

# A Historical Murder-Cult in Former India

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## Abstract

Thugs constituted a cult/order of males, who concealed themselves as ordinary people. In the winter season they would go on roads, join travelers and at the proper moment strangle them and obtain their possessions. Their belief certified that the practice pleased their goddess Kâli. The religious aspects of their deeds imparted many rituals into the “play”. After centuries of clandestine activity accompanied by tolerance and even collaboration by the local figures of power, the order was finally discovered and annihilated by the British authorities.

**Key words:** Thug (Thuggee); India; Murder; Ritual; Cult/order

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## INTRODUCTION

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On a well-worn road through central India, Lieutenant Subhani of the Bengal Infantry and his three companions (two orderlies and a civilian) were on the verge of finishing their journey. The year was 1812, and the day a pleasant one in October. Subhani knew these roads could be perilous But a much greater threat loomed over them.

The lieutenant his two soldiers had spent the night before at the house of a reputable cotton merchant. There he had been introduced to another guest, a business associate. “Narsinghpur!” the merchant had shouted upon hearing the lieutenant’s destination, “What a piece of luck! Our friend Moklal is also heading for that direction!” Subhani, though somewhat unwilling at first, eventually consented to the man’s coming along.

After nearly a day’s travel with his new companion, Lieutenant Subhani was now glad of Moklal’s presence. He was a good-educated and talkative person, who rendered the journey more agreeable. As the evening approached, Moklal explained that they would meet his friends just ahead. Indeed they soon did find a group of men around a camp fire. As a session of n introductions went around, it turned out that most of them were business associates as well.

A fire was burning by the time they reached the campsite, while around it an animated group of men were gathered. A flurry of—many of these men were business associates of Moklal, it was learned, while others were family—and soon Subhani and his orderlies felt like part of the group, eating and laughing with the men.

It was dark when Subhani’s team and the others finished eating amid laughters and jokes and stories. Nobody went to sleep, yet. Moklal turned from the fire to the lieutenant:

— “Maybe a smoke before bed?” he suggested. His interlocutor happily accepted. Moklal smiled, then looked up at somebody standing behind Subhani.

— “Bring the tobacco.” [The code phrase for prompting the attack] (paraphrased from Putnam).

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— “931 murders!” repeated the judge in incredulous tones. “Surely you can never have been guilty of such a number?”

— “Sahib,” replied the benevolent looking native standing before him, in a quiet voice tinged with a note of pride. “there were many more but I ceased counting!”

The judge was [William Henry] Sleeman, and the native on trial was the infamous Burham (from James L. Sleeman).

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## 1. THE CULT AND ITS HISTORY

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*Thug*, derived from the Indian verb *thagna*, means he who deceives. Members of that horrible cult of the Black Idol did practice deceit, leading double lives: Officially virtuous and secretly criminal (Daraul, 1970, p.225).

Towards 1840 this cult of stranglers, then spread onto the entire land, got discovered and annihilated for good by the British officials. Thuggery is a religion, a secret society and a means of getting rich. Before the British came it was not unknown by the local population. The character of the cult changed with the

advent of assassins<sup>1</sup> in India, acquiring a mixture of Hinduism and Shiite-Islamic ways. Entire villages got converted into thuggery. The clergymen of the cult came from Thug families but they did not necessarily follow the murderous gangs. The members believed that goddess of destruction, Black Kâli and Big Mother, required the sacrifice of human lives and in return assured their immunity and well-being of the faithful, granting the appropriation of the belongings of the victims (summarized from Daraul, 1970, p.226).

Some scholars associate Thugs even more closely with the assassins, even suggesting that the order could be a mere transformation of the latter into the former:

[According to Crusadors] the assassins' Old Man was a magician who surveyed the world from his castle. His men were so fanatically devoted to their master that he often demonstrated their obedience to visitors by making them leap out of high windows. By the time Marco Polo saw Alamut in 1273, in Persia they had been slaughtered by the Mongols; in Syria suppressed by Baybars, Sultan of Egypt.

[Those who escaped into India seem to have evolved into] "thugs, who, although known as Moslems, worshipped the Hindu goddess Kali. Their aim was actual killing, rather than the robbery that accompanied it. According to Sherwood, they lived quietly in their villages until the months of November-December, when they took to the roads and slaughtered travellers" [as a sacred ritual] (Wilson 1979, p.24).

General Sleeman maintains that thugs descended from the ancient Persian army {of King Xerxes I (ruled 486-465 BCE)}. In any case they acquired their organization sense and military grades<sup>2</sup> from Persians, while some Hindu rituals got grafted onto Islamic<sup>3</sup> military ways (Daraul, 1971, p.237).

Unlike Suttee (virtuous woman), a practice whereby a widow burned herself after the death of her husband; which Bentinck [the governor-general Lord William Bentinck] forbade in 1829; thugs required more than a decree to get eradicated; namely persistent police work.

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<sup>1</sup> After the capture of Alamut Castle by Mongols, that extremist and esoteric Ismailiyye branch of Islam got dissipated, whereby certain disciples arrived in India. Some of them in turn joined Thugs but many preserved their original creed and came as an intact religious order to this day. Nowadays, Assassins' descents in India recognize Karim Aga Khan as their Imam (spiritual leader).S.Ç.

<sup>2</sup> As a former disciple narrated, the supreme grade is that of master (gourou). As for the very first degree; it is that of Chela, the disciple, and is represented by the ceremonious dressing in a black cloth. At an intermediate state, he receives marks on his arm from a red hot iron piece in front of the statue of the idol etc. (All the initiation rites constitute certain ritual elements called *makaras*) (summarized from Daraul, 1971, p.230, 232, 233).

<sup>3</sup> The province of Bengal is the "home-city" of the first worshippers of the goddess and the mentalities of Hindus and Moslems here are closet than any other location (Daraul, 1971, p.239).

"According to legend, Kali, patroness of the Thugs, first appeared on earth on the banks of the Hoooghli. In commemoration of this event the site was called Kali Ghat (whence Calcutta), where stands her most venerated temple (Franzius, 1969, p.183).

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## 2. THE MODUS OPERANDI

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After their admission, they would study the secret signs, the different omens [of the nature] supposedly revealing the thoughts of the goddess, and especially the method of strangling the victim with a coin knotted in the folds of an immensely big handkerchief. They carried the yellow kerchieves as wrapped around their waists. They did not use knives (except to slit open the already dead bodies to prevent their swelling and discovery) (Daraul, 1971, p.237).

At this point let us introduce the knowledge that in the Ottoman Empire, executions of *shehsades* (sultan's sons), the spill of their holy blood being forbidden, was also carried out through strangling by silk bowstrings. The palace executioners were castrated blacks, mostly giant *Nubidians*. They had been rendered deaf-and-mute before taking up the profession, for the sake of secrecy. The graveyard of the dead executioners was also separated from all the other cemeteries.

Fratricide was often resorted to, due to conflicts within the Ottoman dynasty. The internal struggles for the throne among brothers (it would be more appropriate to say half-brothers, since the Sultans practiced polygyny) after Bayazid the First was a historical lesson to bear in memory. The survival of the state as an unshared, intact unity appears to be a rightful moral excuse for indulging in fratricide. Mehmet the Conquerer would later legitimize fratricide in a written code to overcome disputes over the throne. (*Among the sultan-sons, he who is destined to mount the Throne, may indeed deem it necessary to eliminate his brothers, namely the other claimers, for the sake of preserving the well-being of the sacred empire*).

Barber (1973, pp.74-75) gives an account of a rather dramatic example of fratricide in the Seraglio: [*As soon as Mehmet III ascended the throne at the age of twenty-nine, upon the death of his father, Murad III*] his dominant mother insisted that he [*a weak-minded man*] must invoke the related law. The sultan commanded his nineteen brothers to come and kiss his hand. The eldest was only eleven. As they trooped into the Throne Room, Mehmet III told them they had nothing to fear; he wished them no harm; but he felt that they should be immediately circumcised. The surgeons were waiting in adjoining rooms. And so were the deaf-mutes. Each boy was circumcised within a few minutes of his royal audience and then taken to the next room and dexterously strangled. The next morning the corpses were laid out in nineteen small coffins. They were all buried with their father (the former sultan Murad III).

Normally, the beheading-penalties at the Ottoman capitol were carried out near the infamous executioners' fountain, just outside the palace; and the employed sword was washed cleaned right there. But the practice of strangling sometimes included other high-ranking officials, besides *shehsades*. The lacet of the deaf-mutes was a potential danger already tickling the gorge of any newly promoted *pasha* or *vizier* of the court.

Barber (1973, pp.54-55) vividly describes one such incident, namely the execution of Ibrahim Pasha, the previously favorite grand vizier of Suleiman the First: "*Ibrahim's vanity was growing and becoming dangerous. Roxelane's*

*[Circassian Hurrem, the preferred concubine and later spouse of the sultan] convincing talks had their effects on the sultan's decision. But Suleiman had given his word never to disgrace Ibrahim while he [Suleiman] lived. A legal counselor of the Dîvan [cabinet] said "cause him to be strangled while you are asleep; he that sleeps doth not truly live".*

*On March fifteen 1536 the two men dined quietly (a common affaire for them until then). When Suleiman was about to retire, he suggested that Ibrahim remain for the night in the adjoining room in the Seraglio. [He himself had taken a sleeping remedy to ensure a deep sleep]. The next morning strangled body of the grandvizier was found at the Seraglio gate; but all the evidence pointed to a violent struggle against the deaf-mutes. The walls of the room were splashed with blood that remained there for a century".*

This is the tragic story of Ibrahim Pasha, the Favorite; who later became Ibrahim Pasha, the Victimized. In his well-researched historical novel impregnated with real names; a German author relates a slightly different version:

In this version, Hurrem Sultana herself gets the confirmation from the chief legal-religious authority. When the Sultan eats his dinner (Ottoman rulers used to dine alone) the first bowl covered with a lid contains no rice. Instead, the legal confirmation is squeezed into the vessel. Suleyman reads it and now takes the final decision to remove the spoiled second man.

Suleyman dines with Ibrahim Pasha. He pours wine to his cup with his own hands and he makes his favorite play the violin just like in former days in the city of Manisa.<sup>4</sup> The drink contains a sleep-mittel and it is the Grandvizier who falls into sleep. The annulation of the oath is valid because the subject of the oath, as a sleeping-man, is not considered alive, at the very moment!

As a matter of fact; while executioners are busy with the Pasha, Hurrem (Roxelane) penetrates into the room where Suleyman had receded to. (Normally no woman can do that. She can only wait to be called). The Pasha wakes up and screams for help! Suleyman is torn in a horrible dilemma and even attempts to interfere, emphasizing that the man is now awake and the terms of the religious order is disrupted! But Hurrem is too determined and cold-blooded. She simply blocks the doorway. She then surrounds the Padisah with her arms as if consoling or lulling a small child and temporizes until the action in the next room goes to completion (highlighted from Tralow 1987, pp.393, 397-397).

This second version appears to be more relevant to the truth. A cautious ruler would not dare to fall into sleep in such a delicate situation. Rather he would make the other one sleep. The dead pasha's funeral was nevertheless granted all the necessary glory. The dead Grandvizier's splendid but much smaller palace located at the former Byzantium Hippodrom (not very far from the Topkapi Palace of the

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<sup>4</sup> Suleyman ruled that province as the Throne- candidate, in his adolescence days. This was a usual practice. It is there that he met the music-gifted slave-boy and took him in his princely protection. From then on he always favored him. He trusted his secrets to the boy and gave his oath to spare his life definitely in the future; upon ascending the very Throne.

sultans) would later be occupied by the Sultan's daughter Mihrimah and her spouse Rustem Pasha.

### 3. THUGGEES CIRCLING AROUND PROSPECTIVE VICTIMS

Daraul (1971, p.237) goes on to say that *certain persons were untouchable: Saint wandering men, women (after all Kâli is a female) and some sorts of tradesmen could not be chosen as victims.*

Franzius (1969, p.185) specifies that *although it was unlucky to murder females, it was done occasionally in order to silence witnesses.* This author is also more specific regarding those exempt from the attacks of Thugs: vagrants, potters, goldsmiths, carpenters, lepers, dancing masters, the blind and the mutilated, men leading cows or female goats.

*Daraul (1971, p.237) writes that he who disregards such taboos would be captured by the authorities. Ironically that belief caused their ruin and extermination by the British. A Thug who thought he committed a sin towards Kâli got arrested. The man thought that his fall was ordained by the goddess due to his disloyalty. He confessed everything about the cult to the amazed-British-authorities and betrayed his stooges/accomplices. Then the rest followed like a chain reaction in Chemistry.*

Departing for their winter campaigns in gangs of twenty to fifty, the Thugs pretended to be simple, jovial travelers and meant to accompany other wayfarers. They would pose as friendly, witty people and indulge in talking and singing. With groups of victims they needed convenient opportunities to go into action, mostly at the camping site (paraphrased from Franzius, 1969, p.185).

The doubly knotted kerchief would be wrapped around the neck of the victim and garroted. If discovered before the burial, they would claim that they are moaning their poor relatives, who had lost their lives due to infectious diseases (paraphrased from Franzius, 1969, p.186).

Thugs spared Europeans for whom diligent search action would follow. Besides; they did not induce their sons into the cult unless they would apparently internalize<sup>5</sup> the practice. This was a vocation for Thugs lived from the goods of their prey (paraphrased from Franzius, 1969, p.186).

All Thugs were male, and membership in the cult was hereditary except for some outsiders let in voluntarily and a few spared children of the victims, [included as fresh blood into the community] (paraphrased from Putnam).

Here at this point, I remember the movie titled "The Island", starring *Michael*

<sup>5</sup> One can not expect all sons to take the way of their parents. I remember a French movie: An adolescent starts the family profession in a slaughter house. He is ordered to slay a cow, on the very first day. He succeeds with some difficulty then goes out to vomit. The hardened elderly employees laugh about the affair and celebrate it as an initiation (*rite de passage*) of the young one. S.Ç.

*Caine* (1980), which is the story of a bunch of modern day pirates; who use a small, yet undiscovered Caribbean island as their base of criminal actions. They are the “residues” of centuries-old former sea bandits.

They keep raiding small boats for booty but on occasion spare children in order to brainwash them into their small community; with the aim of overcoming the undesired side-effects of inbreeding. Children at small age or even in puberty are much easier to gain into a cause. After all, a child gets socialized into his new environment and learns to internalize the imposed values, eventually.

In African civil-wars; unfortunately; many children were made into war machines by fighting factions, having no other choice besides “enjoying” the uniforms covering their fragile bodies and the weapons entrusted into their little hands.

Indeed; The Ottoman society also established a system whereby children from the Balkans were recruited, converted to Islam and reared to high offices. The Janissary corps were comprised entirely of such soldiers. With no roots and relations behind, only through merit, one could ascend all the way to the ranks of pashas and eventually the post of Grand vizier, just below the Sultan himself.

In a similar manner; the concubines at the Harem section of the palace, were all slave adolescent girls trained into the Ottoman-world, in all its aspects. Confided to *kizlar aghasi*, the chief black eunuch and his helpers, the other eunuchs— *some were whites*— and the elderly womenfolk (including the sultans’ mothers or daughters), themselves former concubines, those women were usually in possession of immense political power as well as high prestige.

In early 1960s a small Istanbul girl got lost. Her well-to-do family kept giving announcements of promised prize offerings. Her picture was visible in municipal bulletin-boards in towns with the caption “Lost Child *Aylâ Özakar*” just below. She occupied the media for many months but was never found, dead or alive.

The event, well-publicized, caused a mass craze and city children were horrified at the thought of getting lost. The rumor then went that her father located her years later in an itinerant Gypsy group; but he had to repudiate the now-adolescent girl, the poor being an entirely different girl in comparison to the former little daughter of his.

*At about the age of ten, the sons would be called to witness the murders for the first time from a certain distance. Eventually they could strive to achieve the rank of bhuttote, a strangler. Thuggee membership was for life. The members at old age still did what they could for the group as cooks or spies—yet the wives and daughters<sup>6</sup> might never know the true side of the community (paraphrased from Putnam).*

In an era where severe caste distinctions prevailed, Thuggee was unique for

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<sup>6</sup> Even today many men in illegal businesses do achieve to keep their actual tasks hidden from their family. I remember an impressive scene embedded in my memory from a gangster movie: The teenage girl learns his father’s true self from the television news! She is horrified and at that same moment the father (played by Kirk Douglas) enters the house. In a cold-blooded manner he turns to his daughter and asks:

— “Do you believe that speaker on TV or me, your own father?” The girl bursts into tears on his shoulder. S.Ç.

cutting across all those social differences: Anyone from a farmer to a member of nobility could be a Thug. Many were even Muslims who, in a manner of interesting rationalization process, could actually reconcile their practice of human sacrifice to a pagan idol with their creed's categorical ban on idolatry and murder. When members of the brotherhood were not after their preys, the travelers, they lived as ordinary people with respected occupations. It was impossible to pinpoint a Thugs within the society (paraphrased from Putnam).

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## 4. THE DISCOVERY AND THE EXTERMINATION OF THUGS

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Stories of a hidden order of murderers roaming India go back far in history, but in modern times their adventure starts with the intrusion of the British forces into the peninsula in early 1800s. For some years, India's British administrators had been hearing reports of travelers vanishing in the countryside.

It was not until the discovery of a set of shady mass graves across India that the truth began to reveal itself. The bodies were apparently ritually murdered and buried in the same fashion, leading to a well-grounded conclusion: These killings were the task of a single, nation-spanning organization. It was known as *Thuggee*.

Nevertheless, despite the accumulating hard evidence, most members of India's British-run government remained passive and unenthusiastic to take action. It would be the efforts of an appointed officer that would eventually stir this apathy.

Sir William Henry Sleeman was a smart Bengal Army major, who internalized the duty entrusted into his hands: The elimination of the Thuggee danger. Confronted with disbelief and letargy from the part of his superiors, he transferred to the Civil Service in order to gain enough authority to wage his war. As a district magistrate, by the 1820s, he gathered a force of Indian policemen around himself and commenced his assaults against the order with miscellaneous policing methods.

Thanks to well-gathered information, Sleeman's teams formulated predictions of the timing and sites of prospective Thug actions. Employing Thugs' own methods against them—disguised as merchants, the officials would then pose as probable victims.

But Sleeman's job was indeed hard. Strangely, Thugs seemed to enjoy a lot of protection provided for them. Local authorities usually turned a blind eye to relate reports, while peasants would simply work around the bodies in their fields. Landowners and Indian princes often shielded the ritual murderers at the cost of Conflict with the British.

What could be the grounds for that protecting behavior? In the case of the lower-ranked people, it must be mainly superstitions goddess Kali would take revenge! As for the rich and powerful, they may have had some vested interest in Thug activity: sharing of the booty, bribery, or even the fascination by master con artists.



On the other hand; some factors were in Sleeman's favor. Europeans being among the untouchable, Thuggee was unable to retaliate against English persecutors. Moreover, once arrested, most Thugs cooperated with authorities committed fatalists. They now thought it was fate which wanted their imprisonment.

They showed little grief in denouncing their brothers, believing that anything that happened to them would also be the will of Kali. Maybe some Thuggee prisoners accused innocent men; unable to strangle in person now, in this manner they sent victims to their goddess via the gallows.

Within a few years the cult collapsed, and by the end of the 19th century the British announced the cult extinct. Sleeman became a hero. Nevertheless; It is hard for some to think that such an old fraternity could be dissolved in so short a time. Yes, the mass killings are a far-away-memory in recent times. Yet; in some far-flung regions, rumors still survive about the yellow-sashed strangers welcoming travelers with open arms and a broad smile (paraphrased from Putnam).

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## CONCLUSION

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Thuggies were a death order active in India for centuries until the British rule came there. Daraul (1970, p.225, 226) claims that coming from the depths of Hinduism, the cult is more vital than thought and it will live on in some form as long as Idol Kâli is worshipped. According to Putnam; *Kali, despite her fearsome appearance, is not an evil deity. For more mainstream Hindus, she is a goddess of time and transformation who can impart understanding of life, death, and creation and only to the members of the Thuggee cult, she was something else entirely.*

It is a general acceptance that through the clean-up act performed under the supervision of the prominent British officer (and later general) Sleeman, aided by informants, the cult was literally eradicated. It should be pointed out that some say that the campaign was an exaggerated, frenetic witch-hunt.

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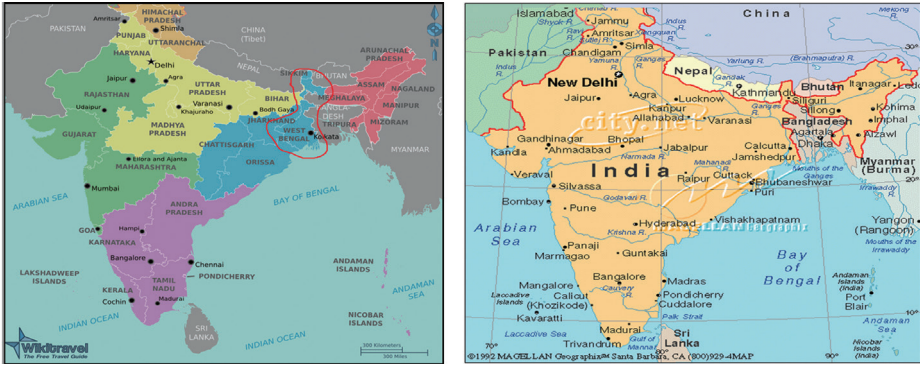
## APPENDIX: VISUAL SUPPLEMENT



**Figure 1**  
Depictions of Kâli (From the Internet)



**Figure 2**  
Major William Henry Sleeman, Who Is Known as the Destroyer of the Cult (From the Internet)



**Figure 3**  
**Maps of India. On the left Bengal Region Is Marked**  
**On the Right the City of Calcutta Is to Be Seen (From the Internet)**



**Figure 4**  
**A Drawing About Thuggeries by W. Cafester, Illustrated London News, 1857**  
**(From the Internet)**