

Thugs in ancient india

[History](#), [Ancient History](#)



Thugs In Accient India On a well-worn road through central India, Lieutenant Subhani of the Bengal Native Infantry and his three traveling companions were nearing the final leg of their journey. Ordinarily the Lieutenant would have only his pair of loyal orderlies to keep him company as he traveled, but today a third man walked alongside his horse—a stranger who had joined him only that morning. The year was 1812, and the pleasant October weather made for an easy trek. Subhani knew these roads could be dangerous for travelers, especially at this time of year, but he was untroubled.

Trained soldiers and well-armed, he and his men were an unlikely target for roving bandits. But a much greater threat loomed over them on that dusty road, closer at hand than the travelers could have possibly conceived.

Accounts of a secret cult of murderers roaming India go back at least as far as the 13th century, but to modern history their story usually begins with the entrance of the British Empire in the early 1800s. For some years, India's British administrators had been hearing reports of large numbers of travelers disappearing on the country's roads; but, while disturbing, such incidents were not entirely unusual for the time.

It was not until the discovery of a series of eerily similar mass graves across India that the truth began to dawn. Each site was piled with the bodies of individuals ritually murdered and buried in the same meticulous fashion, leading to an inescapable conclusion: these killings were the work of a single, nation-pning organization. It was known as Thuggee. At its root, the word "Thuggee" means "deceivers," and this name hints at the methods employed by the cult.

Bands of Thugs traveled across the country posing as pilgrims, merchants, soldiers, or even royalty, in groups numbering anywhere from a few men to several hundred. Offering protection or company, they would befriend fellow travelers and slowly build their confidence along the road. Often the impostors would journey for days and hundreds of miles with their intended victims, patiently waiting for an opportunity to strike. When the time was right, typically while their targets were encamped and at their most relaxed, a signal would be given—reportedly “Bring the tobacco”—and the Thugs would spring.

Each member had a well-honed specialty; some distracted their quarry, some made noise or music to mask any cries, while others guarded the campsite from intruders and escapees. Thugs of the highest rank performed the actual killings. As a prohibition against shedding blood was at the core of Thuggee belief, the murders were performed in a bloodless fashion. The usual method was strangulation with a rumal, the yellow silk handkerchief each thug wore tied around his waist; but an occasional neck-breaking or poisoning helped to add some variety.

It was a matter of honor for the Thugs to let no one escape alive once they had been selected for death. Lieutenant Subhani and his orderlies had spent the previous night as guests at the home of Ishwardas Moti, a prestigious cotton merchant and local official. There he had been introduced to another of Moti's guests, the man who was traveling with him now. Moklal was his name—a business associate of Moti's, he was told, and one he had spoken of

most highly. “ Narsinghpur! ” Moti had exclaimed upon hearing the Lieutenant's destination, “ What a fortunate coincidence!

Moklal is traveling that way as well. Perhaps you could go with him for the extra protection? ” Subhani, though reluctant to take on a civilian traveling companion, did not wish to offend his host—and at any rate, Moklal seemed amiable enough. He agreed. For the members of Thuggee, murder was both a way of life and a religious duty. They believed their killings were a means of worshiping the Hindu goddess Kali, who was honored at each stage of the murder by a vast and complex system of rituals and superstitions.

Thugs were guided to their victims by omens observed in nature, and once the deed was done, the graves and bodies were prepared according to strict ceremonies. A sacrificial rite would be conducted after the burial involving the consecration of sugar and of the sacred pickax, the tool the brotherhood believed was given to them by Kali to dig the graves of their prey. Thugs were certainly not above robbing their victims, but traditionally a portion of the spoils would be set aside for the goddess. Kali, despite her fearsome appearance, is not an evil deity.

For more mainstream Hindus, she is a goddess of time and transformation who can impart understanding of life, death, and creation. To the members of the Thuggee cult, she was something else entirely. Their Kali craved human blood, and demanded endless sacrifice to satisfy her hunger.

According to Thuggee legend, Kali once battled a terrible demon which roamed the land, devouring humans as fast as they were created. But every drop of the monster's blood that touched the ground spawned a new demon,

until the exhausted Kali finally created two human men, armed with rumals, and instructed them to strangle the demons.

When their work was finished, Kali instructed them to keep the rumals in their family and use them to destroy every man not of their kindred. This was the tale told to Thuggee initiates. All Thugs were male, and membership in the cult was hereditary apart from a few outsiders allowed to join voluntarily and some young boys captured in raids. Around their tenth birthday, the sons of Thugs would be invited to witness their first murder, but only from a distance. Gradually over the years they could strive to achieve the rank of bhuttote, or strangler.

Thuggee membership was for life, all the way up to the elderly Thugs who still did what they could for the group as cooks or spies—yet the wives and daughters of these men might never know the truth about the male members of their family. Their extreme secrecy combined with their mastery of murder made the Thugs the deadliest secret society in all of history. In the early 19th century they were credited with 40,000 deaths annually, stretching back as far as anyone cared to count.

Some estimates put the overall death toll as high as 2,000,000, but with the cult potentially operating for more than 500 years before formal records were kept, the true number is impossible to determine. Even as the evidence began to mount, most members of India's British-run government remained dismissive of claims that a secret cult of murderers was terrorizing the countryside. It would be the efforts of a single soldier that would eventually

turn this apathy around. After nearly a day's travel with his new companion, Lieutenant Subhani did not regret allowing Moklal to join him.

The man was talkative and well-educated, and his conversation seemed to shorten the long journey considerably. As dusk approached, Moklal explained that his destination, a wayside grove where he planned to spend the night, was just ahead. " There I am meeting my friends. Please, stay with us tonight, and let me repay you the courtesy of escorting me today. " Subhani, tired from the day's journey and already beginning to think of where he and his men might make camp, agreed. A fire was burning by the time they reached the campsite, while around it an animated group of men were gathered.

A flurry of introductions went around—many of these men were business associates of Moklal, it was learned, while others were family—and soon Subhani and his orderlies felt like part of the group, eating and laughing with the men. William Henry Sleeman Sir William Henry Sleeman was a sober, no-nonsense Bengal Army officer who from early on dedicated his care to the eradication of Thuggee. Faced with a wall of disbelief and indifference from his superiors, he transferred to the Civil Service where he could gain enough authority to wage his war personally.

As a district magistrate by the 1820s, he gathered a force of Indian policemen under him and set to rooting out the cult with a variety of innovative policing methods. By examining common attack sites and listening for reports of suspicious figures, Sleeman and his men formulated predictions of where the next large attack was likely to occur. They would

then turn the Thugs' own methods against them—disguised as merchants, the officers would wait at the chosen site for a group of Thugs to approach, and ambush them. Information obtained from the prisoners was used to plan the next strike.

But Sleeman's job would not be easy, as one of the Thuggee cult's defining characteristics was its pervasiveness within Indian society. In an era where strict caste divisions dominated every aspect of life, Thuggee was unique for transcending all such social barriers. Anyone from a farmer to an aristocrat could be a Thug. Many were even Muslims who, in a truly inspiring feat of rationalization, managed to reconcile their practice of human sacrifice to a goddess with their religion's strict ban on idolatry and murder.

When members of the brotherhood were not terrorizing travelers, they lived as normal—often upstanding—citizens, with ordinary social lives and occupations. It was impossible to know who might be with the Thugs, even among one's closest friends. What was more bizarre, and endlessly frustrating for Sleeman, was the level of protection the Thugs seemed to enjoy within India. Though they clearly had the country living in fear, a strange ambivalence toward the cult existed.

Local police and officials turned a blind eye to reports of Thug activities, while peasants would simply work around the bodies that occasionally appeared in their fields and wells. Landowners and Indian princes often explicitly shielded known Thugs, to the point that they would sometimes violently clash with British soldiers on the hunt. The reasons for this strange reaction to the cult are varied and complex. In the case of the lower-ranked

members of society, it most often may have simply been out of fear or superstition; it was believed by some that the goddess Kali would take revenge on those who interfered with her followers.

The rich and powerful, for their part, may have had some vested interest in Thug activity: bribery, perhaps, or they may simply have been charmed by master con artists. Some poor villages accepted the murder and robbery of rich travelers as simply a way of bringing wealth into the region—for many, Thugging was apparently viewed as a regular tax-paying profession, as noble as any other. Whatever the cause, it meant that Sleeman's men were more often than not met with silence as they probed residents for information. But a few factors were in Sleeman's favor.

First, the Thugs' beliefs forbade them from killing certain groups, including women, fakirs, musicians, lepers—and Europeans. Thuggee was thus unable to retaliate against its English persecutors even when it had the opportunity. Second, once captured, most Thugs cooperated with authorities willingly—one might even say gleefully. Staunch fatalists, the imprisoned Thugs believed their situation was the result of their displeasing the goddess. They therefore showed little remorse in turning in their brothers, believing that anything that happened to them would be the will of Kali.

Some suspect that Thuggee prisoners even deliberately accused innocent men; unable to strangle in person during their incarceration, sending men to the gallows was a convenient way of keeping up their obligation to Kali. As for those condemned to die, it is said that each went to his death with no trace of emotion, often requesting only that he be allowed to place the noose

around his own neck. With informants pouring in at an ever-increasing rate, Sleeman's campaign against the Thugs gained ground beyond anyone's expectations.

Within a few years the cult was crippled, and by the end of the 19th century the British declared Thuggee extinct. Sleeman was hailed as a hero by most of India, and in many parts of the country he is still revered. But there are those who have wondered if the British were too quick to congratulate themselves. It is difficult for some to imagine how a secret fraternity that had survived for centuries and engrained itself into every facet of Indian society could have been eliminated in so short a time. Certainly, the mass killings are a distant memory, and India no longer lives in fear of its shadow.

But in some remote areas, rumors still linger about the yellow-sashed strangers who welcome travelers with open arms and a friendly smile. It was dark when Subhani and his new friends had finished eating. For a time they sat in comfortable silence, with only an occasional quiet exchange passing between men seated across the fire next to one another. But no one had yet turned in for sleep. Moklal turned from the fire to Subhani. " Perhaps a smoke before bed? " he offered. The Lieutenant nodded gratefully. Moklal smiled, then looked up at someone apparently standing behind Subhani. " bring the Tobacco "