



River *Thugs* and River Policing in Colonial Bengal: A Historical Quest

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ABSTRACT

There was a marked increase in the reported number of crimes in Bengal after the advent of colonial rule. The Great Bengal Famine of 1770 and the Permanent Settlement dramatically increased dacoity and violence in the countryside. The most notorious were the River *Thugs* or *Bungoos / Pungoos*. In 1843 Act XXIV (which is a precursor of the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871.) was also enacted to enable the magisterial authorities by a special law to destroy the Thugs and other similar dacoit gangs. The said act enabled the authorities to penalize the members of a gang of river thugs merely by establishing the criminal connection without full proof of their association with a particular crime. But despite all these efforts the colonial authority failed to destroy those criminals completely. This is clear from the report of the Commissioner for the Suppression of Dacoity in 1856, where the commissioner accepted that the efforts of the colonial authorities against the river thugs had only limited success.

In Bengal, there had been a marked increase in the reported number of crimes in general, and that of dacoity in particular, from the earliest days of colonial rule. Although dacoity was not unknown in the Turko-Afghan or Mughal period, a remarkable increase in the reported volume of this rural crime, after the advent of colonial rule, is noticeable. The Great Bengal Famine of 1770 (*Chiyattorer Monwontor*) and subsequently the Permanent Settlement delivered great blows to the foundations of the rural

economy and dramatically increased dacoity and violence in the countryside. Even innocent agricultural people under the circumstances resorted to dacoity. Warren Hastings on his arrival received “repeated complaints from all parts of the province of the multitude of dacoits who have infested it for some years past and have been guilty of the most daring and alarming excesses.”¹

Even after the administrative reforms of Lord Cornwallis and the creation of the colonial police, the situation remained unaltered. The reports of dacoity in particular from the interior, and those of other disturbances in general, continued to disturb the Fort William. The colonial district authorities of Bengal with the small police force at their disposal tried their best to suppress dacoity, but in vain. Since the year 1793, the volume of this particular brand of crime continued to increase and towards the end of 1807, the situation became even more alarming from the point of view of the colonial administrators. The yearly average number of Dacoities in the Lower Provinces between 1801 and 1807 had been 1481.² During the last six months of 1837, in Murshidabad Division alone, 18 dacoities were brought to the notice of the police and it was presumed by the colonial authority that no less than 207 persons were involved in the commission of these crimes.³

Bengal is a land of rivers. So, river dacoits and river *thugs* posed a problem of law and order for the Company’s administration in Bengal. We get a vivid picture from the autobiography of Prasannamoyee Debi (*Purbakatha*) about the unsafe water routes in the first half of the nineteenth century. She wrote: “It is difficult to comprehend today how risky and difficult it was to travel by river from Rajeshahee to Calcutta. The menace of plundering dacoits, robbers and *thugs* threatened life and property every minute when my father (Durgadas Chaudhuri) used to travel thus, the entire household would break down in lament. ...The telegraph was yet to make its appearance, the mail would be delivered only once a

¹ Moncton Jones; Warren *Hastings in Bengal, 1772-1774*, (London: Oxford University Press, 1918), pp. 207-208.

² Ranjan Chakrabarty; *Terror, Crime and Punishment: Order and disorder in Early Colonial Bengal: 1800-1860*, (Kolkata: Readers Service, 2009), p. 183.

³ *Judicial Criminal Proceedings (J.C.P.); (Bengal)*, November 27, 1838, No. 56.

week... Till the letter arrived, the inmates of the house would go without food, in a disturbed state of mind.⁴

The Ganges and its tributaries running through the lush green jungles of nineteenth-century Bengal had been busy links between Calcutta and Northern India. Merchants, traders and pilgrims who could afford to pay, found the boats plying for hire there seemingly a safer and more comfortable way of travelling than narrow dusty roads and humid jungle tracks. Sail was rarely used; men towed the boats, some 20 feet long, ventilated with a large porthole on either side of the cabin, up and down the shimmering tree-lined rivers from the landing stage to the landing stage. Among the river dacoits of Bengal, the most notorious were the River *Thugs* calling themselves *Bungoos / Pungoos*. They persisted in their deadly rampages along the Gangetic River system, primarily infesting the Burdwan district but also reaching Benaras and possibly Cawnpore (Kanpur).⁵ But in comparison with the land-based *Thugs*, the River *Thugs* were less known to the colonial authorities. The first report of land-based *thugs* was written in November 1809 by O.W. Steer.⁶ But surprisingly the first report on river *thugs* was written by Captain N. Lewis in 1836.⁷ In his report to R. D. Mangles (the Secretary of the Revenue Department) Captain N. Lewis (Assistant to the General Superintendent of the operations for the suppression of Thuggee) wrote that:

“I have the honour to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of the 1st March 1836 (which only reached me yesterday) acquainting that the Hon.ble the Governor of Bengal had been pleased to authorize me to exercise the powers of joint magt. in the Zillahs of Bhaugulpore, Malda, Rajeshahye, Moorshedabad and Burdwan, and desiring me to report to you hereafter show and find that my operations required a more extended jurisdiction.

⁴ Prasannamoyee Devi, *Purbakatha* (My Early Autobiography) in Ahana Biswas and Prasun Ghosh (eds.) *Ondorer Itihas: Narir Jobanbondi* (Kolkata, Gangchil, 2003) pp.191-192 (In Bengali).

⁵ James Hutton; *A Popular Account of the Thugs and Dacoits, the Hereditary Garotters and Gang-Robbers of India* (London: W.H. Allen & Co., 1857), pp. 74-77.

⁶ Kim A. Wagner (ed); *Stranglers and Bandits, A Historical Anthology of Thuggee*, (New-Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 67.

⁷ *J.C.P.; (Bengal)*, July 5, 1836. No. 61.



2nd. In reply to your letter I would respectfully submit to this Excellency the Governor General that its sessions to one especially advisable that my jurisdiction should be extended into Zillah Nuddea as it borders with this district whereas being most central (sic), I have for the present established my Head Quarters and with Burdwan where I have discovered that the gangs of River *Thugs* who infest the Bhagruttee and Ganges mostly imanate.

3rd I have information also of gangs of *Thugs* who residing mostly in Zillahs Beerbhoom and Bancoorah practised occasionally on the Ganges but also very frequently by land towards Midnapore, Balasore and Cuttack, this seems to afford a reason for my jurisdiction bring extended into those districts.

4th The Western gangs travel as far to the Eastward as Dinagpore(sic) and Rungpore and these (sic) return Westward – The River *Thugs* of Pabna, Dacca and Furreedpore carry their depredations as far westward as Rungpore and also commented with Mymensing.

5th As my parties in pursuit of Criminals may be quietly be obliged to follow them into any districts there is no doubt that it would much facilitate my operations and I think be of advantage to the public service was I authorized to exercise the powers of Joint Magt. (sic) in them all.”⁸

Pungoos and *Bungoos* frequently travelled in large groups, with numerous boats docked at the same ghat. They were always killed during the day. There were no boats on the river that were so clean and welcoming to visitors, and those who were to take part in the operations were dressed like highly respectable travellers, as opposed to the boatmen who went about their work. They always appeared to be respectable men as they travelled up the river, making pilgrimages to holy sites like Allahabad and Benaras. When they went down, they pretended to be returning home from such destinations. They sent

⁸ *Ibid.*

out well-dressed *Sothas*, or inveiglers, on the high highways, pretending to be travelling by water to the same destinations as the travellers they met. When they arrived at the ghat, they noticed these nice-looking boats and the respectably dressed River *Thugs* having fun. They urged the boat's *Manjee* (captain) to take them and the other passengers on board because he could do so at a lower cost than others. He feigned to be pressed for space, and the River *Thugs* appeared to be unwilling to take any more passengers on board. Finally, he gave in to the inveiglers' urgent pleadings, and the travellers were accommodated. They moved off into the middle of the river, with those above singing, playing, and creating a lot of noise, while the travellers were slaughtered within at the signals of three taps. Following the killing, the travellers' bodies were tossed into the river. The boat then proceeded to another ghat after landing the inveiglers on the roadways.⁹

The system of killing and rituals of the *Bungoos* (River *thugs*) were different from their fellows on shore. Between the two types of thugs, there were certain differences in methods of killing. River-Thugs slung the *ruhmal* (handkerchief) from in front and pushed their victims' heads backwards, while those on land slung the *ruhmal* from behind and pushed forward. And unlike the Thugs, they strictly observed goddess Kali's order not to kill women.¹⁰ Kali worship was very strong among the River Thugs. So, they considered themselves the purest of all *Thugs*.¹¹

If we try to track the origin of the river *thugs*, we have to go back to the thirteenth century. From the biography of Sultan Firoz-Shah Tuglaq, we come to know that during the reign of Jalal-ud-din Firoz Khilji (1290A.D.), 1000 *thugs* were arrested in Delhi. The Sultan would not allow one of them to be executed. He gave orders for them to put into boats and to converge into the lower country to the neighbourhood of Lukhnauti (Gaur), the capital of Bengal, where they were to be set free.¹² Thus, from generation to generation, these bandits practised their excursion in the river. The colonial government in Bengal in the nineteenth century likewise had very little luck in quelling the River *Thugs*. Only 161

⁹ Edward Thornton; *Illustrations of the History and Practices of the Thugs and Notices of some of the Proceedings of the Government of India for the suppression of the Crime of Thuggee*, (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1837), pp. 31-42.

¹⁰ George Bruce; *The Stranglers: The Cult of Thuggee and Its Overthrow in British India*, (London: Longmans, 1968), pp. 190-191.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 195.

¹² Kim A. Wagner (ed), *op. cit*, p. 58.

criminals had been apprehended up until the year 1836, and the colonial authorities obtained the names of thirty-eight further miscreants. Eighteen boats were usually employed by those River Thugs for their illegal operations, and fourteen River Thugs resided on each boat for their horrific activities.¹³ We learn that Bengal's hot and humid seasons were not conducive to the River *Thugs'* criminal activities from the Fureedpore Magistrate's report on them. since there weren't many travellers who went hunting at the time. When it came to manhunting, those River Thugs were most successful from November through February each year. The River Thugs typically lived in boats and used a variety of crafty manoeuvres. Occasionally, they would attempt to prove that they knew the boatmen from their previous frequent travels. Occasionally, they also persuaded traders with boats loaded with hemp, tobacco, and other goods to pause beside them at the *Chur* (Sandbank) of the river so they could rest and prepare meals together at the same time. The Gang Leader then invited everyone to join them in chanting the name of the all-powerful God, *Shri Hari Stotram*. The gang leader abruptly yelled his prayer, asking the Almighty God to grant them their loot, as they were all reciting the song of God. The signal was this. Following this, the gang members quickly jumped on the throats of the boat's crew, passengers, traders, and boatmen, strangling them until they died. It was then time to plunder every object on the boats, including money and merchandise. Then, using their skilled hands and elbows, the gang members fractured the victims' backbones and ribs. They then hauled the dead onto their boats and tossed them into the river's deep, swift-moving water.¹⁴

Now, I try to expose two different case studies to give a complete picture of the River *Thugs*. One is a confession of a Thug who once worked with the River *Thugs* and another is an official report of Colonel William Sleeman. I hope these are sufficient to explain the secret dialects, rituals and expeditions of the River *Thugs*.

The unnamed *Thug* admitted in his confession that he had participated in several amazing adventures during his life with Dilwar Khan, Futteh Khan, Bhowar Khan, and Maradun. In his single expedition, our unnamed *Thug* teamed up with Gholamun and Jhoulee Khan. Nathoo, a man, was chosen by Jhoulee Khan to carry his load. During that season, Jhoulee Khan performed alongside *Bungoo* (River *Thug*),

¹³ James Hutton; *op. cit*, (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1857), pp. 74-77.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 74-77.

Jemadar Jypaul Kaet. At the Marmakeya ghat, they came together. The two travellers were invited to Jhoulee Khan's boat. Jypaul began giving his gang members orders in *Rumasee*, the secret language spoken by thugs, once the travellers and gang members had taken their places on the boat. Jypaul declared: "Let the *Beetoos* (Those Not *Thugs*) separate themselves from the *Boras* (*Thugs*)." Following orders, all of the *Bungoos* (River *Thugs*) left the two travellers together. Starting from the bank, four gang members began to tug the boat. Suddenly, one of them took the lead and pretended to be a spy (*Bykureea*). Then, the other seven gang members ambushed the travellers in a calculated manner. Following some travel, the gang's chief spy discovered that there were no witnesses in the area, making it an ideal time to kill. He then yelled, "*Bhugna ko pawn do.*" (Give a betel leaf to my sister's son.) After the *Jhirnee* (Signal) was given, the two travellers were strangled to death shortly after. The deceased travellers' spinal bones were then broken by the gang members. Now, the bodies are thrown into the river from the side of the ship's window. The corpses' underarms are occasionally stabbed by the River Thugs gang members. However, they typically did not stab the dead to death to hide the bloodstain on the riverbank. The bodies flowed away on the river with only minor wounds, which made people less suspicious. Following the entire ordeal, the gang members split up the money, belongings, and clothing of the travellers who were killed. The original dialogues by the admitted *Thug* will then be interesting to examine. He narrated: "..... it was hardly worth dividing. But coming on near Monghere, Jhoulee Khan, with whom we had landed and gone along the road near the river, inveigled another man, a Beetoo from Bengal, going to Gaya on pilgrimage, who yielded sixteen *gondas* of rupees and we six got only fifteen with us. The traveller was disposed of in the same manner as the others, I believe, but I did not go on board this time. Jhoulee Khan and Bhowur Khan embarked with him and brought back our share of the booty. After this affair, I left them near Monghere, as I got very little; and grew melancholy, as there were no *Thugs* of my clan or district. They were all *Bungoos* and *Loduhas*" ---- It is very crucial to observe this *Thug's* mental discontent.¹⁵

Another case of River Thuggee is based on Colonel Sleeman's official report stated that: Hookum Chund, a jewel merchant, and his two bodyguards sat down inside the cramped cabin of a boat on the Ganges. Hookum Chund was on his way home to Murshidabad from a visit to Calcutta. Beside him sat three other wayfarers who had passed him on the road fifteen minutes ago. Opposite, sat the man whom

¹⁵ Edward Thornton; *op. cit.*, (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1837), pp. 31-42.

he had met on the road and who had suggested going by boat, with six other men he presumed were passengers. His name was Suroop Dutt, *Jemadar* of a highly skilled gang, he had found it no more than child's play to entice this merchant with his bodyguards aboard. The other intended three victims were also merchants. Like all River-Thug jemadars, Dutt strangled one victim on each trip himself --- after nearly twenty years it had become a mechanical operation and he had lost count of the number of his victims. The vessel drifted away from the landing stage and began its smooth up-river journey. Dutt led the cheerful talk in the cabin --- of women, of trade or of the new land annexations in Hindustan which, it was rumoured, the English were going to undertake.

..... In the burning heat of midday, the passengers began their smooth progress upstream again, lounging drowsily in the heat after the meal. The seven *Thugs* sat tense and ready to spring, fingers itching on the *ruhmals*.

Five boatmen now came down from the deck and edged between the victims's backs and the hull, on the pretext of moving heavy baggage. Three sharp staccato taps sounded on the deck above --- the signal to kill. Hookum Chund's wrists were seized -- he struggled to try to escape, but no escape from the strip of yellow cloth flashed around his throat and those of his fellow passengers. The struggle lasted less than a minute. Suroop Dutt tucked his *ruhmal* back into the cabin as his men bent to strip and pillage them. Working in pairs the *Thugs* first broke each victim's spinal cord, jerking head and shoulders against a knee pressed into the small of the back, then thrust a long knife into the armpits, believing these wounds would keep the bodies below the river's surface. Finally, for obscure reasons, they pounded the victim's sexual organs with mallets and then bundled them all out through the portholes into the placid brown waters.

They ripped the heap of clothing to pieces and threw it overboard, swilled the boat from stem to stern and divided the loot --- 1,200 rupees. The morning's work was complete. The boat was moored at the next landing stage and the *Thugs* went to sleep. An hour later Dutt and his servant walked the road again, looking for more victims. Thus, day after day, year after year, had these sordid tragedies been enacted.¹⁶

¹⁶ George Bruce; *op. cit.*, (London: Longmans, 1968), pp. 192-194.

Some River *Thugs* did not carry their expedition in a group. They liked the solo performance. In his memoir Daroga Bankaullah, wrote about a river thug who had used very unique and daring method for his target. According to Bankaullah near the estuary of the Jalangee River, there was a village named Rukunpur. In that village, a rumour was spread that in the Jalangee river, a very unique species of crocodile had lived, who never ate human flesh, only ate ornaments of women. The local people of Rukunpur called it ‘*Gahanavojee Kumeer*’ (The crocodile who ate jewellery only). But after his investigation, Bankullah was sure that, there was no crocodile in the Jalangee river. It was the act of a river thug who had floated in the river under the cover of a holed black *Hadi* (Urn-shaped cooking utensils). He had driven the women, who had come to bathe in the river, into the deep water with the noose of a long iron chain. Those drowning women have died in suffocation. Then, he had stripped all the gold and silver ornaments from the bodies of those women and left their dead bodies in some deserted ford (*Char*) or river-bend.¹⁷

Against this particular brand of offences, the authorities were least successful. The large rivers of Bengal, which had been the only channels of communication, afforded great opportunity for this type of dacoity. It was extremely difficult, if not impossible, for the police to keep track of the offenders. For when a boat was attacked in a solitary place, the victims ignorant of the locality, generally preferred to continue their journey than launching a formal complaint with the police. The river *thugs* and dacoits themselves were very much aware of the inconveniences of the police in detecting the offenders operating on the waters.¹⁸ The contemporary River Police had known the details of the criminal activities of those River *Thugs*. But those River *Thugs* regularly bribed them with money and presentations. That’s why the River Police also maintained the silence and also concealed the details of the criminal activities of the River *Thugs* from the higher authority. Although from their hidden sources, the European Magistrates also knew the very existence of the River *Thugs* even in the year 1836. But, due to the lack of guard boats (and economic shortage also) of the East India Company, River police could not suppress and control the River *Thugs* properly. In his report H.J. James, the magistrate of Rungpore wrote that “for the suppression of Thuggee a guard boat pour (sic) my establishment, I beg to

¹⁷ Soumen Pal and Prasenjit Das-Gupta (eds.), *Bankaullahr Daptar* (Bankaullah’s Department) (Kolkata: Charcapad, 2013) pp. 138-144. (In Bengali)

¹⁸ Ranjan Chakrabarty; *op.cit.*, p. 183.

inform you that the supply of 4 Boats allowed me, is by no means sufficient to perform the duties required of them, for during the rains the Police officers in the mofusul must depend greatly on the Boats as the means of transmission of and carrying into execution the orders from the office.”¹⁹

When, in 1836, the River *Thugs* of Bihar and Bengal were ‘discovered’, Col. Sleeman had called for the introduction of new legal measures and as a result, the colonial government enacted Act No. XXX of 1836. According to this act –

- I. “It is hereby enacted, that whoever shall be proved to have belonged, either before or after the passing of the act, to any gang of *Thugs*, either within or without the territories of the East India Company shall be punished with imprisonment for life with hard labour.-
- II. And it is hereby enacted, that every person accused of the offence made punishable by the act, may be tried by any Court which would have been competent to try him if his offence had been committed within the Zillah where that Court sits, anything to the contrary in any Regulation contained not with standing.
- III. And it is hereby enacted, that no Court shall, on a trial of any person accused of the offence made punishable by this act, require any Futwa from any Law Officer.”²⁰

The River *Thugs*’ reign of terror in the rivers of eastern India was to some extent restrained when Captain Lewis was appointed as a deputy of Col. Sleeman. He speeded up the tempo of operations by the lucky capture of a small gang of River *Thugs*. Some of them became approvers and revealed names of fellow *thugs* and their cruel murders on the quiet rivers. As a result, further arrests followed and from the end of the third decade of the nineteenth century, the rivers of East India became much more secure for the common travellers, traders and pilgrims. In 1843 Act XXIV (which is a precursor of the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871.) was also enacted to enable the magisterial authorities by a special law to destroy the *Thugs* and other similar dacoit gangs. The said act enabled the authorities to penalize the members of a gang of River *Thugs* merely by establishing the criminal connection without full proof of their

¹⁹ *J.C.P.(Bengal)*, September 13, 1836. No. 55.

²⁰ *J.C.P. (Bengal,)* November 29, 1836, No. 22.

association with a particular crime.²¹ But despite all these efforts the colonial authority failed to destroy those criminals completely. This is clear from the report of the Commissioner for the Suppression of Dacoity in 1856, where the commissioner accepted that the efforts of the colonial authorities against the River *Thugs* had only limited success.²²

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²¹ Ranjan Chakrabarty; *op.cit.*, pp. 168-169.

²² *Ibid*; p. 184.