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Positioning Kali in Thuggee Tradition

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Abstract:
In British India, positioning Kali within the thuggee cult and rationalizing human sacrifice ran parallel and witnessed a paradigmatic shift by the end of the nineteenth century. The cult provided a basis for high romanticization and assisted in the mission of projecting a disgraced religious practice. This paper explores how the mother-figure was idealized for rationalizing human sacrifice and the religious symbols were overused. Central to the discussion is the role of the earthly and celestial body of the goddess that codified the practice in its extremity. In addition, controlling the body and subjugating the Orient remained operative within the discourse of mother-worship.

Key Words: Kali Worship; Human Sacrifice; Thuggee; Colonialism; Criminal Tribe

Introduction:

In recent years mother-worship in general and Kali-worship in particular have generated a lot of discussion (Kinsley, 1975; Kripal, 1995). With the rise of Freudian and Jungian Psychoanalysis, the issue has extended its scope to the discourse of sexuality (Jones, 1910; Jung, 1968). Numerous writers such as Allen Ginsberg, Fanny Parkes and in modern times Jeffrey Kripal, David Gordon White, Rachel McDermott and Cynthia Ann Humes have chronicled its implications and have contributed to the study of religion and sexuality. This article explores that the thuggee cult took to its practice elements of religion and codified them, and when the Empire started suppressing criminal tribes in the Indian subcontinent it dubbed the thugs as an explicit Kali-worshipping religious cult. It explores the way the mother-figure, Kali, was implanted within the thuggee cult and the religious taxinomia, in principle, rationalised human sacrifice and banditry. It not only argues that the overuse of religious symbols provides a basis for romantic imagination of thuggee narratives, it also suggests that detailing religious elements projects the criticality of Oriental religious practices. The article also addresses the central positioning of the celestial and earthly body of the goddess that codified the practice to its extremity. In short, it argues that Kali worship has rationalized thuggee practices in British India, and other missions such as controlling the body and subjugating the Orient are of ample importance in British suppression of the religious cult.

Taking both native representation and colonial documentation, this article centralizes Kali worship within the thuggee cult. It begins with an exploration of early native sources such as religious poems of Surdas and biography of Firoz Shah Tughlaq to show a genealogy of thuggee

cult in its coming-of-age. Colonial representations of the Victorian period are cited against the native sources in the formation of the explicit Kali-worshipping religious cult. Early European accounts as well as Victorian travelogues, official letters, reports and fictional representation are taken up for a consequential discussion to explore the amalgamation of banditry and religion. While we understand that pre-colonial native sources are rare and there is a relative lack of evidence regarding the religious affinity of the thuggee cult, we suggest that the dearth of standard sources does not necessarily presuppose the religious implication concocted by the Empire. However problematic the absence may seem, a religious dimension to the practice of banditry remains operative in later colonial narratives. With a focus on Kali worship and its relation with human sacrifice essential to banditry, the progression of this article follows a pattern. In what follows we explore that the idea of banditry is developed gradually and it is in the colonial era that we witness a persistent vocalization of the cult. In dehumanizing the thugs for explicit human sacrifice—de-notifying it and dubbing it as a criminal tribe—colonial suppression of banditry goes hand in hand in localizing Kali—a fierce goddess—in the Oriental world. In short, the article begins with colonial narratives that evoke a sense of religious terror in the minds of people. Highlighting the genealogy and its historicity, it explores the implantation of Kali within the system of banditry. Elaborating upon the practice, it shows how the colonial investigators codified banditry, implanted religious symbols and localized the sanctity of native religious practices. The last section is a critique of Victorian attitude towards mother worship and mother archetype which has helped the colonial modern in creating the thuggee as a homosocial religious group.

Thuggee Tradition and Religious Sacrifice:

In 1844 Fanny Parkes wrote in *Wondering of a Pilgrim*:

> "I can fancy terror acting on the Hindoos when worshipping the great black hideous idol, Kali Ma, at Kali Ghat, near Calcutta; but this poor stump of a woman, with quiet features, starring eyes of silver, and little black feet, inspires no terror–and yet she is Bhagwan–the dreaded Bhagwan" (389).

Kali is terrible-faced, fearful, awful, yet benevolent. The *dhyana mantra* of the Goddess, as is composed, glorifies a potentially terrifying goddess, who dwells in the cremation ground surrounded by jackals; she is naked and though she betrays the love for the extreme, she is worshipped as the mother-figure as she is ever merciful (McDermott, 2001). So also remain the modern references of Kali with her demonic or *birupa* figure and simultaneously modern texts project her as the divine mother—symbolizing both creation and destruction—to its extremity (Ginsberg, 1990; McDermott, 2011). Within the thuggee cult, the implanted religious symbols—chiefly of Kali with her multiple destructive images—have been used to rationalize human sacrifice. Thugs have been highly disgraced for the deceptive nature of their livelihood and have created terror in both western and eastern thought (Senapati, 1983). Whether for deceiving as that of Satan or Cain or for the inhuman practice of strangling men in the name of religion, thugs have evoked a sense of terror in colonial imagination.

As there remains hardly any reference to religious symbols in early thuggee narratives, the historiography of the religious cult is inscrutable. Prior to Captain William Henry Sleeman's interrogation of thuggee suspects, the system of thuggee lacks religious symbols and is considered as a practice of "cheating" (Sleeman, 1836). The earliest references to the system of thuggee can be located in the classical texts of the Jaina Prakrit work, that is, *Kumarapalacarita* by Hemacandra

which dates back to 1145-1229 where Kali or any religious symbol has hardly anything to do with the practice of thuggee. An indigenous historical reference can be located in the biography of Firoz Shah Tughlaq (1290) where any form of deceptive practice is termed as "Thug" (Elliot, 1871: 141). One of the earliest literary references to sundry religious symbols is that of Surdas's poem, which dates back to the 16th Century (1483-1573). Surdas compares Hari's (Krishna's) deception to that of the thuggee's deception. Chiefly an "innocent" allusion, Surdas's poem compares Krishna's *leela* with the deceptive practice of thuggee. However, early native texts hardly mention whether thugs were predominantly murderers and robbers, or simply harmless cheats and swindlers. The confusion in the meaning of "thug" becomes apparent when Robert Drummond in the *Illustrations of the Grammatical Parts of the Guzerattee, Mahratta and English Languages* suggests that the terms "thug" and "phansigar" may be used interchangeably because both the terms indicate robbers whose modus operandi was to strangle and plunder travellers (1808). The early European accounts of Jean de Thevenot, John Fyer and James Forbes are based upon hearsay and express a sense of fear—fear of being killed and looted by highway robbers who were skilled in strangling people with an intention to snatch their belongings. In 1841, the *Irish Penny Journal* (1841) in its review reiterates the strangulation method of killing victims with sole purpose of seizing personal possessions. *The Oxford English Dictionary* (1989) in defining the term "Thug" takes into consideration the idea developed from the times of Thevenot's Voyages (c. 1665). It defines "Thug" as "One of an association of professional robbers and murderers in India, who strangled their victims; a p'hansigar." But the idea contained in "1903 *Daily Chron*. 4 Dec. 5/2," is a significant departure from all other explanations; the OED canonizes: "Lord William Bentinck is known for his suppression of Thuggism, which made strangling a religious rite to the goddess Kali." If we cast a quick look at the history of thuggee narrative, we discover that contradictions are numerous in defining the system of banditry. The chronicles of the initial decades stamp thugs exclusively as robbers and murderers whereas the others who belong to the school of Sleeman and Bentinck add a religious element to it. The historiography sharply distinguishes between the early narratives of both the native and the West and that of the recent ones, and there is a visible shift in defining the system of thuggee in later narratives. As a result, there is a sudden transition in defining the cult, which in principle has changed the nomenclature of thugs forever.

Defining the system is to codify it. Religious assumptions that enabled the colonial modern to define the thuggee cult led to the documentation of its constitution. Sleeman interrogated the thuggee suspects with questions mostly relating to their religion, religious practices and omens.[1] Furthermore, the captive thugs were made to respond to his questions in lieu of colonial exploration, viz., explaining their omens and belief system. Further, Kali, a minor goddess, has been forcefully implanted into the thuggee cult—a cult that inhabited the fringes of the colonial society and thereby the structuring of a cruel religious cult makes way to control the Empire in terms of political administration. With such gradual development in the system, along with its structured belief and ideology, came canonical texts such as Philip Meadows Taylor's *Confessions of a Thug* (1839), the most recent George Bruce's *The Stranglers, the Cult of Thuggee and its Overthrow in British India* (1968) and the cinematic representation of the cult *Indiana Jones: The Temple of Doom* (1984). With this, a structured process of initiation into the system of thuggee approved by religion can be located from the 1830s. Additionally, a reference to the professional initiation ceremony finds a place in most of the contemporary allusions to the thuggee cult in both British as well as native writing. In 1836 Sleeman while analysing the nature of killing wrote in the "Preface" to *Ramaseeana* that the cult is explicitly religious in its practice of banditry and that they encumber Kali to their everyday operation:

> The Thug associations which we are now engaged in suppressing have been taught by those whom they revere as the expounders of the will of their Deity, that the murders they perpetrate are pleasing to her, provided they are perpetrated under certain restrictions, attended by certain observances, and preceded and followed by certain rites, sacrifices and offerings. The Deity who, according to their belief, guides and protects them is ever manifesting her will by signs; and as long as they understand and observe these signs they all consider themselves as acting in conformity to her will; and consequently, fulfilling her wishes and designs. (1836, i)

The importance of the documentation is two-fold: that the colonial officers were too curious to unravel the mysteries of the thugs that they presumed it as a pan-Indian phenomenon and that the colonial record was fancied so much for its religious sacrifices that it contributed significantly to Oriental history. The first, as is well known, provided the basis for voluminous writing and attracted funds for subjugating the heinous crime and the second constructed a negation of the Orient which called for Biblical preaching. Sleeman adds: "On all occasions and in all situations they believe these signs to be available if sought after in a pure spirit of faith, and with the prescribed observances; and as long as they are satisfied that they are truly interpreted and faithfully obeyed they never feel any dread of punishment either in this world or the next" (1836, i). British engagement in unravelling the mysteries of the cult was not only beneficial for official promotion, it also helped in taming the Empire to a significant extent. On the one hand, the court questioned the thuggee convicts in such a way that they would answer—or would be forced to answer—a curious western audience. They answered questions pertaining to their religious beliefs and as a result different disassociated parties of petty dacoits, robbers, bandits and looters came to the purview of the thuggee system under one umbrella culture. Sleeman and others could foresee and construct a uniformed criminal culture that was "hostile" to travellers or trespassers, European or natives. "In the more northern parts of India," Sleeman adds, "these murderers are called *Thugs*, signifying deceivers: in the Tamul language, they are called *Ari Tulucar*, or Mussalman noosers: in Canerese, *Tanti Calleru*, implying thieves, who use a wire or cat-gut noose: and in Telagu, *Warlu Wahdlu* or *Warlu Vayshay Wahndloo*, meaning people who use the noose" (1836, 327-328). In *Ramaseeana*, Sleeman expands the boundary of systematic banditry:

> A gang of Phansigars consists of ten to fifty, or even a greater number of persons, a large majority of whom are Mussalmans; but Hindoos, and particularly those of the Rajput tribe, are often associated with them. Brahmins, too, though rarely, are found in the gangs. Emerging from their haunts, they sometimes perform long journeys, being absent from home many months, and prowl along the eastern and western coasts to Hyderabad and Cape Comorin. (1836, 330)

And further, such an expanding criminal culture had to possess a pan-Indian religious icon–Kali. The criminal culture had to expand its ethnic boundaries from all sects and castes as well. It was never too late for the British officials to extend the purview of criminality.

How did people of all religious sects come to adore one religious icon? How did the umbrella culture take to its practice the benevolent nature of the destructive deity? What were the sources for such a critical discursive field? Among all the socio-cultural institutions that demanded strict supervision and discipline in the Indian Empire, thuggee remained in periphery, yet it was instrumental in engaging the red court to the fullest. Systems such as *sati* and child marriage demanded judicial intervention; thuggee, in lieu of time, helped in constructing an inscrutable India and it was to be systematized, codified, and corrected for the smooth functioning of the judicial system (Ballhatchet, 1980). India, defamed for dividing society on the basis of

profession—its enduring caste system—witnessed the introduction of what even now is contested as "criminal tribes". Introduced in 1871 to constantly supervise, control and eliminate habitual offenders, the central Government authorized local governments to identify any tribe, gang or class of persons addicted to the systematic commission of non-bailable offences to be undertaken into the purview of "criminal tribes." This law however did not come in isolation. Its genesis can be attributed to Warren Hastings's institutionalization of punishment for dacoits; Article 35 of 1772 permitted the Government to extend punishment from individual offender to his/her family and to the village in a convicted act of dacoity (Singha, 1993). The Government sought it necessary to document, in great clarity, that "a tribe whose ancestors were criminals from time immemorial, who are themselves destined by the usages of caste to commit crime, and whose descendants will be offenders against the law, until the whole tribe is exterminated or accounted for in the manner of the thugs" (Government of India, Legislative Dept., 1871, 419-420). Included in its purview people from several religions and castes—Rajpoots, Brahmins and Mussulmans—including the thugs who were perceived as a singular cult, having one central deity, whose occupation was essentially to kill and plunder. In such a crucial act, Kali became a prelude to unite the disintegrated system together; with her multiple names, Doorga, Davey or Bhawani, and set as the tutelary goddess, her image was used for the framing of an umbrella culture. Her temple at the Ganges at Bindachul was cited as the pilgrimage site for the thugs. In an anonymous letter of 03 October 1830—attributed to Sleeman—to the Editor of the *Calcutta Literary Gazette*, the writer concludes that the priests of the temple of Kali control the expeditions of thugs. They invoke the spirit of murder in them with an enticement of getting divine approbation in life and paradise in death. They are raised to be united as a homogenous group of stranglers in the name of Kali. Their whole life is sacrificed for a divine purpose of killing. Beginning with the oath taking ceremony, the investiture of the sacred *romal*, consecration of the *kodalee*, adhering to the omen of offering a share of the booty to Kali—all are said to be done with great faith and reverence. In colonial writing, in the entire act, the idea of property or a share for the thug remains less significant when compared to the religious rites followed. The distribution of property collected from the dead travellers takes place only after burying the victims deep under the earth. Followed by the funeral rite, the sharing of the booty takes place where, as a representative of the benevolent goddess, a priest often receives a share. The system of banditry, being a standardized way of living, thus executed a structured planning for the well-being of the whole group. Moreover, the concept of incurring displeasure of the divine, reminds that every aspect of their life is regulated by the law of thuggee religion. In authenticating the structure of thuggee religion, the Empire took great effort and constructed an explicit Kali-worshipping religious cult.

The Vocabulary of Banditry:

British interrogation of thuggee suspects is crucial to colonial construction of a pan-Indian criminal religious tradition. The interrogation tolerated only questions of omen and belief, and allusions to the 'sacred' criminal system, which in turn shaped the fate of the convicts to its extremity. As a result, the Empire succeeded in implanting sacredness to killing even in judicial system and succeeded in legitimising Kali as a 'destructive force' within the thuggee tradition. The act of documenting such a religious tradition may be seen vis-à-vis the making of the mythology to integrate Kali as a fully developed Goddess in the mainstream Hindu religion. On the one hand, it projected a dehumanized goddess or tradition and on the other it portrayed the basic importance of *purusamedha* that signified the revival of the forces of Nature. The task of the British Government was made easy. Being honest Christians, as the anonymous writer claims in

his letter to the Editor of the *Calcutta Literary Gazette*, they targeted communities of thugs, stranglers, dacoits, and other criminals generally active in secluded areas on the charges of satanic religious beliefs and practices (Wagner, 2009: 175). In addition, the target of capturing poor peasants or people living in the border-line of Indian society owing to the need of the off-shore prisons such as *Kala Pani* and for missionary preaching the mission remained operative. Apparently, George Bruce's *The Stranglers, The Cult of Thuggee and its Overthrow in British India* (1968) celebrates thuggee conversion to Christianity and justifies, in principle, one of the Occidental missions that took a roundabout way in its coming. Further the proceedings of Port Blair indicate the need to populate the islands by any means for its geographical importance and banished the thuggee convicts to the Settlement forever.

British projection of such a heinous crime remained instrumental in law reform, the culmination of which can be witnessed in the approval of Criminal Tribes Act of 1873. How did the colonial authorities succeed in the making of a hereditary-criminal tribe? How did the thuggee cult propagate such a sense of fear in western imagination? How was mother-worship / Kali-worship implanted into the criminal discourse? And further, how was the mother goddess represented so as to propagate a sense of terror for the Other? Colonial documents—judicial, historical and fictional—serve as a prerogative account of the construction of a romantic India. The first police reports by British Officials that propagate British encounter with thugs do not take into account the religious inclination of it. Neither the report presented by O.W. Steer on 18 November 1809 and 7 February 1810 nor the Report of J. Law and T. Brooke takes into consideration the religion of the thuggee practitioners and their omens as opposed to later British accounts (Wagner, 2009: 67-70). The only allusion they approve is that of the religion of the victims, and the documents conclude that thuggee is an extraordinary crime which is well organized and this demands an extraordinary and well-planned means of suppression.

The preliminary colonial reports and claims on thuggee have taken into their purview oppositions regarding the barbaric method of killing. The alarming threat posed by regular killing of civilians that made the roadways unsafe was an immediate challenge to the masculine Empire. Amidst lot of confusion in terminology and the modus operandi of thugs, dacoits, cozauks, and buddecks, the British officials did little to figure out the puzzle. Rather the officials made hasty statements and conclusions. Their impatient measures to control and suppress the crime may be seen as an exhibition of their power. On the face of such established statements made by early British Officials, the act of wiping out any doubt and criticism pertaining to the claims of barbaric method of killing by the criminal group "Thug" could be accepted as a colonial planning for some secret mission. That the Magistrate of Hoogly T. H. Ernst's claim—"I have reason to believe that the Thugs in general do not resort to 'poison, or the cord or the knife' but merely employ the seeds of a narcotic, called Dhattora, in order to preclude resistance, and to escape detection"—was not entertained officially serves as an indicator (Ernst to Shakespeare, 1810). Though such a claim was not entertained directly in initial decades, the court seems to have transported many on similar grounds, the trace of which can be located in the Penal Settlement reports: "Life convicts convicted of Thuggee or of robbery by the administration of poisonous drugs, or who are professional or hereditary dacoits or specially dangerous criminals. These convicts are not released" (NAI, Port Blair: 1890-1892). Magistrate Ernst was further removed from his office. Consequently, the Empire succeeded in establishing a religious cult, documented their practice and Sleeman by 1836 could claim that he has unravelled all the mysteries pertaining to the thuggee cult, and would write in *Ramaseeana*:

> I have, I believe, entered in this Vocabulary everything to which Thugs in any part of India have thought it necessary to assign a peculiar term; and every term peculiar to their associations with which I have yet become acquainted. I am satisfied that there is no term, no rite, no ceremony, no opinion, no omen or usage that they have intentionally concealed from me; and if any have been accidentally omitted after the numerous narratives that I have had to record, and cases to investigate, they can be but comparatively very few and unimportant. (Sleeman, 1836: 3)

Would not the masculine Empire suffer unless such a 'criminal' practice thought dreaded was completely wiped out? Would not the strict police discipline be affected unless all the mysteries about the cult were documented in totality? And further, would not the Empire take larger profit from dehumanizing the religious practices? The most important thing, the Empire could do with the cult, was to make the suspects narrate the cosmos of their vocabulary, religious practices, general assumptions and methods. On the basis of their narration it produced voluminous writing on the nature of killing. Moreover the authenticity to the writing was provided with the rationalization of the methods of killing practised by the thugs through indigenous narration in indigenous language:

> It also appears that the 'Ramasee', or 'peculiar language used by the thugs,' was not a secret language used exclusively by the thugs but a professional vocabulary, used by people who had the need to communicate in secret without anybody else being able to understand the content of their conversation. (Wagner, 2009: 31)

Hence it seems that thug had no fixed identity, language and practice. But the creation of the thugs as a religious cult endangering humanity and humane values has been a political orchestration.

The image of Kali and the concocted history of the thugs' elaborate rituals and omens indicate, in principle, a system of governance and articulation developed during Sleeman's suppression of the thuggee cult. The historical evidences before Sleeman hardly consider thugs as a religious group either. The devotional poem by Surdas may be taken as one of the earliest "innocent" references to the thuggee system. He writes: "As a *Thag* lures a pilgrim / with *laddus* sweet with wine, / Makes him drunk and trusting, / takes his money and his life; / Just so, Honey bee, / Hari takes our love by deceit" (Bryant, 1979: 196). The comparison with Hari's deceit is chiefly drawn to show a practice of cheating in the original sense of the term; Sanskrit *thag* refers to 'cheating' and hence the deception of Hari or the deception of thugs has less to do with the dreaded fear of religion encountered in later-day colonial narratives. In addition, the reference to thuggee takes into consideration the purpose of deceiving, robbing and killing 'religious pilgrims' as well, and thereby the religious symbolisms vary to a significant degree in British portrayal of the thuggee system. The Biography of Firoz Shah Tughlaq (1290) for instance assesses 'thags' from the perspective of their task of scheming, cheating, looting, swindling and killing people, and there remain no religious allusions in such an elaborate description of the system. The *Farman* (1672) of Aurangzeb judges the 'thug' as a 'phansigar' or strangler and terms the 'habitual' act of strangulation as criminal inviting execution of the culprit (Sarkar, 1935). And further, the European travel account by John Fryer presents the execution of Indian criminals witnessed personally near Surat. He describes three robbers as 'hereditary' criminals, the term which was continuously referred to in case of thug trails prevalent during the 1830s (Wagner, 2009: 62). The hereditary criminal act refers to the 'thugs' where the means of earning through the system of thuggee is practiced by virtue of taking birth into a family of thugs which later became a means to ban the whole tribe / group under the Criminal Tribes Act. Wagner thus suggests: "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 faity and was attributed undue significance when elicited and recorded by the British" (2009: 26). As punishment, according to the biography of Firoz Shah Tughlaq, the 'thags' were ordered to be put into boats and left into neighbouring countries such as Lakhnauti away from Delhi.

The continuity of such a tradition of documentation, far away from references to Kali, mother-worship and ritual sacrifice of robbed victims, can be seen in the official order of G. Swinton (23 October1829), written in response to Major J. Stewart's letter, which included in its guidelines, for the conviction of the thugs, the authority to commute capital punishment into transportation for life beyond the seas. Further, the later accounts of the Andaman Penal Settlement indicate that the thugs who faced transportation for life in the Andaman Penal Settlement were never liberated even after the completion of 25 years of their prescribed sentence. The demand for extra-mural labour at the Andaman Penal Settlement contributed significantly in this regard and may be seen in the "Notes and Orders" on the "Report on the Working of the Penal Settlement of Port Blair by Mr. Lyall and Dr. Lethbridge" (1892, File R/82. 2. National Archives of India, Port Blair). This in a roundabout way suggests that various groups of people were transported during the period as the demand of offshore labour was high and the thugs, along with other convicts became a victim of the required labour force (Sen, 2002). The legal recordings found in *Mughal Administration* (1935, 3rd ed.) by Jadunath Sarkar indicates the use of dhatura, bhang and opium by the habitual robbers in order to render their victims insensible before robbing them. Later documents such as transportation files of the hereditary prisoners indicate the usage of poisonous drugs. The transportation file "Memorandum on Releasing Life Convicts" (1911) shows the exiled condition of life-term convicts: "...thugs or those convicted of the cognate crime of robbery by administering poisonous drugs. In the case of these criminals it has been decided that no recommendation for release should ever be made, since to permit such professional and highly dangerous criminals to return to freedom would be inconsistent with the public safety." In all these cases, moreover, the significance lies within a context of a specific space and time contrary to what is recorded in historical and other sources such as letters, case files and biographical narratives on the thugs during the British period.

Kali in Thuggee Narratives:

Understanding the 'vocabulary'—the customs, rituals, omens or religion—serves as a British mission of exploring Indian secrets. Fixing its vocabulary and determining the earthly characteristics of Indian gods go hand in hand. There remains the image of Indian religion with its occult lore and in categorizing its boundary occupies the demonic figure of Kali. "The omens consulted by the Thugs were mostly of animal origin and reflected the mysterious ways of the Goddess," writes Martine van Woerkens in *The Strangled Traveller* (2002, 162). On the backdrop remain Indian gods and 'holy' beings—like terrestrial humans, sinister *yogis* and *tantriks*—who very similar to the deceptive attributes taken by the thugs in gaining credulity of the populace succumb to all sorts of disguises and in disguises do they seduce women, test their devotees, fool their opponents and trespass human habitats. Significantly, the native representation of thugs and British portrayal of the thuggee cult show a significant transition towards the practice of banditry in the Indian Empire. It is earlier stated that the respondent thugs would explicitly answer questions pertaining to religious discourses (Sleeman, 1836: 141-270). Philip Meadows Taylor takes this mission a step further in *Confessions of a Thug*. He would canonize—in native voice—all aspects of the religious practice in detail and would help in introducing an imaginary

world of thuggee to the curious western audience. The counter-claims of the *Irish Penny Journal* in 1841 received little attention however. Rather the subject generated a lot of curiosity owing to Taylor's fictional thug, Ameer Ali. Literary texts such as Kipling's famous poem "Gunga Din" (1890, rpt. 1990) inspired the making of a cult movie *Gunga Din* (1939) which remained critical of Oriental subject and Taylor's *Confessions of a Thug* remains critical of the practice of religion and Kali worship. Romanticised as an ancient practice sanctioned by Hinduism—as represented in fictional and historical documents on thuggee—the thugs supposedly observed strict religious rules in the practice of banditry. Hence, the introduction of Kali worship and her related *birupa* figure, the omen following thugs and their human sacrifice—all satisfied the literary yearning of the imaginary English mind. Their manoeuvre to make a mother-worshipping cult led to the presentation of thugs as abjuring sexual intimacy in keeping with the sanctity of female. But it was in stark contrast to W. Wright's remark for thugs "who obtain money by fraud and violence, squander a good deal away, and are much addicted to drinking, nautching and women" (Wagner, 2009: 82). The concept of getting baptised into the thuggee system too is western in nature, chiefly unknown to native Indians. Such romantic and exotic presentation of religion has sufficed the curious imagination of the West; it has codified the practice of thuggee to its extremity as well. Hence in Taylor's *Confessions of a Thug*, Ameer Ali's surrogate father, for example, details all aspects of their religious life so as to apprise the reader of the fancies the colonial officers took into the worship of Kali.

Colonial narratives work at various levels in the construction of a native religious cult, the implication of which can be located in various historical and fictional narratives. Taylor's protagonist Ameer Ali of the *Confessions of a Thug* is doomed to the practice of banditry. He changes his attitude of aspiring to become an Islamic preacher to that of being a Kali-worshipping and omen-following thug. Little did he know when he converted that he would be the most dehumanized and religious thug in the entire "romantic imagination." This text raises numerous important questions and succumbs to the wild construction of the thuggee system. First, does religion remain so central to the practice of banditry? Does the system of religion demand from a thug a life-time bondage? Is the profession more important than life and humanity? The colonial "masters" who supposedly tamed the cult never made a mistake in answering its concocted properties and crucially took glory in both systematising and wiping out the cult. What they left instead is its documentation. Second, in providing the interrogation a native element could they systematically analyze its religious and criminal implications. There is visibly a shift from the non-religious thuggee texts to the explicit religious texts pertaining to the cult in the two sets of writing. Taylor's *Confessions of a Thug* consequently remains significant, in this regard, for multiple reasons. First, the title does not indicate that it is an account or a representation of the thuggee figure, rather it is presented as a historical account of a thuggee convict. "Confession" is chiefly a non-Hindu concept even as the act is native in its representation. Second, the first person narrative employed in the fiction and the associated geographical-path of banditry cartographed provide the narrative a realistic element enough to historicize the event. And further, so significant does become Kali-worship to the cult that, Ameer Ali, a Muslim by faith, has been convinced of the divine origin of the system of thuggee. He is impressed upon a belief which equalled strangling of a victim to death with human sacrifice offered to Goddess Kali. His mind is satiated when Ismael, his surrogate father, makes it clear that "Thuggee is one of the means by which Allah works out his own end" and a person who is destined to take up this profession has no escape (Taylor, 1998: 40). Moreover, as is projected, acceptance of the divine providence of Kali would not be a hindrance to the faith of man.

In the anonymous letter of October 3, 1830, the author tries to appraise the ever-expanding religious properties of the cult and reports that he was at the execution of eleven thugs in the neighbourhood of Bhilsa. The author witnesses its pan-ethnic implication:

> When arranged, each opposite the noose that pleased him, they lifted up their hands, and shouted 'Bindachul Ke Jae! Bhowaaee Ke Jae!' 'Glory to Bindachul! Bhowanee's glory!' everyone making use of precisely the same invocation, though four were Mahommuduns, one a Brahmun, and the rest Rajpoots and other castes of Hindoos. (Wagner, 2009: 175)

And the parallel is continuous both in historical and fictional representations. Similarly, in Taylor, religion works at two levels: first, Ali has to unlearn the teachings of the local *mullah* who wished him to enter his own profession and second he has to accept the rationale of sacrifice to the supreme deity in order to satisfy his curiosity to unravel the mysteries of thuggee life. Hence, the protagonist, in the narrative, undergoes ceremonies on the auspicious day of Dussehra to initiate himself into the "gory profession" of murder and amassing wealth. Achieving dexterity under the apprenticeship of a Rajput Hindu thug, Ameer receives the sacred *romal* and the goddess is implored to vouchsafe her support to him in his deeds, and would conduct and endeavour to distinguish himself as a thug. Entrusted with task-charge in his first expedition, he uses his sacred weapon (*romal*) with great deftness, wrenches the neck of a moneylender (his first victim) and silences him. All acts and symbols—thuggee, omens and killings—remain at the will of the destructive force Kali. Taylor succeeds Sleeman in his mission of presenting the thugs, and thereby Kali, in the western way.

In the introductory section of the *Confessions of a Thug,* Taylor presents Ameer Ali as a "horrible miscreant" who unravels that the wild act of killing men is like a sport to the thugs. Unlike the English who risk their lives pursuing a tiger or panther, the thugs are in pursuit of men for they have sworn for relentless destruction owing to religious obligation and personal gains. The criminal aspect of the cult was shown to have a religious sanction for the larger profit of the Empire. In such explicit documentation, only in few texts of the West, chiefly police investigation reports and non-official correspondence, do we rarely find an allusion to religion (Drummond, 2009: 64). The transition of petty cheats or murderers who incorporated Kali-worship to rationalize murderous crime remains a chapter in colonial historiography that is crucial to an exploration of mother-worship and mother-complex.

Conclusion:

In canonical texts on the thuggee cult, thugs' passion for mother-worship may be understood as an intense desire deeply rooted in the mother archetype. The all-male group who went on expeditions for several months of the year was deprived of a normative familial life. This style of living, oppositional to orthodox Victorian familial architecture, could have generated inherent fear towards the homosocial bandit groups. Hence in texts such as the *Confessions of a Thug*, hardly do we witness any allusion to a normalized family though the respondent thugs over-emphasize the fidelity of their relatively imaginary or textual wives. Taylor's familial archetype can be explicitly understood—both in terms of orthodox Victorianism and military discipline of the Empire—in the narrative. His protagonist, within the all-male system of banditry, finds real time to woo a lady while on expedition. In the textual universe created, while adoring Kali and coveting religious omens, he performs a marriage, and loses her permanently after spending few nights with her. Within the boundary of high Victorianism, the thuggee system is projected as a mother-worshipping cult that rarely succumbs to conjugal boundaries. In renouncing sexual life,

thus in the relative absence of women figures, they fortify their passion towards the mother-figure.[2] Carl Jung in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious* reminds us of the mother-complex relating it to mother archetype. He states: "The mother archetype forms the foundation of the so-called mother-complex. It is an open question whether a mother-complex can develop without the mother having taken part in its formation as a demonstrable casual factor" (Jung, 1968: 83). The portrayal of the mother goddess as the most terrifying and most benevolent explains the inner fear and a libidinal type that colonial narratives evoked, and its native expression voices the western mind. The prime motive of the thugs' whole life is, hence, to satisfy the overpowering "mother" either by killing for her or by strict abidance to the celebrated code of conduct made in her name. Kali being the central iconic mother-figure overpowers the familial archetype.

There remain two categories of truths in western imagination that relate familial boundaries and the portrayed obsession with the mother-figure. In the first category, we find the absence of women characters which is directly oppositional to Victorian portrayal of sexuality within the strictest boundaries of family. The conjugal boundary is deformed in the imperial voyage and the thugs supposedly stay "months together away from family" (Sleeman, 1836: 304-6) in their all-male companionship, worshipping the mother-figure and thereby adhering to imperial attitude of abandoning familial obligation. This may be the genesis of adoring a mother archetype in Victorian narratives on India. The mother-figure, thus, with her demonic face yet controlling attitude, would remain central to imaginary thinking and in the process the cult would succumb to a series of crimes such as murder and plunder to take refuse of the original sin. And in the second category, imaginary / textual women make a comeback with the image of either a wife or concubine so that the homophobic Victorian architecture is suppressed to a significant extent. The second category consequently implants a marriage ceremony as in Taylor's, and in other such documentations prostitutes make a comeback in ordinances and memorandums.

The imperial attitude towards conjugal boundary is only a mere indicator of the process of creating a homosocial group, and its implication can be located in judicial and literary texts as well. An initial proposal by Magistrate W. Wright to introduce prostitutes as spying agents was not only less charming, the imperial court deported an all-male gang of officials to undertake an expedition against the cult. And such references are numerous. Be it criminality, religion, sexuality or minority, the dreaded thuggee cult is constructed in the colonizer's mind. Thuggee link and Kali or mother-worship remain a case in point that can not only be perceived as an imperial construction, it can also be projected as a negative notion that was to be organized, codified and tamed or exterminated. Moreover the Indian society that divided people into different castes according to their profession also takes into consideration homogeneity in religion as well as biological genealogy into the division. Colonial investigators such as Sleeman who claimed to have unearthed the religious aspect of thuggee, terming them a Kali-worshiping cult, missed to correlate the homogeneity. To be fair however there is a relative lack of native representation of Kali within the system of thuggee and there is no way to be extremely conclusive owing to the absence of representation. What remains documented about the cult in terms of the practice of banditry or religious discourse is as important as what is not documented and has to be made meaningful.

Notes

[1] A sample of questions includes, but is not limited to: "Do you ever recollect any misfortune arising from going on when a hare crossed the road before you?," "You are a Mussalman?," "Have they any written treatises on augury?" and "But you worship at Davey's temples?" See Sleeman's *Ramaseeana* (197-205) for further details.

[2] Jacques Lacan in his paper of 1958 "The Signification of the Phallus" takes such signifiers of absence as a category and states: "That which is thus alienated in needs constitutes an *Urverdrangung* (primal repression), an inability, it is supposed, to be articulated in demand, but it re-appears in something it gives rise to that presents itself in man as desire (*das Begehren*)". The repressed and the alienated mother-complex thus comes out at regular intervals in thuggee narratives. For further reference, see Jacques Lacan, *Ecrits: A Selection* (London: Routledge, 1977).

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