

Criminalisation and Colonial Violence: Thuggees in the Accounts of William Henry Sleeman

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Of the myriad ways violence has helped propagated colonialism, criminalisation has always been a quintessential one. It facilitated the justification of the ‘debasement’ of the indigenous people, and the ensuing violence that would be unleashed on them. I employ the term ‘debasement’ here in accordance to David Spurr; in his pathbreaking work *The Rhetoric of Empire*, Spurr formulated twelve rhetorical modes through which the coloniser perceived the colonised. They “constitute a kind of repertoire for colonial discourse, a range of tropes, conceptual categories, and logical operations available for purposes of representation” (Spurr 1993, 3). His theorisation of the rhetoric of ‘debasement’ formulates

from the act of this representational classification, and is perched deep into the notions of abjection. According to him, this rhetoric works on certain parallelisms:

[T]he qualities assigned to the individual savage – dishonesty, suspicion, superstition, lack of self-discipline – are reflected more generally in societies characterized by corruption, xenophobia, tribalism, and the inability to govern themselves. In the same way, social problems in health and sanitation, unemployment, or population growth come to be associated with individual filth, indolence, and sexual promiscuity . . . Here synecdoche and metaphor combine, marking the individual as both cause and emblem of a more general degradation. (Spurr 1993, 76)

Debasement thus functions as a prohibition preserving the Self – or protecting the boundaries of colonial cultural values and practices – against the Other. It is then followed by the rhetoric of ‘negation’, operating as a “provincial erasure, clearing a space for the expansion for the colonial imagination and for the pursuit of desire” (Spurr 1993, 92-93). Most often, the indigenous colonised would be overrepresented in crime, followed by the process of victimisation that would justify the unleashing of colonial violence upon them in the name of justice. In fact, the very legitimacy of the colonial justice is subject to problematization by the postcolonial critic or historiographer.

Although colonial practices are almost as old as the human civilisation, and critics like Asselin Charles have cited the Mesopotamian victory-stele of Naram-Sin of Akkad or the ancient Egyptian Narmer Palette as examples of colonialism in the antiquity, the present study shall limit the use of the term to Western Europe's colonisation of nearly half the globe in the last few centuries (Charles 1995, 135-136). Furthermore, although that phenomenon has arguably come to an end (apart from a few 'overseas' territories) several decades ago, and attempts at ameliorating the conditions of the indigenous populace have been severally made, studies show the prevalence of colonial criminalisation in the modern world as well. Chris Cunneen, for example, has discussed in detail "the high rates of criminalization and victimization of indigenous people in North America, Australia, and New Zealand", as well as the "role of colonization in defining crime" (Cunneen 2013, 387). Thus, critical discussions of the colonial models of criminalisation and violence are still quite pertinent.

In theory, 'criminality' is always a colonial discourse, for laws are made by and for those in power. According to criminologist Colin Sumner, historical studies on criminal justice "must inevitably turn us towards colonialism . . . crime is not behaviour universally given in human nature and history, but a moral-political concept with culturally and historically varying form and content" (Sumner 1982, 10). Cunneen also opines that the crimi-

nal laws are historically rooted in colonialism, but traditional criminology “has had a problem with understanding the importance of colonialism in structuring ideas about crime and punishment” (Cunneen 2013, 390). “Can criminology have a role unless it develops a theory of colonialism and its effects?”, he asks. “The dominant intellectual frameworks of criminology were established in the west with a view of understanding and explaining the phenomena of crime and crime control within specific western contexts” (Cunneen 2017, 251).

Several scholars, chiefly postcolonial, have attempted to analyse the role of law and criminality in the colonial process, along with their continued relevance in the present day with exploitative consequences. Biko Agozino, for example, have explored how colonisers have utilised the judiciary system to subjugate the colonised, and how the criminologists indirectly facilitated this process by virtue of their silence. He resorts to African literary works like *Devil on the Cross* by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o and *Oga Na Tief Man* by Tunde Fatunde to illustrate the potential for the decolonisation of criminology (Agozino 2003, 140-156). Harry Blagg, on the other hand, has focused on the colonial residues in the modern-day governance of Aboriginal people in an Australian context, attributing much of the violence as “less the product of Aboriginal culture...but rather a manifestation of the damage caused to the fabric of Aboriginal law and society by the intrusion of some of the most negative and destructive

aspects of non-Aboriginal culture” (Blagg 2007, 178). All of them more or less agreed with Cunneen that post-colonial perspectives on crime should adjudge it through the context of “the material practices and ideologies of the colonial states and by the resistances of colonized people” (Cunneen 2017, 250).

This, however, is not an advocacy in favour of the absence of crime altogether in a colonised state; nevertheless, crimes committed by the indigenous peoples, and the marginalised of them in particular, were exaggerated manifold and moulded to fit the colonial propaganda of criminalising the victims. Such criminalisation not only facilitated the justification of colonial violence; it also helped the attestation and codification of individual occurrences of violence by the imperialist state. The present study aims at demonstrating this through the discourse of *thuggee* in the works of William Henry Sleeman, an early nineteenth-century English administrator in India, juxtaposing his works with his contemporaries like Fanny Parkes.

Of all the orientalist myths and lore, few could capture the English imagination as fascinatingly as that of thuggee, the crime committed by a thug. For the uninitiated, “the thugs were a fraternity of ritual stranglers who preyed on travellers along the highways of nineteenth century India. Their unsuspecting victims were first deceived into joining the thugs and later at some secluded spot strangled, plundered and buried” (Wagner 2007, 1).

They also supposedly sacrificed their victim to the goddess Kali, practised several occult rituals, fervently followed omens, and communicated in secret codes – all of these contributing to heighten the exoticism associated with the early nineteenth-century thugs.

Indeed, highway crimes in India preceded the advent of the East India Company: there are “various accounts of highway robbery predating the official discovery of thuggee by the British in the early 1800s” (Wagner 2007, 25). Kim A. Wagner (*Thuggee: Banditry and the British in Early Nineteenth-Century India*, 2007) has written extensively on the thuggees in pre-colonial India. Nitin Sinha in his article “Mobility, control and criminality in early colonial India, 1760s-1850s” (2008) and Sagnik Bhattacharya’s “Monsters in the Dark: The Discovery of Thuggee and Demographic Knowledge in Colonial India” (2020) also offer useful insights. Incidents of crime, however, began to reduce with several administrative measures being adopted by the East India Company in the 1830s; although the thuggees secured safer places in contemporary fictions, travelogues, and popular imaginations – beginning with Philip Meadows Taylor’s *Confessions of a Thug* (1839). Without ever realising, Taylor founded an orientalist discourse that has “not only outlived the empire that tried to eradicate its very existence, but has also made its way into the 1984 Hollywood film *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* and several other ‘orientalist’ portrayals of India” (Bhattacharya 2020, 2).

An army officer in his earlier career, Sleeman was selected for civil employ in 1820, and in 1829, assumed the charge of the Deputy Commissioner of Sagar in present-day Madhya Pradesh. The Company's version of the subsequent history is somewhat this:

In 1829, the leader of one of the gangs gave himself up to Major Sleeman, then Deputy Commissioner of Sagaur, as he sat at the door of his tent. This man had a strange and terrible tale to unfold – that beneath the very tent pitched, his informant told him to his great discomfort and surprise, the bodies of travellers murdered by the Thugs were concealed. The tale was true and the remains were found. A searching investigation followed and the entire iniquitous organisation was brought to light. A special department for the complete suppression of Thuggee was created and placed under the charge of F.C. Smith, Agent to the Governor General for Central India and Maj. William Sleeman. Within six years nearly four thousand thugs were brought to light, out of which two thousand thugs were convicted and the rest were sentenced to death or transported for life. Thuggee became extinct. (Shah 1993, 52)

According to Sleeman, the thugs were members of a countrywide organisation, who communicated in a secret language called Ramasee. He even compiled a mammoth dictionary of Ramasee terms called *Ramaseeana: Or a Vocabulary of the Peculiar Language Used by the Thugs* (1836).

According to Bhattacharya, the sheer scale of efforts, budgetary allocations, and the granting of unchecked power to the Thuggee and Dacoity Department transformed the discourse of thuggee “into a ‘metaphor’ and a personification of the fear of the ‘other’ and the unknown” (Bhattacharya 2020, 2). Sleeman’s identification of thugs as members of a vicious pan-Indian Kali-worshipping cult renders them as unusual criminals, calling for unusually prompt administrative interventions, as opposed to petty criminals of regular sort. The belief that vicious cults of such sort actually existed was so deeply ingrained in the English psyche, and later instilled to Indians, that Amrish Puri defended his enactment of Mola Ram in *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* – the leader of the thugs who tears off the heart of a man and burns him alive in a flaming pit of lava.

Nitin Sinha thinks that the exaggeration of thuggee as an enigmatic monstrosity “provided a powerful optic through which to classify criminality” (Sinha 2008, 5). However, he noted that bringing mobile communities such as the Gosains and Banjaras under the aegis of the umbrella term thuggee may be justified by the fact that vagrancy in seventeenth-century England was considered a crime as well. Secondly, there is not enough scholastic evidence regarding how these mobile groups were treated by pre-colonial administrators, such as the Mughals (Sinha 2008, 5-6). Nevertheless, there is no denying of the fact that the exaggerated criminalisation of thug-

gee propagated colonial motifs. Alexander Leon Macfie opined that the thuggee archive almost singlehandedly created by Sleeman was very much an orientalist construction, “the product of a deep-seated European inclination to make an ontological and epistemological distinction between the Occident (Europe, the West) and the Orient (the East)” (Macfie 2008, 384). Robert Grant Williams also believed that Taylor’s motif behind writing *The Confessions of a Thug* was to justify colonial expansion by the evangelical earnestness of redeeming the criminality of Indians (Macfie 2008, 385). Although critics like Mary Poovey suggested that the novel may be read as “not as a justification of British imperialism but as an oblique critique of the East India Company and everything it represented”, such claims are difficult to substantiate, despite the facts that Taylor’s wife was half Indian, and “he ruled in Shorapur like a nabob, enjoying all the pleasures of a well-stocked harem” (Macfie 2008, 385).

Spurr’s aforementioned rhetoric of Debasement is followed by Negation, a strategy by which the self conceives of the other as “absence, emptiness, nothingness, or death” (Spurr 1993, 92). It has twofold benefits for the coloniser. On the one hand, this negation “serves to reject the ambiguous object for which language and experience provide no adequate framework of interpretation” (Spurr 1993, 92). On the other hand, it also “acts as a kind of provincial erasure, clearing a space for

the expansion for the colonial imagination and for the pursuit of desire” (Spurr 1993, 92-93). Spurr cites the works of Darwin, Conrad, and Gide to establish how European narratives of exploration negate the indigenous space, followed by a negation of their histories and languages.

The next rhetoric, which logically follows after that of Negation, is “Affirmation: The White Man’s Burden”. The colonial discourse time and again returns to “an idealization of the colonialist enterprise against the setting of emptiness and disorder”, because it “must always reaffirm its value in the face of an engulfing nothingness” (Spurr 1993, 109). This rhetoric, Spurr observes, is “deployed on behalf of a collective subjectivity which idealizes itself variously in the name of civilization, humanity, science, progress, etc., so that the repeated affirmation of such values becomes in itself a means of gaining power and mastery” (Spurr 1993, 109). After Debasement and Negation, this is where the colonial rhetoric seems to come a full circle.

How exactly did Sleeman exaggerate the thuggee? And what might have been his motifs in doing so? He tells his English readers in his 1844 book *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official*:

The Thugs went on their adventures in large gangs; and two or more were commonly united in the

course of an expedition in the perpetration of many murders. Every man shared the booty according to the rank he held in the gang, or the part he took in the murders; and the rank of every man, and the part he took generally, or in any particular murder, were generally well known to all. (Sleeman 1844, 115).

He informs us about a large “gang of two hundred Thugs . . . encamped in the grove at Hindoreea in the cold season of 1814”, who robbed and murdered “seven men well-armed with swords and matchlocks . . . bearing treasure from the bank of Motee Kocheea, at Jubulpore, to their correspondents at Banda, to the value of four thousand five hundred rupees” (Sleeman 1844, 103). Next, he recounted another story about some thugs in Lucknow, attacking a Mogul officer and his men, narrated to Sleeman by a “native commissioned officer of a regiment of native infantry” (Sleeman 1844, 106). “All the parties they [the Mogul officer and his men] met on the road belonged to a gang of Jumaldehee Thugs, of the Kingdom of Oude” (Sleeman 1844, 109).

Thus, Sleeman made a mountain out of a mole; what was in reality isolated and tiny groups of impoverished highwaymen was projected as a monstrous, enigmatic, and nationwide confederacy, no less disciplined and regimented than any guerrilla army. This justified the unleashing of state policing and violence in an unforeseen manner: special courts were set up for the trial of the thugs, courts that had permissions to do without ade-

quate and satisfactory evidences, and often sentenced the victims based on words of mouth (Sleeman 1844, 118-9). Furthermore, if the judiciary was so biased in favour of the colonial raj, it may easily be imagined the violence police must have unleashed on the thugs before transferring them to courts of law. Unfortunately, the records that exist are only diary accounts and papers related to court trials; there is absolutely no statistics of how many people must have been convicted of thuggee by the police – even before moving to the court – and were either killed in encounters or in police custody.

The period of the suppression of the thuggee, spearheaded by W. H. Sleeman, was also the time when Fanny Parkes was wandering about in the hinterlands of India. Like any other white person in India at that time, Parkes could not altogether dismiss the lore of thuggee as fictitious; in fact, she might be said to have been a little intrigued by the idea of the sacred stranglers. Nevertheless, she sounded a note of caution, and lamented the judicial delay in deciding the fate of the convicts. Fanny wrote about an execution of twenty-five thugs on May 9, 1831, that “it cannot but be lamented that the course of justice is so slow; as these men, who were this day executed, have been in prison for more than eight years, for want of sufficient evidence” (Parkes 1850, 201).

If the thugs were so guilty, how come there was so little evidence? It was certainly an apposite query. In normal circumstances, courts in India did not ac-

cept the statements of informers who turned 'King's Evidence' on their fellow captives; but in the case of thugs, the colonial laws were altered to allow the conviction of thugs on evidence which would in other circumstances be regarded as wholly suspect and inadequate. The result was that accused thugs hoping for a pardon would produce lengthy and dramatic testimonials, giving evidence against scores of men they alleged to be former colleagues. (Dalrymple 2002, 15).

The question that pertinently follows must be about the justification of such violence, if any. According to Dalrymple, some historians "allege that the British used the suppression of Thuggee as an excuse and a justification for widening their area of rule" (Dalrymple 2002, 15). It was probably no coincidence that the same William Henry Sleeman insistently wrote about the misrule in the state of Oudh or Awadh, although he advocated against direct annexation of the same citing administrative difficulties.

The Kingdom of Oudh, according to Sleeman, was not only the land of the aforementioned "Jumaldehee Thugs", but of utter civil disorder and lack of administration by the crown. He blames the Rajput feudal lords of north and central India for the commotion:

Thus were founded the Bondelas, Powars, and Chundeles, upon the ruin of the Chundeles in Bundelcund,

the Boghelas in Boghelcund, or Rewa, the Kuchwas, the Sukurwars, and others along the Chumbul river, and throughout all parts of India. These classes have never learnt anything, or considered anything worth learning, but the use of the sword; and a Rajpoot chief, next to leading a gang of his own on great enterprises, delights in nothing so much as having a gang or two, under his patron age, for little ones. There is hardly a single chief, of the Hindoo military class, in the Bundelcund, or Gwalior territories, who does not keep a gang of robbers of some kind or other . . . It is much the same in the kingdom of Oude, where the lands are for the most part held by the same Hindoo military classes, who are in a continual state of war with each other, or with the government authorities (Sleeman 1844, 188).

Sleeman observes that “[a] good deal of the lands of the Mahomedan sovereign of Oude are, in the same manner, held by barons of the Rajpoot tribe; and some of them are almost always in the field engaged in the same kind of warfare against their sovereign” (Sleeman 1844, 322). One important reason behind this continuous clash between the government and the landholders is the former’s unjust tax demands. Until the season of tillage comes, peace prevails; “but when the crops begin to ripen, the governor begins to rise in his demands for revenue; and the Rajpoot landholders and cultivators to sharpen their swords and burnish their spears” (Sleeman 1844, 324). To an Englishman who studied the unques-

tioned submission of the thanes of yore to their lords in his own country, this is not just unthinkable, but savage.

Sleeman also found Oudh the home to several abominable practices, such as horrific rituals associated with infanticide (Sleeman 1858, 38). The judiciary is also unjust and corruption is at its peak: “those who are sentenced to six years’ imprisonment in Oude, are release in six months, and those who are sentenced to six months, are released in six years” (Sleeman 1858, 41). Serious convicts would bribe their way out of the prison, and then revenge themselves on those who had aided the government in their arrest or conviction. Again, if any member of the royalty fell sick, prisoners were released, albeit superstitiously, hoping for their recovery. Sleeman notes that there is no protection for life or property, for there is no effective policing by the state of Oudh: “cases of atrocious murders and robberies which come before me every day, and are acknowledged by the local authorities, and neighbours of the sufferers, to have taken place, are frightful” (Sleeman 1858, 41). There was also agitation regarding the successor to throne, the contestants being Moonna Jan and Naseer-od Dowlah (Sleeman 1858, 175).

The annexation was Oudh, nevertheless, did not happen overnight. By the treaty of 1801, Oudh was divided into two equal shares; one of them was transferred to the British government, while the other was reserved

for the sovereign of the state of Oudh. Thus, when Sleeman was pursuing the eradication of thuggee in the early decades of the nineteenth century, the East India Company had already had a formidable political presence in Oudh. On the 20th of January, 1831, Lord William Bentinck the Governor-General held a conference with Oudh's sovereign in presence of the entire ministry, where it was observed that "maladministration in all departments were such as to warrant and require the authoritative interference of the British Government for their correction" (Sleeman 1858, 194). Also, as Sleeman has observed:

[T]he Governor-General intended to make a strong representation to the authorities in England on the state of misrule prevailing, and to solicit their sanction to the adoption of specific measures, even to the length of assuming the direct administration of the country, if the evils were not corrected in the interim. (Sleeman 1858, 195)

On the 24th day of December, 1847, the Governor-General Lord Dalhousie further cautioned the King of Oudh, having learnt from the Resident about the ongoing misrule. In 1848, Sleeman was sent to Lucknow as a Resident, and the next year, he was asked to tour across Oudh and prepare a report on the administrative condition of the state. Sleeman recorded that experience in his 1858 book, *A Journey through the Kingdom of Oude in 1849-1850*, that "two years have elapsed since the cau-

tion was given, and the King has done nothing to improve his administration, abstained from no personal indulgence, given no attention whatever to public affairs” (Sleeman 1858, 41). Although Sleeman did not suggest a direct annexation of the Kingdom of Oudh under the Doctrine of Lapse, he nevertheless opined that as the King failed to rule his people, the only viable “alternative left appears to be for the paramount power [East India Company] to take upon itself the administration”, doling out pensions to the sovereign and the stipendiary dependents of the aristocracy. He was nevertheless replaced as the English Resident in Oudh by Outram in 1854, who also reported utter misrule and massacre in the state.

Neither Sleeman nor Dalhousie had recommended a forcible abduction of the king and the annexation of his land; however, that was only for safeguarding the political image of the Company in the eyes of Indians. The Company executives in London were divided in this matter, and in January 1856, Dalhousie was advised to propose to the king a titular, Vatican sovereignty. As the king Wajid Ali Shah refused to accept the same, he was forcibly dethroned and transported to Calcutta, where he would die next year. It was also perhaps more than a coincidence that Sleeman breathed his last on February 10, 1856; and the following day was Wajid Ali Shah’s last as the sovereign ruler of the Kingdom of Oudh.

In retrospect, thus, all of it seems to be part of a larger schema: beginning with the complains and the subse-

quent suppression of thuggee by unleashing unforeseen foundational violence, and then going on to incessantly grudge about the severity of misrule in the Kingdom of Oudh, William Henry Sleeman probably served as an agent of the East India Company – just what David Spurr would later theorise in his rhetoric of Debasement, Negation, and Affirmation.

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