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Discovering India, Imagining Thuggee

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Discovering India, Imagining *Thuggee*

Parama Roy (bio)

“I am a Thug, my father and grandfather were Thugs, and I have thugged with many. Let the government employ me and I will do its work.”

In 1920, James Sleeman, writing about his grandfather's services to the East India Company's government in India, credits him with having unveiled (and vanquished) the most important criminal conspiracy of the nineteenth century, if not of all time.¹ This conspiracy was called thuggee; and the campaign for its exposure and extirpation was to form a significant constitutive component of the authoritarian and interventionary reform of the 1830s and 1840s, and to contribute to the still emerging project of "discovering India."² "It was with the flourish of mystery unveiled and mastered," says a contemporary historian, "that a group of officers of the Political Department had lobbied for special operations against [a] 'murderous fraternity' and for special laws to deal with it."³ It is the tale of that mystery that this paper will take up, examining the phenomenon designated thuggee by colonial authority in nineteenth-century India, a phenomenon whose emergence, codification, and overthrow was to become perhaps *the* founding moment for the study of indigenous criminality. I take up that narrative, not so much to provide another account of thuggee as to (re)cast it as a problem of impersonation/mimicry and the transactions of colonial reading. In doing so I broach a nexus of concerns that cohere around the vexed concepts of identity formation and colonial knowledge: the contested, changing, and uneven definitions of law, order, criminality, and reform in early nineteenth-century India, the theorization of colonial subjectivity through the optic of impersonation, and the discursive problems associated with generating the moral subject of the civilizing mission of British colonialism.

This paper has three movements, some of which have significant amounts of overlap. The first examines the official records of the Thuggee and Dacoity Department (first established in the 1830s), a cluster of documents that I have perhaps rather arbitrarily designated the archive of thuggee. This includes first and foremost the files on thuggee and dacoity in the India Office Library and **[End Page 121]** the

National Archives of India. Also incorporated in this body of work designated the archive are the works (*Ramaseeana, or A Vocabulary of the Peculiar Language Used by the Thugs, Report on Budhuk alias Bagree Dacoits and other Gang Robbers by Hereditary Profession, Report of the Depredations Committed by the Thug Gangs*) of William Henry Sleeman of thuggee fame, as well as other officials associated directly or indirectly with the anti-thug campaign: James Sleeman, *Thug, or A Million Murders* (1920); Charles Hervey, *Some Records of Crime* (1892), 2 vols.; Edward Thornton, *Illustrations of the History and Practices of the Thugs* (1837); and the anonymously authored *The Thugs or Phansigars of India* (1839), an abridged version of the *Ramaseeana* for a North American audience. This inventory of thuggee materials includes as well a number of biographies, fictionalizations, and non-official accounts of the “discovery” of the phenomenon and its eradication: James Hutton, *A Popular Account of the Thugs and Dacoits, the Hereditary Garroters and Gang-Robbers of India* (1857); A.J. Wightman, *No Friend for Travellers* (1959); George Bruce, *The Stranglers: The Cult of Thuggee and Its Overthrow in British India* (1968); Francis Toker, *The Yellow Scarf* (1961); and Philip Meadows Taylor, *Confessions of a Thug* (1839). These are collectively designated the archive in my chapter, despite the incommensurability in their generic status; this has been done because there appears to be very little significant difference between one text and another in this collection. Each seems to repeat the others in an uncanny fashion; each narrates the same incidents in almost exactly the same rhetorical mode, and each looks to W.H. Sleeman’s productions as the founding texts of the thuggee narrative. (Meadows Taylor’s novel differs from these only in its focus on a single thug and its accumulation of additional [fictional] detail.)

The second movement focuses on the special juridical procedures that had to be instituted in order...



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