the ways in which mechanisms of control continue to be exerted from formerly imperial centers). The references to thuggee in the discourse around Phoolan Devi are epicolonial in the sense that they identify a problematic and structurally deep-seated persistence of colonial influence without an accompanying sense of existential generalization or the notion that such influence receives direction from a metropolitan center such as London. Where neither postcolonial nor neocolonial will quite suffice analytically, epicolonial proves appropriate to capture the deformative persistence of colonial influence.

Whether colonial or epicolonial, the discourses of law-and-order presented here, as I have noted, are elaborated through life narratives. Thugs and Phoolan Devi both reveal how life narratives, because of their referential appeal to lived truths, play a crucial role in advocating for as well as criticizing a law-and-order state. They are deployed by the state to generate an account of monstrous criminality among the governed that can then be met by overwhelmingly punitive regimes of discipline. They can also be drafted to contest such accounts.

We might go further and note that the role played by life narratives in conjunction to discourses of law-and-order derives from the peculiar status of the body in this genre. Life in life narratives is linked to the *bios* of *auto/biography*—life not only as a narrative of events associated with an individual or communal subjectivity but also as a biological phenomenon. Leigh Gilmore has identified “the gendered connection of word and body” as one element of “a text’s autobiographics” (184). Surely, the connection between word, or representation, and body in life narratives need not be restricted to gendered manifestations or to *autobiography*. As narratives of (a) life, the genre suggests the ineluctable presence of legitimating body or bodies. As a species of nonfiction, G. Thomas Couser has noted, memoirs “are representations of real people, who are vulnerable to harm” (13). Couser’s insight of course extends beyond memoirs to life narratives in general. Embodied life is summoned up by life narrative as a genre, even if in problematized ways. As the discourses on Thugs and Phoolan Devi vividly show, narratives of life are

representations that embody, and because they are they can be quite readily deployed to render particular bodies vulnerable.²³

Law-and-order discourses, I am suggesting, are attracted to life narratives because of their privileged relationship to the body—that is, because life narratives identify a specific material body, past or present, that could once or can still be touched and otherwise affected. Couser notes that the “special relation to the real affects what memoir can *do* . . . not just what it *is*” (16). When we consider that law-and-order discourses are about disciplining bodies (consider Foucault), their attraction to life narratives becomes obvious. Because of their privileged relationship to actual bodies as referents, life narratives can *do* things to bodies more efficiently than, say, fictional genres such as novels—they can be put to use for the purposes of disciplining specific bodies (such as those of the Thugs) with much greater immediate effect. Subsequently, they might also be used to contest such disciplining (as for example in Phoolan Devi’s autobiography).

In the context of empire, Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton have written of “the centrality of bodies—raced, sexed, classed, and ethnicized bodies—as sites through which imperial and colonial power was imagined and exercised” (“Introduction” 8). “Indeed,” they write, “the body is in many ways the most intimate colony, as well as the most unruly, to be subject to colonial disciplines” (“Postscript” 406–407). In India, this intimate exercise of state power found novel forms through the discourse on thuggee in the early part of the nineteenth century. Life narratives became a discursive technology through which the brute force of disciplining practices could be brought to bear on Indians. At one point in his writings, Sleeman tells us that the head of Thug Bakshee Jemadar was severed from his body, “preserved by Dr. Spry,” and transported to Europe—to be exhibited, we might speculate, as a monstrous curiosity and/or to be subjected to scientific analysis (1: 90, 190, and especially 20n). Life narratives, I am suggesting, allowed the emerging colonial law-and-order state to establish itself by fingering Bakshee Jemadar’s head as worthy of severing. So successful was this exercise in imagining and establishing power abetted by life narratives that its force continued in India after the withdrawal of the British, expressing itself now in epicolonial forms—that is, in embedded if attenuated colonial structures that could find activation under the right circumstances.

In postcolonial India too, life narratives played a crucial role in the discourse around Phoolan Devi, though no longer only in relation to discipline. Life narratives also become discursive technologies of resistance, marshaled by the criminalized (as opposed to the criminal) and by sympathetic observers to contest disciplinary regimes. In Phoolan Devi’s autobiography as well

as other representations of her life we can recognize a form of witnessing that is counter to the logic of law-and-order. Typically in these counterrepresentations, which sometimes coexist within the same text with a discourse of law-and-order, Phoolan Devi's agency is emphasized, and her victimization either as an individual or as a self-in-society foregrounded. Phoolan Devi appears in them not as a cipher to be decoded as a clue to a civilizational identity (as Thugs do), but as a human being. In this fashion, the discourse on Phoolan Devi illustrates how a narration of a life can sometimes be used to recover the oppositional humanity of the criminalized.

NOTES

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1. *Dacoit* is an Anglicization of the Hindu/Hindustani word *dak* or *daku* (डकू). See for example the Hindi-English edition of *Bhargava's Standard Illustrated Dictionary of the Hindi Language* (436–37). The meanings given for the word are “robber, bandit, dacoit, brigand, highwayman, marauder, plunderer”—common associations the word has in Hindustani. Unlike *thug*, *dacoit* has not passed into general English usage and is restricted to the South Asian context; also unlike *thug*, the word remains fairly close in meaning to the Hindi/Hindustani word from which it is derived. Hence, it does not raise the vexatious issues that we encounter in the semantics of *thug*. See also note 16.
2. There are numerous ways of rendering *thug* (and its derivations, most importantly *thuggee*). I have throughout used the most current English spellings. However, in quoted passages, I have retained the spelling as presented. When written with an upper case T, the word indicates members of the purportedly fiendish organization; for an example that regurgitates the hoary clichés of colonialist constructions, see the Wikipedia article on thuggee. I have dispensed with cautionary quotation marks, but I hope my skepticism regarding *thug* and its derivations as presented by British colonialist accounts is sufficiently evident from my argument. For examples of essays dealing with the topic of sati, see Nandy; Sunder Rajan, “The Subject of Sati”; Sabin; Spivak; and Mani, “Contentious Traditions” and “Cultural Theory, Colonial Texts.”
3. Stewart Gordon notes: “Oral tradition supports the position that the principal meaning of the word Thug was not even robbery, much less a particular style of robbery” (408).
4. In his descriptions of thuggee in his two-volume work *The Thugs or Phansigars of India*, Sleeman refers to Thevenot's account as proof of the antiquity of thuggee (1: 81). This work is henceforth cited parenthetically as *Thugs*. See note 5 for a brief introductory comment on this work. I will have more to say about this “antiquity” of thuggee later.
5. Publication information given in the preface to the first volume of *The Thugs or Phansigars of India* notes that the two volumes of this edition were compiled from Sleeman's volume published in Calcutta in 1836. Pages 13 to 48 of the first volume are Dr.

- Sherwood's account of 1816. Pages 48 to 75 consist of text prepared, apparently, from Sleeman's accounts and that of an unnamed author of an article in volume forty-one of *Foreign Quarterly Review* (1: 49n). I have not been able to locate this article. The text from pages 75 to 118 is explicitly ascribed to Sleeman. Pages 119 to 227 are conversations held "by Capt. Sleeman with Thug informers while preparing his vocabulary of their language" (119). Pages 6 to 33 of the second volume continue the conversations between Sleeman and his informers from the first volume. Pages 35 to 112 consist of the "ramaseena" or vocabulary of Thugs prepared by Sleeman. Pages 113 to 228 consist of official papers (prepared by different administrative personages) relating to trials of Thugs. I have taken the ascription of the two volumes to Capt. W. H. Sleeman at face value and have assumed the author of the text to be Sleeman unless, as in the case of Dr. Sherwood, made clear otherwise. References to Sherwood's work are henceforth given parenthetically, according to the appropriate page numbers in *Thugs*. Large parts of these volumes of course constitute an unusual but crucial form of life writing.
6. Henceforth cited as *Confessions*. Ameer Ali is, of course, a Muslim name. The so-called Thug gangs had both Muslim and Hindu members. This religious heterogeneity in the membership of Thug gangs continually proves of interest to British commentators on thuggee such as Sleeman, especially because of the close association of thuggee with the worship of Kali, a Hindu deity; see, for example, *Thugs* 1: 124–25. I discuss the religious aspect of thuggee further below.
 7. To take only two other examples—James Hutton repeats it on page 13 of *Thugs and Dacoits in India*, and the character Yasin, in John Masters's thuggee novel *The Deceivers*, retells the story at a feast of Kali (161–63).
 8. The final defeat of the Marathas was not in 1803—they made a recovery the following year. However, Gordon is suggesting that in this part of India Maratha power was conclusively broken in 1803. The final defeat of the Marathas by the British is usually dated to 1818. Also, Gordon's suggestion that Thugs were simply highly mobile, marauding, robber gangs would help explain the alleged occurrence of thuggee outside the immediate area of central India. The postulation of a national fraternity of Thugs, then, would certainly be unnecessary.
 9. For a reference to this power of gur in William Henry Sleeman, see 2: 111.
 10. In Ahmad's analysis (which is not only of thuggee but also of dacoity or armed banditry), the primary emphasis is on showing that these "criminal" phenomena are caused by certain developments that are linked to the world system. He carries out what may be called a Wallersteinian analysis of thuggee and dacoity as specific types of "criminality" in colonial India. He suggests (as Gordon has done) that thuggee (or rather, in Gordon's case, the phenomena which are transformed into thuggee) and dacoity increased in India as a result of the social dislocation caused by the East India Company's policies and actions. In a number of places he also asserts on dubious evidence that thuggee did exist in a limited way before the advent of the British (for example, see 81). Nevertheless, his dissertation provides useful information for the context within which the discourse on thuggee was produced.
 11. See for example 109.
 12. See for example Singha 89, 100, 124, and 138.

13. Sleeman's claims for the autonomy of "ramaseena" and for the thoroughness of his investigation of it are quite unambiguous; see 1: 75–76.
14. Only self-righteous conviction regarding the colonialist project allows this detail to surface in thuggee discourse. So self-evident to this discourse is the status of the Thugs as monstrous ritual murderers that torture and mistreatment appear as perfectly legitimate practice. This detail also reveals the expectations that this discourse has of its audience.
15. In "Approver's Testimony, Judicial Discourse: The Case of Chauri Chaura," Shahid Amin has examined characteristic features of the discourse of an "approver," a rebel turned informer, who testified in the court case that followed the attack on the Chauri Chaura police station in 1922. His observations regarding the approver Shikari's discourse are relevant to our own concern here with Thug approvers of nearly a century earlier: "Despite its length, scope and detail, [the approver's testimony] bears just too many traces of outside structuring, raising considerable problems with regard to its autonomy and authorship. This AT [approver's testimony], the vehicle of the prosecution, bears the impress of an interrogating power and the stamp of violent intervention: fear of punishment, actual torture and, most crucially, promise of pardon and reward. These are its originary characteristics. . . . [T]he more Shikari-as-approver implicated himself in 'the crime of Chauri Chaura' the better the chances become of his being pardoned" (177–78). A similar process is perhaps willing the Thug approver to produce the discourse of thuggee under the interrogating power of Sleeman.
16. A text that sets out, in a different context, to examine phenomena broadly similar to thuggee is E. J. Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels*. Unlike Hobsbawm, however, I have focused attention on the colonialist discourse through which thuggee is elaborated rather than on Thugs themselves (whose existence as Thugs is to be questioned in any case). Aside from this important difference in emphasis, Hobsbawm's valuation of "bandits" as "primitive," and continual theorization of them as limited in their status as rebels (for example, page 5), is also counter to my critical impulse here.
17. For a reliable account of the murder, see Tripathi.
18. For example, Madhu Kishwar castigates the film for pandering to Western stereotypes of India, for getting basic facts about Phoolan Devi's life wrong, and most importantly for not consulting Phoolan Devi herself or taking her views on her own representation into account, though she also acknowledges that there is much to like in the film's politics.
19. See Edward Soja for an extended exploration of the relationship of "space" to "time" in social analysis. Soja suggests that, by and large, Western social analysis has not been sufficiently attentive to the complexity of space and its social significance.
20. The contiguity of the discourse on thuggee to other British discourses of colonial law and order is revealed in Philip Meadows Taylor's novel *Seeta*, in which Azrael Pande, who goes about fomenting rebellion during the Indian "mutiny" of 1857, is described as an ex-Thug. See the novel's "hero" Cyril Brandon's musings on Pande and his accomplices (1: 203–204). Brandon comments in this context, "[I]f we English do nothing more, we at least keep such people in check" (1: 204).
21. It is worth noting in this context Arnold's assertion that the "Thagi and Dakaiti Department" founded by Sleeman later evolved into "an intelligence agency" devoted to "collecting information about political and social movements as well as organized crime" (*Police Power* 186).

22. The *American Heritage Dictionary*, for example, defines *epiphenomenon* as “a secondary phenomenon that results from and accompanies another.” In this sense, *epicolonialism* is a secondary phenomenon that results from and accompanies colonialism and its legacy.
23. Of course, as studies of life narratives routinely show, just because life narratives are inevitably embodying representations in the manner indicated here does not mean that they actually attend to or acknowledge the body as such.

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