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THUGGEE AND SOCIAL BANDITRY RECONSIDERED

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ABSTRACT. *Eric Hobsbawm's concept of 'social banditry', as presented in* Bandits *of 1969, is probably the single most influential idea in the modern study of bandits and outlaws. Key to Hobsbawm's argument is the assumption of a more or less direct relation between 'a bandit's real behaviour and his subsequent myth' – in other words, that the popular perception of bandits reflected the social reality of banditry, and that accordingly the Robin Hood myth had some basis in historical events. This article seeks to qualify some of the basic premises of Eric Hobsbawm's concept of social banditry by examining the context and process by which popular and official knowledge of banditry emerged. This analysis is based on a case-study of the thugs of early nineteenth-century colonial India. Though seldom described as such, thuggee is one of the best-documented instances of banditry historically speaking. This makes the findings and theoretical considerations made in connection with thuggee pertinent to banditry worldwide and during various periods. By focusing on issues of methodology it is hoped that a critical discussion of Hobsbawm's model, rather than just being a polemic deconstruction, may suggest a new approach to the study of banditry more generally.*

They are no more than a species of robber whose policy consists in murdering the person they rob and can seldom be convicted from want of evidence to corroborate their confessions which they in general will make before a magistrate because they themselves attach no idea of dishonour to this their profession.

N. J. Halhed, late assistant to the superintendent of police, regarding the thugs of Sindouse, 10 Dec. 1812[1]

Eric Hobsbawm's concept of 'social banditry', first voiced in *Primitive rebels* (1959) and later expanded on in *Bandits* (1969), is probably the single most influential idea in the modern study of bandits and outlaws.[2] The social bandit, according to Hobsbawm, was a noble robber, embodying the virtues of Robin Hood by robbing the rich and giving to the poor, and found historically all over the world. Social bandits expressed social protest among the peasants and were as such regarded as heroes and champions, contrary to the view of the elite and

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[1] Enclosed in Perry to Dowdeswell, 15 Jan. 1813, Bengal Criminal and Judicial Proceedings (BCJP), P/131/12, 30 Jan. 1813 (no. 62), Oriental and India Office Collections (OIOC), British Library (BL).

[2] See Eric Hobsbawm, *Primitive rebels* (Manchester, 1959), and *Bandits* (London, 1969).

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authorities who branded them as criminals. In certain cases social bandits could lead the way and in that sense form a part of rebellion or revolt, which is why Hobsbawm had originally cast them as primitive rebels. Hobsbawm's work has been qualified on a number of points, especially by Anton Blok in a review article from 1972, thus stimulating a long-lasting debate among scholars as to the applicability of the model of social banditry.[3] In the last four decades numerous works have appeared on the subject, in various geographical and chronological contexts, in one way or another relating to the concept of 'social banditry', adopting or deconstructing it.[4] However, the recent republication of Hobsbawm's *Bandits* and Blok's review article, both up-dated and with extensive additions, calls anew for a discussion.[5]

This article seeks to re-examine the model of social banditry and its continued application by historians and others, and to question its appropriateness as a framework and programme of research.[6] A concept like social banditry is, in my opinion, best assessed and appreciated in the context of empirical material and I shall base my discussion upon the thugs of early nineteenth-century colonial India. In the literature the thugs are seldom described as bandits and yet thuggee is one of the best-documented instances of banditry historically speaking.[7] This makes the findings and theoretical considerations made in connection with thuggee pertinent to banditry worldwide and during various periods. Since the thugs have never been cast as social bandits, my purpose is not to try to invalidate the model by citing historical examples to which it does not apply. Rather I want to explore some of the themes crucial to Hobsbawm's work; more particularly the construction of knowledge of banditry, the differing views of authorities and rural population and the bandit's self-perception and myth. By focusing on issues of methodology I hope that a critical discussion of Hobsbawm's model, rather than just being a polemic deconstruction, may suggest a new approach to the study of banditry more generally.

I

First of all it is necessary to recognize that Hobsbawm's work on banditry is firmly rooted in the leftist and Marxist-inspired approach to history that developed in

[3] Anton Blok, 'The peasant and the brigand: social banditry reconsidered', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 14 (1972), pp. 494–503, with Hobsbawm's rejoinder pp. 503–5.

[4] To name but a few: Richard W. Slatta, ed., *Bandidos: the varieties of Latin American banditry* (New York, 1987); John S. Koliopolis, *Brigands with a cause: brigandage and irredentism in modern Greece, 1821–1912* (Oxford, 1987); and Stephen Wilson, *Feuding, conflict and banditry in nineteenth-century Corsica* (Cambridge, 1988). One work in particular that I would like to draw attention to is Florike Egmond's brilliant *Underworlds: organized crime in the Netherlands, 1650–1800* (Cambridge, 1993).

[5] In the following I am referring to the latest edition of *Bandits* (London, 2000) and the review article in Anton Blok *Honour and violence* (Cambridge, 2001), pp. 14–28.

[6] I would like to acknowledge the help of Prof. C. A. Bayly, Ben Hopkins, and especially Ricardo Roque, who have all made valuable comments on this article.

[7] The relationship between the terms 'thug' and 'thuggee' is like that of 'bandit' and 'banditry'.

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the 1960s and 1970s and of which he himself was one of the most prominent proponents. The theoretical background is thus one in which the development of history and civilization is seen largely if not exclusively as a continuing struggle between the different classes – hence the focus on social and economic history. Accordingly, in Hobsbawm's use the term 'social' is not a neutral descriptive notion but key to the theoretical and not least ideological framework.[8] When reading Hobsbawm one can often exchange 'social' in social bandit for 'just' and his understanding of bandits is at times not far from the popular perception of the noble righteous robber. To Hobsbawm social banditry is about the struggle for social justice and therefore implicitly understandable and justifiable – on the ideological level at least.[9]

Hobsbawm's notion of social banditry is not a straightforward historical model inasmuch as it combines historical records with fiction, folklore, and myths, in order to understand the mentality of bandits and the rural population in particular. It is in part for this reason that the idea has attracted such a strong interdisciplinary following as it seems to ground beliefs in a historical context. But the interdisciplinary aspect of the social bandit model is at the same time its main weakness in that the nature of the relationship between the historical context and the myths and legends is never resolved or sufficiently explored. Even after considerable revisions of his book it remains unclear whether Hobsbawm considers the social bandit to have been a social reality or merely the invention of people. Thus the main problem with Hobsbawm's concept is not that there are too many historical cases for which it does not apply, which there are, but that the basic premise of the model is flawed.[10]

In his initial response to Blok, Hobsbawm argued that the social bandit did exist in the distinction between 'good' and 'bad' bandits made by the rural population. Hence the social bandit existed because belief in him existed: 'It seems simplest to assume that there is some relation between a bandit's real behaviour and his subsequent myth.'[11] One cannot but agree with this statement. However, the exact nature of the relation between 'real behaviour' and 'subsequent myth' is anything but straightforward in the manner that Hobsbawm seems to suggest.[12] It is to state the obvious that opinion depends on point of view, but even among the same rural population any given act of banditry will inevitably be perceived differently depending on the circumstances. A further degree of uncertainty is added when it is considered that the bulk of Hobsbawm's material are stories and ballads, often written down long after the

[8] The reader is never in doubt as to where Hobsbawm's sympathies are located, see Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, pp. 123–38.

[9] See ibid., pp. 144–5.

[10] I realize that Hobsbawm might consider social banditry as a social reality, but I am applying the term to signify the events of the past – what Hobsbawm calls 'real behaviour'.

[11] Hobsbawm's rejoinder to Blok's review article, 'The peasant and the brigand', p. 505.

[12] Information is never impartial and a distorted report of banditry may lead people to interpret it as being the act of a 'good' or 'bad' bandit respectively, without it being in any way reflective of the actual nature of the specific event.

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events. Moreover, these fictional literary accounts are usually the product of an urban elite and not simply reflective of the peasant mentality – except in a heavily romanticized manner – nor of the social reality of banditry.[13]

In the subsequently revised editions of his book Hobsbawm conceded that the 'real life' of bandits often did not match their public image and that myths and ballads can *not* be used as sources for the 'real life' of such bandits.[14] A new first chapter takes into account the relationship between bandits, the authorities, and various forms of power, a discussion that was wholly absent in the first editions. But the revision does not go as far as resolving the inherent ambiguity of the model and Hobsbawm makes the following revealing statement:

> what interests the social and economic historian is primarily the structure of banditry, social or otherwise, rather than the effects of bandits' activities on the wider history of events in their times … Their names and the details of their exploits hardly matter. Indeed, for the bandit myth, the reality of their existence may be secondary. Few, even among archive-rats, really care about identifying the original Robin Hood, if there was such a one. We know that Joaquin Murieta of California is a literary invention; nevertheless he is part of the structural study of banditry as a social phenomenon.[15]

This relegates the social bandit to a world of beliefs and mentalities entirely separated from any 'physical' history. But if there is some kind of relationship between a 'bandit's real behaviour' and 'subsequent myth', which even Hobsbawm recognizes, it *does* matter whether a bandit was 'real' or not. Myths and legends of bandits do not appear out of the blue, but in a specific historical context and accordingly the social reality of banditry cannot simply be left out of the equation. If we are to understand the myths and the processes by which they emerged, a comprehensive knowledge of 'names and details' is essential. Throughout the book Hobsbawm consistently pursues an ambiguous strategy. When talking of 'robber barons' for instance, Hobsbawm mentions 'Dumas' Musketeers' and the 'Spanish *conquistadores*' in the same breath – as if these examples were comparable.[16] A sentence like 'Just so in real life (or was it contemporary legend?)' seems to suggest an awareness of the problem, but this is not reflected in the general argument.[17] At the same time Hobsbawm does acknowledge the importance of what he calls the 'political history' of banditry, by which he means the study of the historical phenomenon.[18] Thus it appears that his view of the study of banditry is rooted in a sharp but unarticulated division between social and political history, the subject and not least methodology of which are, in his view, entirely different in nature. The aim of his revised book is to show how

[13] As the work of, for instance, Peter Burke has demonstrated, folklore can be used to great effect to examine the way that people perceived their world and not, as Hobsbawm implicitly argues, how that world 'really' was. [14] Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, p. xi. [15] Ibid., p. 10. [16] Ibid., p. 42.

[17] Ibid., p. 49. At one point Hobsbawm identifies economic reasons as the main motive for becoming a *haiduk* (Bulgarian bandit) with the qualification: 'if we are to believe the innumerable haiduk songs and ballads'. Yet two pages down he states: 'As we have seen, their motives for going into the mountains were mainly economic.' Ibid., pp. 79 and 81. [18] Ibid., pp. 10–11.

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the 'social element in banditry [fits into] the political history of banditry'.[19] This in fact he never does. I would argue that the social and political history of banditry are indivisible and therefore already 'fit together'.

One of the main characteristics of Hobsbawm's concept of social banditry is the wide range of types of banditry for which it does *not* apply: namely urban bandits, members of the 'underworld', robber barons, raiding communities, organized criminal bands, and retainers of the elite as well as feuding bandits.[20] In his differentiation between common robbers and social bandits Hobsbawm claims that 'It would be unthinkable for a social bandit to snatch the peasants' (though not the lord's) harvest in his own territory, or perhaps even elsewhere.'[21] Such rigid structuralism fatally undermines much of his argument as it would in fact be impossible to find a single bandit who did *not* snatch the harvest of peasants, locally or elsewhere. Hobsbawm accepts that the distinction between social bandits and common robbers is less clear in practice than in theory; 'Nevertheless', he states, 'analysis requires us to establish the difference.'[22] However, he does not make any comprehensive use of primary material such as police reports and trial records that might actually permit that. The argument is further complicated when Hobsbawm maintains that 'criminal robbers' who were regarded as 'good' bandits by the rural population still remain outside his definition of the 'social bandit'.[23]

Hobsbawm has not revised the basic concept of social banditry, or his use of the sources upon which the work is based. In the postscript to the latest edition of *Bandits*, he repeats the statement he originally made in 1972: 'However, while the most unsuitable candidates have indeed sometimes been cast for the role, so far as I know, all regions with established bandit myths distinguish between "good" bandits and primarily anti-social "bad" bandits on the grounds of their behaviour in real life (actual or supposed).'[24] The bracketed addition of 'actual or supposed' negates the meaning of the sentence and leaves the argument adrift. The inherent problem of taking popular accounts at face value is never addressed, and even when Hobsbawm acknowledges the existence of such issues, he does not reflect on the wider implications this has for the basic tenets of the concept of social banditry. As has been pointed out it is in the myths and ballads of the 'good' bandits that we may identify elements of social protest among the peasantry – not in the actual acts of the bandits themselves.[25] Since Hobsbawm has based his work almost exclusively upon such material it is no wonder that he reaches the conclusion that he does. Using popular accounts of banditry alone as the main source could only give him a popular, and hence in the methodological sense fairly narrow, view of banditry. Hobsbawm's social bandit is in fact a historiographical equivalent to the myth of the noble robber of popular culture.

[19] Ibid., p. 18. [20] Ibid., pp. 19–20. [21] Ibid., p. 20. [22] Ibid., p. 21. See also p. 45.
[23] Ibid., p. 44. [24] Ibid., pp. 168–9. [25] Blok, *Honour and violence*, p. 21.

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The conceptual slip from myth to social reality, and vice versa, is also apparent in the work of non-historians following in the footsteps of Hobsbawm. According to the folklorist Graham Seal, historical bandits had to conform to the standard of the noble robber in order to succeed: 'Outlaws who disregard these rules are not balladised and, more worryingly for them, are unlikely to have the sympathy and therefore sustaining support of their own social group or groups.'[26] A very clear connection is here made between the myth of a bandit and the bandit's ability to operate, the former being the precondition as well as signifier of the latter. Being brave and a gentleman were amongst the characteristics ascribed to noble bandits, especially when it came to women, whose virtue had to be defended. In that regard Seal notes of the eighteenth-century English highwayman Dick Turpin: 'Turpin's career of crime included some unpleasantly violent and distinctly unchivalrous actions against women. But Turpin's folkloric representation in song and story ignores these incidents.'[27] So bandits who breached the 'code' of the noble robber were after all balladized and if anything this shows that bandits were at times glorified *in spite* of their 'actual behaviour'.[28] The really interesting aspect of the social bandit myth is accordingly why robbers who did not comply with a certain moral standard of behaviour were nonetheless ascribed such virtues and recast as Robin Hoods in the popular imagination. The relationship between social reality and myth cannot be taken for granted but must itself be made the subject of analysis. This standpoint is not derived from a positivist distinction between 'fact' and 'fiction' as it were, but rests on the supposition that it is only by taking into account a much wider range of material that the actual nature and significance of myths and legends might be appreciated. The bandit myth needs to be situated within a specific historical context and not merely judged on the basis of an all-embracing structural argument.

II

The myth of the thugs is one of the more exotic features of the lore of the Raj. According to the myth, the thugs were a fraternity of ritual stranglers who preyed on travellers along the highways of nineteenth-century India.[29] Their unsuspecting victims were first deceived into joining the thugs and later at some secluded spot strangled, plundered, and buried, supposedly assuming the status of human sacrifices to the goddess Kali. The thugs were said to observe a plethora of religious rules; they relied on omens, performed rituals, and spoke a secret language. From 1830 onwards the British official William H. Sleeman unravelled

[26] Graham Seal, *The outlaw legend – a cultural tradition in Britain, America and Australia* (Cambridge, 1996), p. 7.

[27] Ibid., p. 8.

[28] Apparently Hobsbawm would not consider Dick Turpin as a social bandit, see Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, p. 22.

[29] This part of the article focuses on thuggee as a type of banditry and does not make any assumptions of presenting a comprehensive historical account of either thuggee or the British operations against the thugs.

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their secrets and by using pardoned thugs as informers, the so-called approvers, he put an end to their reign of terror. The eradication of thuggee was long regarded as one of the truly redeeming aspects of the East India Company's rule and having captured the imagination of authors like Thomas De Quincy, Eugene Sue, and Jules Verne, the thugs will be known from John Masters's novel *The deceivers* (1952) and movies like *Gunga Din* (1939) and the neo-Orientalist extravaganza of *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984).

This colonial representation of thuggee no longer has any credence among historians who generally agree that the emergence of the phenomenon should be seen in the context of the expansion of British rule in India.[30] During the early part of the nineteenth century the emerging colonial state was preoccupied with establishing tax-settlements with its newly acquired subjects and a legal and police system, i.e. with the introduction of the British notion of rule of law over its ever-expanding sphere of influence. Native landowners and petty rulers who harboured bandits, refused to pay tax, and who relied on alliances with bordering indigenous states, were recognized as one of the biggest obstacles to the implementation of law and order and the authority of the colonial state. Accordingly, ending the prevalence of banditry across northern India became a key task for the British administration. Violent crime was one of the most obvious challenges to the colonial state's monopoly of violence, and moreover one that could easily spill into open rebellion. Over the years the British criminalized and even demonized indigenous Indian practices with little or no understanding of the socio-political factors at play and in this way a whole plethora of practices, habits, and modes of living were reinterpreted along the lines of European notions of criminality, law, and order.[31]

Thus there can be no doubt that the colonial account of thuggee as formalized during the 1830s was to a large extent a misrepresentation and that the sources produced by the British should be used with the greatest circumspection. Like most other bandits the thugs did not leave any written sources of their own which would allow for the examination of their beliefs and practices independently.[32]

[30] See for instance Stewart Gordon, 'Scarf and sword: thugs, marauders, and state-formation in eighteenth century Malwa', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 4 (1969), pp. 403–29; and Radhika Singha, *A despotism of law: crime & justice in early colonial India* (Delhi, 1998).

[31] Some scholars, following the argument of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, basically dismiss the historicity of thuggee, see for instance Amal Chatterjee, *Representations of India, 1740–1840: the creation of India in the colonial imagination* (Basingstoke, 1998); and Parama Roy, 'Discovering India, imagining thuggee', *Yale Journal of Criticism*, 9 (1996), pp. 121–45. For a more detailed discussion of the historiography of thuggee, see my article 'The deconstructed stranglers – a reassessment of thuggee', *Modern Asian Studies*, 38 (2004), pp. 931–63.

[32] It is sometimes asserted that the British coined the term 'thug', which in Hindi means a 'cheat', but several pre-colonial indigenous sources testify to the usage of the word as meaning highway robbers and to the existence of what was called thuggee as a criminal practice in the seventeenth century if not earlier. One Mughal news-writer in the late sixteenth century, for instance, referred to 'highway robbers known in Hindi as thags', see I. Habib, *The agrarian system of Mughal India, 1556–1707* (Oxford, 1963, 1999 edn), p. 75 n. 40.

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But were it not for the British operations against the thugs we would not have the abundant material that is available on the subject today. The primary sources on thuggee offer a rare insight into banditry and parts of Indian society and history about which we otherwise know very little. For more than thirty years the British collected the depositions and testimonies of thousands of Indians, and, most importantly, they also gathered a huge amount of information not directly pertaining to thuggee, thereby documenting a vast range of socio-economic and religious aspects of Indian rural life. Each step of the judicial procedure has been recorded and thus we have all the stages of individual cases amply covered. That is not to say that the use of the material is in any way straightforward, quite the contrary, but if we work on the sources the rewards are indeed promising. Thuggee was first encountered by the British in north India in 1809 and accordingly the stereotype that most people are familiar with was just the final stage of a much longer process.[33] This allows us to trace the development and process by which colonial knowledge of the phenomenon came into being. The British may have misinterpreted the phenomenon they encountered but they in turn left us with sufficient material to reassess thuggee – both as a colonial construction and as a social reality.

III

My reconstruction of thuggee takes as its starting point the area of Sindouse, in present-day Uttar Pradesh, from where many of the thugs came and which has been known as bandit-badlands for the past two centuries.[34] An account of Sindouse resembles typical bandit territory as described by Hobsbawm or Blok: located on a narrow tract of land between two rivers and intersected by labyrinthine ravines, Sindouse was in a remote and inaccessible area in the southernmost periphery of the British domain, bordering on to native states on three sides.[35] During the eighteenth century the area was the scene of prolonged fighting and successive invasions as different invaders and lineages fought over the control of the land and intermittent raids by marauders added to the gravity of the situation. The first British officer to visit Sindouse in 1812 wrote that it

> produces nothing that is fit for trade; possess not a road fit for a wheeled carriage; and the very small proportion of arable land can require only a few hands to cultivate it. [A] great

[33] It is part of the colonial myth that the threat posed by thuggee was only taken serious by the British in 1830, but this is incorrect, see Wagner, 'The deconstructed stranglers'.

[34] It is not possible to cite all primary references for this article, but the following account is based on material from the Board's Collections (1809–39), and BCJP (1809–27), OIOC; the T. Perry papers, Add. MSS 5375–80, Cambridge University Library (CUL); and the papers of the Thagi and Dacoity Department (T&D), 1829–39, National Archives of India (NAI).

[35] Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, pp. 24–5 and 104, and Blok 'Bandits and boundaries: robber bands and secret societies on the Dutch frontier (1730–78)', in Blok, *Honour and violence*, pp. 31–2. The proximity of major trade routes and markets at Etawah and Agra had no impact on the situation in Sindouse, which was isolated by the topography and geographically came within the Chambal Valley region.

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part of the grain consumed by the inhabitants is brought from other parts of the country, and sold at an advanced price.[36]

This desolate state of affairs meant that an inflow of cash from an outside source was vital for the basic survival of the communities, while at the same time the insufficient extent of cultivable land resulted in a surplus of young men.[37] Add to this the martial ethos of the Rajput lineages, and the prevalence of banditry in the area was almost inevitable. The ravines, which yielded so little, provided excellent cover and hiding places and being a border region, Sindouse was very suitable for bandits who could pursue their depredations on foreign territory and subsequently retreat to the safety of their home. The inhabitants of the area had always been considered to be outside the bounds of law, and their refusal to pay taxes and subsequent extortion of contribution by the changing rulers, was a common theme of local history. The landowning elite were Rajputs, of high martial status, who had a long tradition of armed resistance and banditry, and it seems the entire population was armed, as one villager stated: 'It is the custom of the country. If a man goes only to his field he carries arms.'[38]

Banditry in Sindouse took the form of thuggee and was intrinsically tied to the local elite in a typical client–patron relationship, as Blok and others have pointed out and as Hobsbawm has acknowledged. The thugs lived on the land owned by the landholders, called *zamindars*, who took care of their families when the thugs went on expeditions and in return received a substantial share of the loot.[39] The thugs 'belonged' to specific *zamindars* and many conflicts between the patrons originated in thugs changing their allegiance.[40] The relationship between the thugs and the *zamindars* was in fact very similar to the so-called *jajmani* system or ritual ties between *zamindars* and their dependants.[41] Although the term itself may not be entirely appropriate, its connotations of ritualized fealty may be invoked to appreciate the existing system in Sindouse. Besides the term 'thug' the villagers referred to the bandits using words that implied either soldiery or retainer-ship and thus it appears that the thugs were considered as a sort of mercenary.[42] Accordingly they were not particularly stigmatized in Sindouse, and the use of martial designations imply that they enjoyed a fairly respectable

[36] Watkins to Perry, 26 June 1812, in Perry to Guthrie, 29 June 1812, BCJP, P/130/55, 18 July 1812 (no. 37), OIOC.

[37] See also Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, p. 35.

[38] Deposition of Oomrao, para 54, 4 Jan. 1813, T. Perry papers, Add. MSS 5376, CUL.

[39] See for instance examination of Ruheem Khan, 30 Dec. 1810, Appendix B, in Shakespeare to Bayley, 30 Apr. 1816, BCJP, P/132/44–45, 30 Aug. 1816 (no. 7), OIOC, BL; and deposition of Laljee, para 21, 11 Dec. 1812, T. Perry papers, Add. MSS 5376, CUL.

[40] Ibid.

[41] The nature of the *jajmani* system has been widely debated among historians, see for instance Peter Mayer, 'Inventing tradition: the late nineteenth-century origins of the north Indian "jajmani system"', *Modern Asian Studies*, 27 (1993), pp. 357–95.

[42] Many of the thugs had, at one time or another, been enlisted in an army or attached to some kind of military establishment; see for instance deposition of Bukhut Lodha, para 42, 31 Dec. 1812, T. Perry papers, Add. MSS 5376, CUL.

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reputation.[43] It was common practice for the landowning elite of northern India to defend their villages with mud forts and keep armed retainers as it enabled them to maintain a certain level of independence.[44] But armed followers were also used as plunderers by the *zamindars* and in that capacity they constituted an extra source of income. The relationship between the thugs and the *zamindars* was reciprocal; the thugs received protection and subsistence and in return the *zamindars* received a substantial share of the loot the thugs brought back from their expeditions. To become a thug 'officially' one had to obtain the permission of the *raja* or *zamindar*, which reflected a degree of local power by which marauders and mercenaries could be made 'lawful', if they went through the right channels.[45] This was typically interpreted as a kind of Hobbesian state by the British, who saw themselves as the natural successors to despotic indigenous kingdoms ridden by tyranny and chaos:[46]

> The class of people who plunder and disturb the peace of the country under the countenance of the zemindars took their rise at a remote period, for if I am correctly informed the zemindars, by the regulations of the Mogul Government were held strictly responsible for all thefts and robberies committed within their zemindarries; since the fall of the Mogul Empire every chieftain and every zemindar of consequence, has according to his means maintained in his service parties of armed men for the purpose of robbing and plundering on the highway, and shared with them, in the spoils agreeably to fixed regulations. The Mahratta chiefs have to this day, their Pendaries, their Grassuahs and their Beels, and the late Hyder Ally and Tippoo Sultan had their Looties to let loose on the neighbouring countries to rob and plunder them, while the zemindars of the Doab had their Mahwatties, Tugs and other descriptions of thieves in their pay for robbing and plundering on the roads, nor has this usage if my information is correct, yet entirely ceased although they are obliged to practice it, with more caution and circumspection than formerly.[47]

But the relationship between the thugs and the authorities went even further: in Sindouse and the surrounding villages, the thugs paid a tri-annual tax of 24 rupees 8 annas to the indigenous ruler, the Marathas at Gwalior.[48] This suggests that the relationship between the thugs, the local elite, and the authorities

[43] The thugs were often referred to as Mewatis, a common name for marauders in the region, see Shail Mayaram, *Against history, against state – counterperspectives from the margins* (Delhi, 2004).

[44] See Dirk H. A. Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy: the ethnohistory of the military labour market in Hindustan, 1450–1850* (Cambridge, 1990), pp. 6–7.

[45] See testimony of Ghulam Hussain, 11 Nov. 1810, enclosed in BCJP, P/130/27, 18 Jan. 1811 (no. 46), OIOC, BL.

[46] See for example John Malcolm, *The political history of India from 1784 to 1823* (London, 1826).

[47] Law to Court of Circuit, 25 Nov. 1809, BCJP, P/130/12, 16 Feb. 1810 (no. 52), OIOC.

[48] We know this because a copy of a tax-list from 1797 has survived, giving the name and caste of the head of family of 318 households, the tax being collected by one of the *zamindars* in exactly the same manner as ordinary revenue would have been. See W. H. Sleeman, *Ramaseeana* (Calcutta, 1836), II, pp. 155–224.

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was completely institutionalized, indeed normalized, and that the thugs were regarded as an asset and a viable source of income at all levels of the indigenous administration. The thugs were in fact paying a specific 'thug-tax', thus making banditry in this region very 'official' indeed.[49]

This is where Hobsbawm's analysis of the relationship between power, state, and banditry, when applied outside the European context, fails. According to Hobsbawm the existence of banditry reflected the weakness or instability of the state and bandits were by definition outside the range of power.[50] In India, however, all levels of the power structure of the indigenous state were linked with marauders or robbers, for an extra-territorial source of income. As Gordon has argued, the thugs were merely the lowest category in the hierarchy of marauders playing a part in the larger process of struggle for money and power. This certainly describes the situation in Sindouse.[51] Thuggee as it appeared in Sindouse, was not an archaic primitive practice, but an aspect of the militarization of the general population during the Mughal period in the context of overlapping and interdependent jurisdictions. The absence of a single overarching authority after the Mughals enabled emerging groups like the Marathas and Rohillas to compete for power and land, forcing the population to make alliances to secure their possessions and status. This led to the commercialization of group rights and resources, i.e. the thugs became an asset, which provided them with some bargaining power. The fact that the changing rulers of Sindouse continued the collection of the thug-tax suggests that in spite of local conflicts and sporadic outbreaks of violence, there was no complete break down of order and on certain levels life went on as usual.[52]

In Sindouse the thugs came from all rungs of rural society and lacked any caste homogeneity whatsoever; in fact they constituted a complete cross section of the general population of the region indicating that virtually anybody could be a thug. Both Hindus and Muslims were to be found in the same gangs, reflecting the high level of syncretism common in rural Indian society. Within the gang as well the hierarchy was sharply outlined and the leaders, designated by military ranks equal to lieutenant and captain, were treated with great respect and received the largest share of the loot. Family and kinship ties constituted the nucleus of the thug gangs of Sindouse of whom a large number were related; and it appears that introduction to thuggee happened primarily through the family, either close or distant. This is why the British perceived thuggee as a hereditary occupation that was passed on from father to son. The concept of family extended well beyond actual blood ties and associates were included in the family network,

[49] The very existence of the tax-list reflects the level of control exercised by the indigenous authorities, see Norbert Peabody, 'Cents, sense, census: human inventories in late precolonial and early colonial India', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 43 (2001), pp. 819–50.

[50] Hobsbawm, *Bandits*, pp. 12, 14, and 16.

[51] Gordon, 'Scarf and sword', p. 427.

[52] See material enclosed in Perry to Shakespeare, 24 Dec. 1818, BCJC, P/134/6, 19 Mar. 1819 (no. 10), OIOC.

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even across religious boundaries, and thus the thug gang may have functioned as an extension of the family and vice versa.[53] In times of hardship, however, individual thugs primarily relied on their kin in the narrow sense, a fact which the British later exploited when they used the family of wanted thugs as bait or played out approver-factions against each other.[54]

A level of fluidity prevailed in the composition of the thug gangs, and members of the same gang, for instance, did not necessarily have the same *zamindar* as patron. Whole gangs or individual members could join, leave, and rejoin various other bands without any friction between the principal leaders.[55] A thug band was never constant, therefore, but based on a few core members and a number of 'occasional' members whose allegiance was determined by various considerations, such as the prospect of loot. The thug-network and kinship ties did not overrule the caste system but were co-existing systems that took precedence at different times and in different contexts.

The thugs went out on expeditions after the harvest and stayed away until the rain set in, thus following not only the agricultural cycle, but also the traditional pattern of military campaigns including the rituals that preceded departure.[56] The range of the expeditions was immense, sometimes extending hundreds of miles and lasting more than a season. As far as we can trace the routes of the thug expeditions, they centred on travel routes and prosperous cities and at times followed the fluctuations caused by the incessant invasions and wars of the period. The various thug gangs invariably crossed passes during expeditions, which suggests that they were well acquainted with the routes being used within the thug network. The association of different thug gangs was not limited to those belonging to Sindouse and they maintained connections and co-operated with other gangs from different parts of India with whom expeditions were undertaken regularly. It seems very likely that the thugs operated within loose-knit networks of various bandits and petty criminals and that their secret language was very similar to the 'thieves' Latin' and cant of early modern Europe.[57]

The thugs preyed on the travellers who moved across India in huge numbers every year and many of their victims were related to the military market, such as soldiers, belonging either to the British or indigenous armies, or the traders that

[53] See for instance testimony of Ghulam Hussain, 9–17 Nov. 1810, enclosed in BCJP, P/130/27, 18 Jan. 1811 (no. 46), OIOC. [54] See Sleeman to Macnaghten, 10 Aug. 1833, T&D, D.1-(2), NAI.

[55] At the same time we do find individuals involved in thuggee on a much more peripheral level and with little or no choice themselves. Servants and slaves were at times commandeered by their masters to join in thug expeditions, usually carrying out menial chores on the way and not necessarily knowing the full extent of the murders that occurred. See deposition of Gopy and Budloo, 14 July 1812, in Perry to Dowdeswell, 10 Oct. 1812, T. Perry papers, Add. MSS 5376, CUL.

[56] See W. H. Sleeman, *Rambles and recollections* (London, 1893; repr. New Delhi, 1995), I, p. 359.

[57] See for instance Uwe Danker, 'Bandits and the state: robbers and the authorities in the Holy Roman Empire in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries', in Richard J. Evans, ed., *The German underworld* (London, 1988), pp. 75–107.

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streamed to the large military camps to sell their goods.[58] On the roads the thugs would murder any kind of travellers, pilgrims, and merchants – rich as well as poor, Hindu, or Muslim. The thugs would deceive their prospective victims into joining them on the road by various wiles. A common trick was for the thugs to pretend that they were going to the same destination as the travellers and to suggest joining up for protection. At some secluded spot or during the night the travellers would be set upon and murdered and the often-cited method of strangulation used by the thugs might seem to indicate some kind of ritualistic practice. In truth, however, it was merely a practical means of quickly rendering their victims senseless and the thugs did quite often use swords, knives, and poison. By murdering the people they robbed the thugs got rid of all witnesses, which made it almost impossible to convict them were they apprehended. The careless manner in which the bodies were subsequently hidden suggests that the purpose was merely to prevent their immediate discovery until after the thugs had left the area.

At times the quantity of valuables obtained by thuggee could be very large; however, usually the loot was meagre. Upon returning from the expedition part of the loot was immediately spent on paying back the *zamindar* or whoever had laid out the expenses for the expedition – usually with exorbitant interests. Fences and jewellers would come to Sindouse and buy the stolen property directly from the thugs.[59] The money realized from the loot would enable the thug and his family to live comfortably throughout the rainy season and sometimes there was even enough to allow him to stay at home for a whole year. Many of the thugs, however, seem to have squandered the money and the shares they had to pay the *zamindars* kept them in a circle of debt. In short, thuggee enabled its practitioners to maintain a standard of living out of the reach of most villagers, but it also kept them constantly indebted to the *zamindars*.

This brief account of thuggee has emphasized the socio-economic and topographical background of the area where they lived and the historical period during which they operated and the obvious question is how the bandits of Sindouse became the Kali-worshipping assassins of the colonial myth. This is where a detailed analysis and examination of the sources *and* of the context in which the sources were produced becomes vital.

IV

Apart from the lengthy and detailed approver accounts given during trials, the most interesting sources regarding thuggee are the interviews conducted by Sleeman and other officers during the 1830s, many of which were

[58] The thugs thus profited from the war-economy, and at the same time the turmoil enabled them to carry out their murders with less circumspection.

[59] See examination of Ruheem Khan, 30 Dec. 1810, Appendix B, in Shakespeare to Bayley, 30 Apr. 1816, BCJP, P/132/44–5, 30 Aug. 1816 (no. 7), OIOC, BL.

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published.[60] These interviews were conducted in order to gather information on a range of issues, most of which had never been broached in the strictly legal context of the confession and approver testimony. In other words it afforded the British with a chance to clarify and elaborate their knowledge of thuggee *tête-à-tête* with the thugs. These interviews present a faithful record, not of thuggee per se, but of the process by which the colonial knowledge of the phenomenon came into being. By looking at the questions posed by Sleeman and others we can see what subjects occupied the British and how the approvers reacted to specific questions. The fact that we have both the questions and answers enables us to observe the interaction between the interrogator and the informant, i.e. the 'colonial encounter' in action.

Official accounts of bandits and criminals often depict them as a more or less undifferentiated group defined by varying degrees of depravity. This is certainly also the case regarding the thugs and one of the defining aspects of the colonial myth are the numerous inconsistencies and contradictions found. This is caused by the fact that the British presented the phenomenon of thuggee as a fixed caste-like identity with certain characteristics; whatever differences appeared from the thugs' own accounts were explained away as mere variances of the same essence. However, the primary material in its entirety does not corroborate this interpretation and it is my main argument that thuggee was a type of crime rather than a type of criminal. It is possible to discern two basic categories of thugs: the 'hereditary' and 'occasional' thug. The thugs of Sindouse mainly belonged to the first category and to them thuggee was a quotidian vocation conducted under institutionalized and socially legitimate circumstances. The 'hereditary' thugs were *not* hereditary in the sense that the British implied but were following what might be described as an established profession. They perceived themselves as thugs, stating that it was their profession, which their fathers and forefathers before them had followed.[61] Even though they might at times follow a different occupation they still referred to a long tradition of thuggee.

The 'occasional' thugs on the other hand were not necessarily born into banditry, but belonged to marginal groups or were famished peasants, forced to make a living any way they could, thuggee being just one option. As the 'occasional' thugs often had no fixed abode they occupied a precarious position between sedentary and peripatetic society. While both 'hereditary' and the 'occasional' thugs usually operated under the protection of *zamindars*, the 'occasional' thugs were more vulnerable due to the less extensive network within which they operated.[62] In the passing of time any distinction between the two types of thugs

[60] See Sleeman, *Ramaseeana*, I, pp. 67–270. Another equally important collection of interviews is to be found in the 'Collections on Thuggee and Dacoitee, by Capt. James Paton', Add. MSS 41300, BL ('Paton Collections').

[61] Although the importance of 'social inheritance' is still widely debated in connection with criminality it is well documented historically; see for instance Koliopoulos, *Brigands with a cause*, p. 239.

[62] As Blok has rightly pointed out the success of bandits was directly related to the level of protection granted them by the elite, Blok, *Honour and violence*, p. 18.

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became increasingly blurred, and as the 'hereditary' thugs were pursued relentlessly by the British they could not uphold their former lifestyle. It should be noted that for neither of the two types was thuggee ever the only means of gaining a livelihood.[63]

The various groups of thugs tended to represent the phenomenon differently and while the 'occasional' thugs often executed their crimes in an ad hoc manner, the 'hereditary' thugs had pride in their 'trade' and repeatedly emphasized the importance of rules, omens, and rituals. The confessions of the thugs of Sindouse, taken in the 1830s, harked back to a lost ideal period when they occupied several villages and carried on their banditry under the protection of the indigenous authorities in a legitimate manner. The information the British collected was thus reflective of the 'hereditary' thugs' self-perception, and they were describing an ideal of thuggee, not a 'realistic' picture of their practices.

The approvers told Sleeman and his officers how their tutelary deity protected them as long as they observed the requisite omens and rules and that their downfall at the hands of the British was caused by their murders of women and other 'forbidden' victims.[64] By complying with the rules and observances associated with a strict adherence to the ideal image of thuggee, the thugs could in effect pursue their 'trade of murder' with complete impunity, both in terms of prosecution and moral responsibility. One approver expressed the belief in the goddess's absolution of the thugs' blame in no uncertain terms: 'She pardons our murders – it is not I, who murder, but Bhowanee, she is responsible!'[65] An intimate experience of murder, death, and dead bodies necessitated a framework which allowed the thugs to carry out the grisly business of thuggee with a clear conscience.[66] The thugs' world was one of constantly changing fortunes; they acquired huge sums and lost them again, were imprisoned and released, and had to migrate and resettle throughout their lives. By presenting thuggee within a religiously legitimate framework they could rationalize and make sense of the different events, both to themselves and each other but also to outsiders. Indeed it seems likely that what had probably never been more than a vague or loose set of beliefs among the thugs regarding the role of their tutelary deity, assumed the appearance of doctrinal articles of faith and was attributed an undue significance when elicited and recorded by the British.

The issue of identity was also discussed by the approvers and it seems that the disguises of the thugs might also have had a more significant purpose beyond the deception of travellers. Having murdered some merchants near Jaipur, one thug gang brought the plundered merchandise to the city and sold

[63] Obviously the division of thugs into two groups is a simplified model, yet I find them to be useful in explaining the discrepancies in the material on thuggee.

[64] Nasir in Sleeman, *Ramaseeana*, I, pp. 141–2. See also pp. 157 and 221.

[65] Futteh Khan, 10 Oct. 1836, in 'Paton Collections', p. 59. See also Sleeman, *Ramaseeana*, I, p. 147.

[66] See Sleeman, *Ramaseeana*, I, pp. 175–6.

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it in the guise of peddlers, i.e. for a while they assumed the identity of their victims.[67] When we consider the multitude of different groups to varying degrees involved in the rural underworld and the widespread use of disguises and aliases, the notion of permanent identities is in many instances no longer meaningful. Many thugs, for instance, were supposed to disguise themselves as mendicants during their expeditions, while yogis caught during the 1830s stated that they travelled the roads to beg and sell beads and pearls but occasionally committed thuggee as well.[68] Thus it becomes impossible to distinguish between identity and disguise and primary and secondary profession or livelihood. Concerning the fluid identities of the peasant-mercenaries of northern India, the historian Dirk H. A. Kolff states that

> These identities, and others like them, took, in different places and periods, many forms and names according to social, economic, political, and social events. Men were not restricted to only one of them and in the course of the lives found themselves activating other designations that gave expression to other roles in society.[69]

Being a thug was probably compatible with a range of identities, and as was the case in Sindouse, religious, ethnic, caste, and thug identities took precedence over each other in different situations.

The point of view and sphere of understanding one finds in the approver depositions and interviews, belonged to men from very different social and geographic backgrounds. The precondition for their becoming approvers was that they acknowledged being thugs, regardless of whether they considered themselves as such or not. Under the direction of officials like Sleeman, thuggee assumed the appearance of a coherent socio-religious identity. The approvers had in effect been reduced to a homogeneous entity irrespective of their social background and standing. Thus the conversations were not only between Sleeman and the approvers, but also between the approvers themselves, trying to work out a coherent narrative, which could accommodate them all.[70]

Permeating every aspect of the practices of the thugs a particular emphasis on honour and legitimacy is discernable. The thugs did not regard their murders as dishonourable, and instead they often took pride in their skill and proficiency when strangling people. The approvers were also keen to distance themselves from thieves and other 'common' criminals, which again reflected an ideal according to which engaging in thuggee is not forced upon the thug by circumstances but a deliberately chosen livelihood or the honourable trade of one's forefathers. One approver made a great show of imparting this

[67] Testimony of Ghulam Hussain, 11 Nov. 1810, enclosed in BCJP, P/130/27, 18 Jan. 1811 (no. 46), OIOC.
[68] Deposition of Giddah Bhaynath, 27 Oct. 1837, T&D, D.2-(3), NAI.
[69] Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy*, pp. 181–2.
[70] However, it is not at all clear whether the British were aware of the role they played in refashioning the identity of the approvers.

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upon the British, and summed up the virtues and aspirations of the thugs in the process:

Buhram: (A notorious Jamadar or leader of Thugs of 65) with his usual great animation, 'a chor!' a thief! (here he imitated a skulking thief) but a Thug! (rising with animation) rides his horse! wears his dagger! And shews affront! 'choree na! Kubbee nyhen!' thieving! never! never! If a bankers' treasure were before me, and intrusted to my care, though in hunger, and dying, I would spurn to steal! but let a banker go on a journey, and I would certainly, ('albutta') murder him! but not a Mahajun whom I knew; (indignantly) I despise a Dacoit! a robber! ('pajee!') contemptible! let him come before me! 'our Keea!' (what else!).[71]

The thugs perceived themselves, and wanted to be perceived, as warrior-gentlemen. The thugs' 'code of honour' as expressed by Buhram was actually the martial ethos of groups like the Rajputs and Jats, who often constituted the landholding elite and therefore, in Sindouse for instance, were the patrons of the thugs.[72] Being Rajput was not so much related to birth or ethnic background as to a martial and ritual tradition, which emerged out of a history of military service, migration, and settlement, during the late Mughal period.[73] The use of military terminology and observance of rituals and similar practices prevalent among the thugs, can all to a greater or lesser extent be traced back to the ideal of the traditional warrior. Discussing the state of Indian society, Sleeman also touched upon this issue:

In India, the difference between the army of the prince and the gang of a robber was, in the general estimation of the people, only in *degree* – they were both driving an *imperial trade*, a 'padshahi kam.' Both took the auspices, and set out on their expedition after the Dasahra, when the autumn crops were ripening; and both thought the Deity propitiated as soon as they found the omens favourable; one attacked palaces and capitals, the other villages and merchants' store-rooms. The members of the army of the prince thought as little of the justice or injustice of his cause as of the gang of the robber; the people of his capital hailed the return of the victorious prince who had contributed so much to their wealth, to his booty, and to his self-love by his victory. The village community received back the robber and his gang with the same feelings, by their skill and daring they had come back loaded with wealth, which they were always disposed to spend liberally among their neighbours. There was no more truth in the prince and his army in their relations with the princes and people of neighbouring principalities, than in the robber and his gang in their relation with the people robbed. [Italics in original.][74]

Though obviously prejudiced, Sleeman nonetheless provides a meaningful description of the notions of legitimacy, banditry, and kingship within the martial

[71] Deposition of Buhram in 'Paton Collections', p. 24.

[72] Besides the Rajputs, there were also other models of the martial ethos, such as the figure of the Muslim gentleman trooper, see Seema Alavi, *The Sepoys and the Company: tradition and transition in northern India, 1770–1830* (Delhi, 1995).

[73] See Susan Bayly *Caste, society and politics in India from the eighteenth century to the modern age* (Cambridge, 1999), pp. 8–9; and Kolff.

[74] Sleeman, *Rambles*, II, pp. 30–1.

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tradition.[75] And it was in the context of this tradition that the thugs presented themselves. The question, though, remains as to what extent the thugs' self-perception extended beyond their own ranks. Were they successful in presenting their practices as legitimate and was this view shared by the Indian population more generally? The distinction made by the approvers between thugs and *dacoits* is very similar to that made by modern-day *dacoits* in the Chambal Valley area, who use the word *baghi* or rebel when referring to themselves.[76] While a *dacoit* was merely a common criminal, invoking the status of a *baghi* implied that one was engaged in a legitimate and noble act and fighting a righteous cause. In a similar manner nineteenth-century dacoity could be legitimized by invoking the concept of *bhumeawat* or honourable fight for land and lineage.[77] The distinction made between thugs and *dacoits*, and *baghis* and *dacoits*, reflects the distinction made by the bandits themselves on the one hand and by various authorities on the other. This is also the basic *leitmotif* of Hobsbawm's concept of social banditry, namely that bandits were criminalized by the authorities, and idolized as noble fighters by the local population.[78] Yet there is nothing to suggest that the inhabitants of Sindouse perceived the thugs in a particularly noble light, and the 'Robin Hood' imagery may be readily disregarded. Still, the thugs were part of the population, lived under the patronage of the Rajput *zamindars*, and had generally conformed to local notions of martial status and honour. The thugs' neighbours did after all share in the plunder and wealth they brought into the community, directly or indirectly. Furthermore, thuggee was never practised close to the homes of the thugs and accordingly the inhabitants of their villages were not alienated. Probably the thugs were regarded on par with the various other kinds of robbers and marauders kept as retainers by the local *zamindars*; as men who followed the respectable martial tradition and earned their legitimate livelihood by plunder as did so many others during this period.

To the relatives of the murdered victims and the bankers and merchants who had their property plundered, the thugs were probably no more than common murderers and robbers. There are, however, some hints that the sepoys of the Company harboured a particular hatred for the thugs who often murdered soldiers on leave. When the thug Inayat was arrested by sepoys after he had tried to burn the possessions of murdered soldiers, he stated that: 'the European officers found it difficult to prevent the Sipahees from bayoneting me on the spot'.[79]

[75] See also David Shulman, 'On south Indian bandits and kings', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 17 (1980), pp. 283–306.

[76] See Paul Winther, 'Chambel river dacoity: a study of banditry in north central India' (Ph.D. thesis, Cornell, 1972), especially p. 24.

[77] See Malavika Kasturi, *Embattled identities: Rajput lineages and the colonial state in nineteenth-century north India* (Oxford, 2002), pp. 200–28.

[78] It has been implied by some authors that thuggee might have constituted an anti-colonial practice, but this is simply not corroborated by the material; see for instance Felix Padel, *The sacrifice of human being, British rule and the Konds of Orissa* (Delhi, 1995), p. 138.

[79] See Inayat in Sleeman, *Ramaseeana*, I, p. 229.

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One reference to an article on thuggee in an Indian newspaper of 1833 suggests that among the educated elite and those in close contact with the British, the perception of thuggee was very similar to, if not directly derived from, the colonial one.[80] But we must remember the prevalence of large-scale banditry and brigandage during the period, and it remains unclear whether there was any moral distinction made by the victims between, for instance, *dacoits* and thugs. As the people living in the same villages as the thugs did not really distinguish between different types of bandits, there is little reason why it should be different as far as the rest of the population was concerned.

In summing up it becomes clear that the thugs were appropriating various legends, rituals, and practices that conferred a higher status to them and their acts. This was all part of a general strategy aimed to improve their status, but through interpretation of Sleeman and others it also played a significant role in the colonial construction of thuggee as a ritualized and religious phenomenon. The thugs did perform rituals and observe omens that to some extent guided their behaviour while engaged in thuggee.[81] But this was not exceptional and shows that they were really quite ordinary. Bandits who did not worship a tutelary deity, perform rituals, or entertain certain beliefs concerning the moral sanction of their acts would have been truly exceptional in the Indian context.[82] Furthermore, that the thugs believed their acts to be sanctioned by the goddess does not mean that the murders and robberies were carried out for an explicitly religious purpose. Most likely the motive for thuggee had nothing to do with religion, but the thugs as a means of legitimizing their acts ascribed to them a ritual and religious meaning. In practical terms it is virtually impossible to make a distinction between religious and non-religious acts carried out by religious people.

Accordingly I am arguing that many of the aspects of thuggee that attracted the attention of the British, the aspects that made thuggee stand out as a singular phenomenon, can be written down to the thugs' pursuit of social legitimacy. This argument is not wholly dissimilar from Blok's work on honour and violence, but while it is true that 'actual brigandage expresses a man's pursuit of honour and power', we should certainly not forget the very basic need for maintaining a tolerable livelihood either.[83] The shape that banditry assumed in a specific instance was related to the social aspirations of the bandit, but as far as motivation is concerned I would not venture to distinguish too sharply between on the one hand pursuit of honour and power and on the other pursuit of the next meal. During the examination of an inhabitant of Sindouse the British magistrate asked of what tribes the thugs were and the reply was: 'Of all tribes. He who was

[80] See J. W. Kaye, *The administration of the East India Company: a history of the Indian progress* (London, 1853), footnote p. 361.

[81] One approver described nine travellers whom the thugs had perceived as (literally) 'fair game' because of favourable omens, see deposition of Doorgha, 26 May 1833, T&D, D.2-(1), NAI.

[82] See also 'Paton Collections', pp. 64/79–80.

[83] Blok, *Honour and violence*, p. 21.

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hungry became a thug.'[84] Similarly, commenting on the likelihood of a rogue approver returning to thuggee or not, one thug said: 'Where will he get food? He will kill, to feed himself!'[85] Hunger is here emphasized as the main reason for committing thuggee, but obviously not all the inhabitants of Sindouse were on the verge of starvation. However, it does indicate the level of pragmatism as part of the motivation. The economic attraction of banditry, by which common villagers could earn several times more than by manual labour, should thus be taken into account.

V

On a range of points the thugs of Sindouse did conform to the classical bandit model: they came from an inaccessible border area with little arable land and a surplus of young men, an area that had a tradition of feuds and resistance. They were aligned with the local elite as retainers, organized on the basis of kinship along military lines, their excursions were seasonal, and they operated within a wider network of marginal groups. But thuggee was a type of banditry entirely devoid of any trace of social protest. The thugs killed quite indiscriminately, they had no grudges, no scores to settle, no wrongs to avenge vis-à-vis their victims. The thugs did not loom large in the popular imagination of the rural population and insofar as there was a myth of thuggee it was a British one.[86]

Hobsbawm considers banditry as a symptom of change, as a stage in a process rather than a quotidian phenomenon. In Sindouse this was not so and thuggee was a customary practice that was fully institutionalized – its existence did not necessarily imply weakness on the part of the authorities who controlled the thugs and benefited from their acts.[87] Banditry was not incompatible with state power in eighteenth- to nineteenth-century India but was often a semi-legal part of the indigenous state.[88] In Sindouse the thugs were an integrated part of rural society but at the same time they went on expeditions every year and thus their lifestyle constituted a combination of sedentary and non-sedentary aspects – of seasonal expeditions and return to the village base. Although some of the thugs considered themselves to have been hereditary few of them ever lived exclusively by plunder. For most it was an alternative source of income that could be reverted to in times

[84] Deposition of Birj Lal, Procs FA Etawah, 28 Feb. 1813, Appendix A, in J. Shakespeare, SP WP, to W. B. Bayley, Secy Govt, 30 Apr. 1816, BCJP, P/132/44–5, 30 Aug. 1816 (no. 7), OIOC, BL.

[85] Deposition of Rambux, Sept. 1836, in 'Paton Collections', p. 19. See also ibid., p. 66.

[86] See also Gordon, 'Scarf and sword', pp. 408–9.

[87] The secrecy that was such an integral aspect of thuggee was only necessary where authorities were strong.

[88] Obviously the thugs were persecuted by the local rulers in the territories where they carried out their murders, but connections, corruption and the ad hoc nature of indigenous legal practices ensured that they could often continue operating undisturbed. In India highway robbery was punished harder when it included murder but since the meting out of punishment was left to the discretion of the individual authorities, the thugs were never punished in any consistent manner.

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of need; there was no sharp division between farming and occasionally going on expeditions.[89] Identities were fluid and different strategies were available to the armed peasants of north India. Being a bandit was never an unchangeable identity.

The combination of secrecy, deception, and murder of the victims made thuggee a distinctive category different from other kinds of banditry. Why then would a man compelled to gain his livelihood by plunder commit thuggee rather than ordinary dacoity? The thug Kalee Khan made mention of one associate whose younger brother had been a *kazak* but after having lost his horse he had become a thug.[90] This clearly indicates that the type of crime to which people reverted depended on the means available to the individual, i.e. one's socio-economic position determined which type of livelihood could be pursued, including types of banditry. Thus thuggee was sometimes merely the continuation of a predatory lifestyle under well-regulated circumstances by men deprived of the means for open plunder. According to Blok: 'What united people behind banditry were kinship, friendship and patronage – not class. What animated banditry was the quest for honour and respect. What often motivated it was revenge – bandits invariably started their careers to avenge personal wrongs.'[91] In the case of thuggee the first statement is correct, the second only partly so and the third incorrect. First, one cannot speak of class in the Indian context, at least not in the sense that Hobsbawm uses it, and it was therefore precisely ties of kinship, friendship, and patronage that were at the core of thug gangs. As a highly institutionalized type of banditry, the common slang, rituals and myths, and wide network of associates strengthened the sense of unity among the thugs internally but also vis-à-vis the wider criminal networks. Secondly, the quest for honour and respect, in other words status and social legitimacy, is noteworthy in connection with thuggee but can hardly be considered the prime motive. Deceiving and strangling people was not honourable or even martially respectable and it is for that reason the thugs had to construct a ritual and mythic superstructure to imbue their activities with some sort of legitimacy. Thirdly, those who practised thuggee, either as a tradition or as a last resort, were not motivated by revenge as the practice was not 'directed' against anybody in particular. To the 'hereditary' thugs, thuggee was their profession and thus it makes little sense to talk of *a* starting point of their career, and while 'occasional' thugs might take up banditry in reaction to changing socio-economic conditions, it did not necessarily form a disjuncture in their life in terms of a change from law-abiding to criminal.[92]

[89] See also Kolff, *Naukar, Rajput and Sepoy*, p. 172.

[90] Deposition of Kalee Khan, 24 Apr., in Perry to Dowdeswell, 24 Apr. 1810, T. Perry papers, Add. MSS 5375, CUL.

[91] Blok, *Honour and violence*, p. 22.

[92] The focus on revenge as a crucial factor in becoming a bandit also ignores the very likely advancement from petty crime to banditry without any external causes being necessary.

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While some of the more ideological implications of Hobsbawm's use of 'social' in connection with banditry remain problematic, the term is still useful when reconsidered along the lines of Blok's argument:

> In a sense, all bandits are 'social' in so far as they, like all human beings, are linked to other people by various ties – of protection, support and collaboration. We cannot understand the practices of bandits without reference to other groups, classes or networks with which bandits form specific configurations of interdependent individuals.[93]

That is to say the phenomenon of thuggee only makes sense when examined in the context of the socio-economic background of the locality where it emerged. Furthermore, my discussion has emphasized the importance of social connections and links inside and outside the local community in the development and shaping of the specific type of banditry called thuggee. Examining the social conditions of thuggee is the only way of understanding this type – and indeed any type – of banditry. And it is only by taking account of the social conditions and wider historical context, that the true significance of the bandit myth can be assessed.

VI

It does indeed seem simplest to assume that there is some relation between a bandit's real behaviour and his subsequent myth, to paraphrase Hobsbawm, but it also seems safe to assume that that relationship is anything but direct. If it were direct, the conclusion would be that the thugs *were* religious fanatics who practised human sacrifice – because belief in the thuggee myth existed. I would argue that the thugs, like most historical bandits, aspired towards an ideal that was socially acceptable and even morally legitimate, and one that would ensure the support of the local elites and the rural population among whom they lived. Making the bandit's self-representation the subject of study would reveal much about his world-view, his religious beliefs, and sense of honour, but little about historical acts of banditry. The myth needs to be grounded within a historical context in order to be truly appreciated.

Then is the notion of social banditry still useful? The merit of Hobsbawm's work is primarily to have brought into focus an alternative history of banditry, one that did not rely solely on the view of the authorities but took into account the social aspects of banditry as seen from the other side of the law. The differences between, respectively, official and local perceptions of the legitimacy and status of bandits (to which might be added other marginalized groups) are thus emphasized. The problem is that Hobsbawm excised the archive in favour of folklore and furthermore that his 'social' is highly imbued with ideological significance. Myth remains myth, whether it is that of the authorities or the illiterate peasantry.

[93] Ibid., p. 18.

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To take the colonial myth of thuggee as an expression of popular belief would be a gross simplification, ignoring the process by which this representation was elicited and recorded, and to take it as simply reflecting historical events would be an even bigger mistake. Hobsbawm's claim that 'for the bandit myth, the reality of their existence hardly matters' is strangely at odds with his assertion of a relationship between 'real behaviour' and 'subsequent myth'.

The fact that bandits have often been criminalized by the authorities who misrepresented them as brutal murderers and simple thieves has led some historians, almost instinctively, to assume the opposite stance. The bandits are recast as reacting against elite suppression, their acts expressing social protest reflecting the sentiments of the poor. This also goes for the colonial context, where banditry is often interpreted as resistance against the colonial power.[94] While there certainly are good reasons for reinterpreting the official accounts of banditry, I do not find that the kind of historical indignation and personal idealism that characterize Hobsbawm's work is conducive to nuanced research. Sometimes bandits robbed the rich because they had more to be robbed.

One should be careful not to make too assertive generalizations with regard to banditry. There are always exceptions to the rule and insisting on essentialized explanatory models, of which even Blok's emphasis on honour and violence is suggestive, may lead to the kind of rigid structuralism that Hobsbawm has rightly been criticized for. Taking up banditry did not necessarily constitute a disjuncture; it was not always motivated by revenge; and even social bandits snatch peasants' harvest.

VII

In late October 2004 thirteen peasants were massacred by *dacoits* at Bhanwarpura village, the largest number of *dacoit* killings in a single instance since Phoolan Devi shot twenty-four villagers in 1981. I was then preparing to go to Sindouse, which is now quite peaceful and located more than 100 miles from the event and in a different state altogether. However, such is the power of the popular myth of *dacoits* in Chambal Valley that I could find no one willing to go to Sindouse with me to act as an interpreter for my research.[95] In the end I had to go on my own and rely on the old English teacher of Sindouse for my inquiries regarding the past of the area and the thugs.[96] In Sindouse the thugs are still remembered today. The *zamindar* who harboured them and opposed the British is now hailed as a freedom-fighter in terms similar to those used of twentieth-century Indian

[94] See for instance David Arnold, 'Dacoity and rural crime in Madras, 1860–1940', *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 6 (1979), pp. 140–67; and Ranajit Guha, *Elementary aspects of peasant insurgency in colonial India* (Delhi, 1983).

[95] See also Paul Winther's excellent analysis of twentieth-century banditry in the area.

[96] It should be noted that the limited extent of my stay in Sindouse (in 2001 and 2004), and my reliance on a local interpreter, means that this part of my fieldwork hardly qualifies as anthropological fieldwork proper and is in no way comparable to, say, that of Blok's in Sicily.

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nationalists. The thugs on the other hand have not been internalized in the local tradition, and are instead said to have been a group of people who lived there before being expelled by the predecessors of the present Rajput lineages. Thus in the local tradition the patrons of the thugs are remembered as anachronistic patriots while the thugs have been 'othered' and inscribed in the stories of how the Rajputs expelled the original tribal inhabitants of the land. The villagers laughed when I told them that people were afraid to come there and they assured me that I was quite safe. When I asked about Phoolan Devi, who is reported to have been hiding in Sindouse in the early 1980s, their point of reference was Shekhar Kapur's 1996 movie *Bandit queen*. Thus in a remote area, for centuries associated with banditry, local knowledge of a famous female *dacoit* was derived from a European-produced movie. So much for the existence of the Robin Hood figure in rural popular imagination.

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