It should be apparent from the preceding chapters that the account of thuggee usually found within the colonial tradition, and beyond, is only loosely based on the historical records. Sleeman did not discover thuggee in 1829, he did not single-handedly convince the Government to mount the thuggee campaign, nor did he alone unravel the murderous fraternity or even suggest the necessary measures to obtain that goal. The use of approvers and rewards were the traditional means of apprehending criminals and they were used before 1809 and in connection with thuggee well before 1829. Information concerning thugs, such as Wright’s report, was widely circulated as early as 1810, information from approvers was exchanged between the districts and the idea of an official list or register of suspected thugs was proposed by Moodie in 1824. While it cannot be denied that Sleeman’s personal engagement shaped the thuggee campaign, as well as the colonial representation of thuggee, any account of thuggee that makes no mention of Perry, Halhed, Shakespeare and Stockwell can hardly be considered comprehensive.

The British did not invent or coin the term ‘thug’ and the pre-colonial material suggests that in several instances the usage of the word was practically identical to that of the nineteenth century. Thuggee, though, was not an ancient practice and even if there were people called thugs in thirteenth-century Delhi, the extant records do not allow us to talk of the existence of the phenomenon prior to the seventeenth century. A number of indigenous and early European accounts from the seventeenth century, however, do contain the key elements of deception and strangling of travellers long before the colonial stereotype of thuggee came into existence. Consequently thuggee cannot simply be reduced to a colonial construction.
It is the claim of this book that the thugs were, in the words of Halhed, ‘no more than a species of robber’. That is to say, they are best understood in the context of banditry rather than some vague notion of a religious sect or caste-like entity. In the study of Sindouse I have attempted to demystify thuggee and instead naturalise the phenomenon in a concrete socio-economic, political, religious and historical context. Sindouse was situated in a poor, politically turbulent, inaccessible border-area with insufficient agriculture and the prevalence of banditry in such an area is virtually given. The martial ethos of the landowning Rajput elites in this locality moreover provided the moral and ritual framework within which the thugs sought to inscribe themselves. The 1797 tax list suggests that the thugs in Sindouse and the surrounding area were a distinct category and that they were regarded as an asset on all levels of the indigenous administration. It was a common aspect of the local power structure that the zamindars entertained armed retainers and while some had kazaks in their pay, others had thugs. This type of patronage was completely institutionalised and worked to the benefit of both the zamindars and the thugs. The military designations used by the zamindars and villagers to describe the thugs shows that they were considered as mercenaries or retainers. The thugs themselves used the word ‘naukari’ or ‘service’ to describe their profession; again implying that it was a common part of village life and a socially acceptable livelihood. The employment of marauders on all levels of the power hierarchy was a basic part of the process of state-building in India during this period and accordingly thuggee was part of a much larger phenomenon.

Thuggee did not constitute a caste-like entity in Sindouse or elsewhere, and even within small tight-knit groups it completely lacked any social or religious homogeneity. The notion of bhalibandh or ‘brotherhood’ appropriately encompasses the sense of affinity existing among the loose and overlapping networks of thug gangs based on kin and accredited kinship. In their myths of origin, the thugs were part of the ‘84 tribes’ but the material also corroborates the actual existence of links between various thug-gangs as well as various communities of what I have described as an itinerant underworld. The notion of an underworld need not encompass a counter-society that is always and fully excluded from ‘law-abiding’ sedentary society, and I have used it to describe the loose-knit and overlapping networks of people who sometimes engaged in crimes of varying sorts, including thuggee, and whose identities cannot necessarily be narrowed down to either itinerant or sedentary. One of the defining characteristics of the itinerant underworld was the extensive use of slang, but its usage was never limited to criminal activities alone. Thus the