The Practice of Thuggee

The Surguja expedition

As examples of the thug’s expeditions I have chosen those that set out from Sindouse in the fall of 1809 as described in the depositions of three approvers in the early 1830s; namely Ameer Alee, Punna and Doorgha. The expeditions of this year are significant because of the number of gangs involved, making it possible to examine the thug network in greater detail.

Ameer Alee set out from Sindouse in October 1809 with 20 thugs led by the Muslim *jemadars*, or gang-leaders, Durroo and Moloo, and went to Jabalpur and further south. Later they met and joined Kosul *Jemadar*, and his band of 125 thugs and together they turned eastwards, murdering several smaller groups of travellers along the way. At Ratanpur they met and joined Himmut Lala *Jemadar*, a Brahmin, and his band of 100 thugs, making a total of 250. At Jhada they murdered another party, after which they retraced their route and on the way met Noor Khan *Jemadar*, with his band of 50, and together they went to Takhatpur.

The expedition of 1809 was only Punna’s second and he also left Sindouse in October with his brothers Bussuntee and Suddoo, and Ghasee Subadar with 200 thugs altogether. In a field outside of Sindouse they waited for the ‘shugoon’ or auspice, and having received a favourable one, the *jemadars* cooked and ate their dinner on the spot, after which they proceeded towards Mirzapur. Upon reaching this city they encamped on the banks of the Ganges near the temple of Vindyachal, bathed in the holy river and made an offering of Rs 10 to the goddess Bhowanee, and after that the thugs bought sweetmeats with which they feasted a dozen Brahmins. A traveller joined their camp and he was immediately strangled and thrown in the Ganges after they had
taken Rs 105 from him. Then Punna stated: ‘We bought goor with five rupees of the money, and ate it, and the remaining hundred we took to the temple of Bhowanee, and gave them to the Pundas, or priests. The gun, sword, and clothes [belonging to the victim] we took ourselves.’ From Mirzapur the band went southwards and on the way they met Pahar and Laljoo Jemadars, Muslims, with 100 thugs, whom they joined. Later, they met and joined Noor Khan’s gang and eventually the bands reached Takakhatpur where they took up camp in the bazaar and adjoining grove, and soon after the others thug bands arrived.

Doorgha, who was a jemadar himself left Sindouse in October with a band of 125 thugs and was soon joined by Nathooram Jemadar and Natheea Jemadar with 50 thugs. They too went to Vindhyachal and Mirzapur and then southwards and at Ratanpur, 165 thugs separated from them, leaving Doorgha with only ten or twenty. At Takhatpur, however, most of them reunited.

According to Punna, the gangs assembled at Thakatpur numbered upwards of 600 thugs. The inhabitants of the town became alarmed at their presence and the thug jemadars send a delegation to the governor of Thakatpur lest he should become suspicious of their presence. The thugs told the governor that they were respectable men in search of service and that some were soldiers in the Raja of Nagpur’s army, and the governor gave them Rs 5 and some pawn leaves and ‘dismissed them with the respect due to public servants of rank’. Nevertheless, it was thought prudent to leave quickly and the gangs broke up to go their separate ways: Himmut, Kosul and Pertaub with 300 took the road to Mirzapur, Noor Khan with 100 took the road to Nagpur, while Ghasee and Suddoo with 200 went towards Ramtek.

Shortly after Takhatpur, Himmut and 160 of the thugs met a party of 40 travellers who were going from the Deccan to the Ganges, whom they joined. The party of travellers consisted of several different families including a Brahmin officer belonging to a native regiment and a Brahmin with most of his relatives. At Ratanpur, Noor Khan and a further 160 thugs who had gone towards Nagpur joined them having heard of the large group of travellers. This was thought to be very fortunate as the original 160 would have been unable to manage the murder of 40 by themselves.³ Even more thugs joined along the way and by the time they set out from Ratanpur towards Mirzapur, there were 360 thugs accompanying the 40 travellers. Two days later they reached Choree and scouts were despatched to choose a suitable place for the murder, which they found in a nullah amidst extensive jungle a few miles ahead. A few hours before daylight they all set out, and when they reached the spot a jemadar