

THE THUGGEE CULT

The Thuggee Cult is a Hindu sect that is known for its notorious strangulations of travelers in India generally throughout central India (Gordon 404). The Thuggee Cult became more widely known during the 19th century when Sir William Bentinck, along with his chief captain Sir William Sleeman, took vigorous action against the cults during the 1830s. The history of the cult goes back many centuries, yet an exact date of its origins is unclear. What is clear is that the ritual killings were done in honor of the goddess Kali and that the killings were very distinct and highly ritualistic. The members of the Thuggee cult were considered to be hereditary killers; that is Thuggee was thought to be a trait passed down through generations. Sir W. Bentinck's campaign for the eradication of the Thuggee Cult took measures that tended to be extreme in nature. The campaign all effectively eradicated the Thuggee Cult from existence entirely.

The first recorded arrest of a Thug (also known as *thag*) was Tipu Sultan in 1799 although at the time it was not known that he was a cult member and that the murder was ritualistic. Although the first arrest was in 1799, there are records from 13th century of Thuggery, which suggests that the Thuggee Cult has more ancient origins. The Thuggee were a cult of professional roadside stranglers who preyed upon travelers as an act of worship to the goddess Kali; interestingly, they did not strangle any of the English who were in the area. The Thuggee Cult membership was passed down through heredity, yet this passage did not function as other castes do in Hindu society. Members of the cult may come from any region, religion, class or caste. Also, outsiders are welcomed into the cult. They are a coherent group in that they share language, belief in the practice that has many minutely observed rituals, prohibitions and superstitions.

Meadows Taylor's novel *Confessions of a Thug* offers an explanation of the divine origins of the cult.

“In the beginning of the world according to the Hindoos, there existed a creating and a destroying power, both emanations from the Supreme Being. These were, as a matter of consequence, at constant enmity with each other, which still continues. The creative power, however, peopled the earth so fast, that the destroyer could not keep pace with him . . . [he] was given permission to resort to every means he could devise to effect his objects. Among others, his consort Deveen, Bhowanee, or Kalee . . . assembled a number of her votaries, whom she named Thugs. She instructed them in the art of Thuggee . . . She endowed the Thugs with superior intelligence and cunning, in order that they might decoy human beings to destruction, and sent them abroad into the world, giving them, as the reward of their exertions, the plunder they might obtain from those they put to death; and bidding them to be under no concern for the disposal of the bodies . . . [Eventually] corruptions crept in . . . after destroying a traveler, [they] determined, instead of following the old custom of leaving the body unnoticed, [that they would] watch and see how it was disposed of . . . [Kalee] quickly espied them . . .

‘You have seen me,’ said she, ‘and looked upon a power which no mortal has ever yet beheld without instant destruction; but this I spare you; henceforward, however, I shall no longer protect you as I have done. The bodies of those whom you destroy will no longer be removed by me, and you must take your own measures for their concealment. It will not always be effectual, and will

often lead to your detection by earthly powers, and in this will consist your punishment. Your intelligence and cunning still remain to you. I will in future assist you by omens for your guidance; but this my decree will be your curse to the latest period of the world.’

So, saying, she disappeared, and left them to the consequences of their own folly and presumption: but her protection has never been withdrawn.

(Meadows, 28-29)

This story is important in explaining the purpose of the Thugees. As many scholars have postulated, they are not an economically motivated cult. Although, there have been theories stating that the cult was materialistically driven. One of these theories pertains to the early colonization of India by the British. The members of the cult who were apprehended were often soldiers or officials, who had been under the employment of royalty in territories that were made into British states. This theory is, however, fairly problematic as the victims of the crimes were never British. Further, the Thuggees were actually widely integrated into Hindu culture, particularly into agrarian life. Among groups of organized criminals, the Thuggee were the most interwoven into local society. They held a symbiotic relationship within villages and were supported by “zaminidars (landowners), Indian princes, law enforcement officials, merchants and even ordinary farmers” (Roy, 125). Large landholders would allow them to live on their land so long as they received their portion of the Thuggee’s plunderings. They also provided protection to the area, for they did not harm locals nor did they allow other organized criminals into the area. In return for this, the Thuggee cult members were permitted to practice ritualistic killings for their goddess Kali.

This living arrangement would not last for an extended period of time, however. After colonization by the British the state of affairs would drastically change for members of the Thuggee cult. The first mention of a problem between the British and the Thuggee Cult occurred in 1810 (Roy 123) with the Commander-in-Chief's instructions to Indian soldiers, who belonged to the East India Company's army, about the dangers of traveling at night, especially with large sums of cash. Dr. Richard Sherwood's essay for the Madras Literary Gazette in 1816 was the first time that the cult had been officially recognized by the British. However, it was not until 1830 when Captain William Sleeman, under Sir William Bentinck, took measures to eradicate the Thuggee Cult that had become more notorious. This campaign proved to be far more difficult than initially expected due to the elusive nature of the cult.

One of the reasons for this was that Indians were generally neither interested nor willing to give cult members up. To the British those of the upper echelons of society had no interest in condemning the Thuggee because the murders were often to their benefit. There also was a large amount of superstition surrounding the Thuggees. Although it was not unusual for peasantry to discover bodies in fields and wells, they went unreported. Added to this was the fact that members of the cult were often upstanding citizens who were very assiduous about their social and religious obligations. Yet, what was most difficult for the British to detect were the murders themselves. Due to the nature of the murders, there was often little evidence that the murders ever occurred: the victims were murdered by strangulation and buried immediately thereafter (Gordon 415).

Edward Thornton describes the ritualistic killings in his book *Illustrations and Practices of the Thugs*. The Thuggee members would wait on highways or outside of

town in groups of three or four and often with a child of age 10 or so. They would appear as though they had all met there by accident. Then they would learn about any travelers who might be carrying goods and enter into conversation with them. The travelers would then be convinced that the cult members were really fellow travelers who would like to travel along with them for safety. Once the opportunity presented itself they would then throw a silk scarf around the victim's neck. Two Thugs were generally required to perform the murder. Were one Thug to perform the murder singlehandedly he would be praised for his efforts by other cult members. The noose would become tighter around the victim's neck as he/she struggled to get free. The body would then be taken to a spot to be buried face-down in a three or four foot grave. The nature of the murders made detection incredibly difficult to uncover (Thornton 7-11).

Adding to all these difficulties was Hindu law, which prohibited the testimony of approvers (one who had participated in the exploits of the gang and thus was fully culpable (Freitag 238)). In an attempt to counteract the difficulties that they were faced with, the Thuggee and Dacoity Department decided to implement Act XXX of 1836. The Act deemed that it was no longer just criminal deeds that would be punishable by law; rather, anyone who was deemed to be a Thug was prosecuted, regardless of whether or not they could be tied to any specific crime. Any person who was convicted of "having belonged to a gang of Thugs, liable to penalty of imprisonment for life" (Roy 33). The law applied retrospectively as well as established special courts for the trial of Thugs, permitting the arrest of not only individuals but also entire family (as Thuggee was passed down hereditarily). In addition the testimony of approvers was also allowed, as there was a major lack of independent witnesses.

Anyone who was identified as a Thug by testimony from an approver was found to be guilty regardless if he/she had been convicted of any single specific crime. The accused did not have the benefit of counsel so they were never cross-examined by prosecution. Upon confessing to being a part of the cult one could have the sentence of hanging or transportation (to a criminal penal colony) reduced to life in prison without appeal. Because of this Thugs were advised by the government to plead guilty to being cult members. There were numerous problems with this method of conviction. One of the problems may very well have been that imprisoned Thugs were now able to be creative in their methods of killing. Accusing one of being a member of the cult could mean having that person hanged by the courts, absolving them of the need to kill him/her or themselves.

Convicting was not the only job of the Thuggee and Dacoity Department, as British citizens they sought to rehabilitate the Thugs. Thugs who had not actually been convicted of a capital crime were the most likely candidates to be selected for the rehabilitation programme. Some were actually sent to work with the British police force while others were settled in colonies where they would engage in manual labor. They were also not allowed to reproduce as this would merely produce a new generation of Thugs. Between the years of 1831 to 1837, 3,266 Thugs were captured by the British, 412 of those were hanged, 483 provided evidence to the state, while the remainder were transported or imprisoned for life (Encyclopædia Britannica).

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NOTEWORTHY WEBSITES RELATED TO THE TOPIC:

http://www.bbc.co.uk/religion/religions/hinduism/history/history_1.shtml#h7

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thuggee>

<http://www.environmentalgraffiti.com/featured/indias-infamous-thuggee-cult/5973>

<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,501020729-322673,00.html>

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