The Indian Economic and Social Review,
Volume 6, Number 4, December, 1969
(403-429 p.)

*Scarf and Sword: Thugs, Marauders, and State-formation in 18th Century Malwa**

STEWART N. GORDON
Centre for South & Southeast Asian Studies,
University of Michigan, U.S.A.

1. Introduction

Thugi[1] captured the English popular imagination in the nineteenth century as did few features of India. Bracketed with suti (widow self-immolation) and infanticide, it proved the "backward" state of India to the Utilitarians, and its need for Christianity to the Evangelicals. Priests thundered of the need for missionaries and Benthamites argued for better courts and jails. For many Englishmen, Thugi was only the most hideous and bizarre of those strange religious perversions which were the essence of India—making it alien, evil, incomprehensible, and quite frightening enough to be titillating.

European official accounts of Thugi and later histories reveal almost as much colour as the novelists; yet among them there are also striking inconsistencies. Let us compare descriptions of Thugi by authors whom we might justly expect to be authoritative. First,

* The ideas of this paper were first presented at the Michigan Rotating South Asia Seminar in March, 1969. With the comments and criticism of that group and the generous assistance of J. H. Broomfield it has been substantially revised to its present form.

1. The problem of transliteration is a plague whenever foreign terms are used. Words known in the West in one form—such as Thug, Thuggi, Bhil, Rajput—I have retained in that form, though the terms appearing in quotations will vary, i.e.: Thag, Thagi, Thaggi. Place names especially in the section on the geography of Malwa I have taken from James Tod *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* and John Malcolm *A Memoir of Central India*.

Percival Spear, a twentieth-century historian :

> The dislocation of society drove adventurous, hopeless or embittered spirits to a lawless life. They formed the material for princely armies or robber bands, each of whom recruited from the other as fortunes rose and fell. The landless or uprooted man looked for a leader and reckless from despair was the typical figure of the time. A specialized form of these men were Thugs, robbers and ritual murderers, who rose to prominence in these times and spread across central India to the terror of travellers and peaceful men.[2]

Second, James Sleeman, military officer in India, and author of *Thug, or a Million Murders* (1933) :

> [The Thug] regarded the stalking of men as a higher form of sport . . . : that fiend in human form, luring his victims to their doom with soft speech and cunning artifice, committing the coldblooded murder of every man he met, saint or sinner, rich or poor, blind or lame . . . . The taking of human life for the sheer lust of killing was the Thugs' main object : the plunder, however pleasant, being a secondary consideration.[3]

Third, the characterization of Thugi in R. V. Russell's comprehensive *Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces* (1916): Thug is listed between Teli (oilmen) and Turi (a cultivating caste) and the Thugs are considered a caste or "community of murderers" just as the Teli are a community of oilmen.[4]

These accounts are quite incompatible. First, on the fundamental motivation of Thugs. To Spear, they are essentially rational men, though "hopeless" and "embittered", who are driven by conditions in society and for lack of other income to murder and

2. V. A. Smith, rewritten by Percival Spear, *Oxford History of India* (Oxford, 1958), pp. 575-576.

3. James Sleeman, *Thug, or A Million Murders* (London, 1933), pp. 3-5.

4. Robert Russell and Hira Lal, *Tribes and Castes of the Central Provinces of India* (London, 1916), p. 558.

rob. For Sleeman, in contrast, the basic motivation is psychological blood-lust. A Thug was a "fiend in human form" who regarded the "stalking of men as a higher form of sport". It follows that according to Spear plunder was the central objective, while Sleeman states that the plunder was a "secondary consideration".

Second, Spear's image of men of diverse occupations and origins driven to Thugi by social dislocation is incompatible with the Russell description of Thugs as a "community of murderers" or caste. Either Thugs were or were not a "caste" with all that implies : a high degree of hereditary entrance, commonaliy of pool of marriage partners, and some consensus on place in the ritual hierarchy.

Third, Russell and Sleeman are at loggerheads on who the Thugs would kill. For Russell, the elaborate set of omens and prohibitions (against murdering women, Brahmins, etc.) constituted the essence of the Thug caste. Sleeman baldly says a Thug committed "coldblooded murder on every man he met . . . "

Finally, to Spear, Thugs are a product of a particular political and geographic setting. He refers to dislocation in "these times" (the eighteenth century) and "central India". For Sleeman and Russell, Thugs were assumed to be an ubiquitous, permanent, and immutable feature of Indian life.

Beyond these inconsistencies, more perplexing still is the fact that if we turn to verbatim testimony of men arrested as Thugs, rather than European interpretation, we find that none of these three contradictory assertions is adequate to explain the social organization or motivation as revealed in the testimony. Consider first the definition given by Percival Spear: Thugs were a special type of "landless or uprooted men looking for a leader and reckless from despair." From a reading of Thug pre-trial testimony, it is clear that these men were not "landless or uprooted" ; in fact they were only part-time murderers—having regular, permanent villages and occupations which included cultivating, trading, or even serving as local officials in revenue collection. Many cases were reported of whole villages coming out to defend an accused Thug against British capture.[5]

5. Charles Hervey, *Some Records of Crime* (London, 1892), I, 439.

We might expect Thugs, as "uprooted" men, to be roaming the countryside, pariahs of society; nothing of the sort is true. This very same European-collected testimony reveals a pattern of continuing relationships between accused Thugs and local zamindars (we shall return to a precise definition of these zamindars). Numerous men who turned state's evidence describe such arrangements. In return for the promise not to commit robbery or murder in his area, and a percentage of the booty from all expeditions elsewhere, the local zamindar not only left the bandits alone, but protected their homes and families while they were on the roads. Regular rent rolls detailing this relationship were known in the early nineteenth century.[6]

Were Thugs as Spear suggests, "looking for a leader"? Probably not. Some men arrested were of criminal families going back several generations. However, in addition to these bandit chiefs, other types of leaders emerge from the evidence: "(1) The man who always has at command the means of advancing a month or two's subsistence to a gang; (2) A very wise man whose advice in difficult cases has weight with the gang; (3) One who has influence over local authorities or the native officers of the courts of justice; and (4) A man of handsome appearance and high bearing who can feign the man of rank well" might all be leaders.[7] If anything, there were *too many leaders*; bands were constantly fragmenting as new men proved their prowess and gained followers.

We fare no better if we turn from this twentieth-century historian's characterization to the formulation of a "community of murderers" in *Tribes and Castes of Central India*. The same European-collected evidence belies this thesis. Minimally, caste implies some commonality of potential marriage partners, some consensus on a place in a ritual hierarchy, and a great degree of hereditary entrance. None of these hold for the men arrested—they came from dozens of different castes. Hindus and Moslems ate, slept, and worked together in some bands.[8] Many of the men

6. Edward Thornton, *Illustrations of the History and Practice of the Thugs* (London, 1837), pp. 473-475.

7. *Ibid.*, p. 23.

8. Caleb Wright, *Lectures on India* (Boston 1849), p. 177. This "problem" is discussed in Russell, *Tribes*, Vol. IV, pp. 562-567 and in Hervey, *Records*, I, 274-275 f.

arrested were not members of long-standing criminal families, but were recruited later in life.[9] Also, murder and robbery was not necessarily a hereditary occupation; sons of some accused Thugs chose to support themselves in agriculture or as religious ascetics.

Let us apply this European-collected data to the theory advanced by our remaining "authority", James Sleeman, who as we have seen described Thugs as "brought up in a faith which regarded the killing of men as legitimate sport." The testimony provides numerous examples of men who were not "brought up" as Thugs at all, but first joined a band as men in their twenties or thirties.[10] It also shows that plunder was the main motivation, in contradiction to Sleeman's statement that "it was secondary". The accused men took to the roads, not in search of just any traveller, but specifically looking for banker's agents, treasure-carriers, rich traders, and wealthy mercenary soldiers or pilgrims. Routes were chosen where booty was expected, and bodies of victims were especially severely mutilated when anticipated booty was not found. Elaborate scales of division of booty are recounted in pre-trial testimony, a greater percentage for those actually doing the murders, and the head of the band, somewhat less for guards, gravediggers, and information-gatherers.[11]

2. Stereotypes and an Ambitious Officer

These inconsistencies among various theories about Thugs arise in part from the common Anglo-Indian process of appropriating an Indian term and using it to make sense of unfamiliar and inadequately understood social institutions or groups of people. These appropriations and consequent distortions were of several kinds. For example, a specific office or title was made to stand for all titles with superficially similar functions. In a recent volume, Walter Neale has discussed the distortions to the term zamindar arising from differing Indian and British conceptions of the function of land.[12]

9. James Sleeman, *Thug*, p. 73.

10. Thornton, *Illustrations*, pp. 346, 367-368.

11. James Sleeman, *Thug*, p. 79.

12. Walter C. Neale, "Land is to Rule", *Land Control and Social Structure in Indian History*, ed. Robert E. Frykenberg (Madison, Wisconsin, 1969).

A second important type of distortion occurred when a regional or tribal name became a stereotype. In this dual process the terms ceased to mean all people from a specific area or tribe, and came to refer to any person possessing a set of characteristics *attributed* to people of that place or tribe. For example, consider the word "bhil" : originally referring to a specific group of tribals, it came to mean any group of turbulent woods dwellers:

> The term Bheel [is] applied as a general name to all the plunderers who dwell in the mountains and woody banks of rivers in the Western parts of India; not only Bheelalahs and Coolies, who have an affinity to them but many others have been comprehended in this class. But these are in no manner (beyond the common occupation of plunder) connected with the real Bheels, who have from the most remote ages been recognized as a distinct race, insulated in their abodes, and separated by their habits, usages, and forms of worship from the other tribes of India.[13]

The term "Mehwatee" had a similar history. Originally a place name, it came to mean anyone operating—in this case plundering—in the style attributed to the people of the Mahi River region in Eastern Gujerat regardless of whether they in fact came from there.[14]

Looking at the name "Thug" in this light, we find that it was not a place or a tribal name, but a common eighteenth-century Hindi word meaning a cheat or trickster—anyone from the perennial practical joker, to a sleight-of-hand artist or a coinage swindler. As a verb, it can even be translated: "to amaze". Oral tradition supports the position that the principal meaning of the word Thug was not even robbery, much less a particular style of robbery. Among some 2000 fragments of oral tradition—both in vernacular

13. John Malcolm, *A Memoir of Central India* (London, 1832), pp. 517-528.

14. Ranvir P. Saxena, *Tribal Economy in Central India* (Calcutta, 1964), p. 5. Note the beginnings of the stereotyping process in Malcolm, *Memoir*, pp. 174-176 and its continuation in Hervey, *Records*, II, p. 511.

and in translation—from Central India, I find many stories about robbers, but none specifically about Thugs.[15]

Through the first half of the nineteenth century, we can follow this process of stereotyping in the British official writing. Increasingly and steadily, differences between bands called Thugs were ignored, and similarities between them became exaggerated. Their fragmented organization came to be represented as a dangerous, widespread conspiracy.

First described by a Madras medical officer, Dr. Sherwood, in 1816 (in an article in the *Madras Literary Gazette*[16]) the Thugs virtually dropped from official British notice until the mid-1830's, except for a few careful British observers who saw great diversity in Sherwood's so-called Thug bands. These observers noted that, some bands were Hindu, some Moslem, while some were mixed caste and community. Some attacked openly in large groups, and did not bury their victims; others attacked only at night and took great care with burials.[17]

In the early 1830's a few military officers observed that numbers of sepoys who had been discharged with pay failed to return the following season. Further checks showed that they had not arrived in their home villages. At that point an ambitious military officer, William Sleeman, decided on reading the Sherwood article that these sepoy disappearances were caused by an India-wide Thug brotherhood of murders. He set out to prove this thesis to the Government of India, but more than five years of official scepticism greeted his efforts. As George Bruce, twentieth century historian of Thugs, explains:

> Sleeman found himself up against a British wall of avowed disinterest, even hostility towards any organized investigation. Government House, and most of his fellow magistrates argued that if Thugs existed, and there was no proof, they were members of a religious

15. Principally in Stith Thompson, *The Oral Tales of India*, Indian University Folklore Series, No. 10 (Bloomington, 1958).

16. Quoted in full in George Bruce, *The Stranglers* (New York, 1968).

17. Extract of a letter from the Magistrate of Etawah, 1816, in Thornton, *Illustrations*, pp. 322-324.

> fraternity; and Company policy was not to interfere. Thus, apart from a few notable exceptions among fellow magistrates, Sleeman was almost alone in his determination to stem the flow of murders.[18]

More than any other person, William Sleeman is responsible for the stereotyping of the word Thug. Many of our "primary" documents on Thugs were produced by Sleeman in this period, and they are anything but unbiased. By omission of differences and emphasis on similarities, he repeatedly made the case for a widespread Thug conspiracy. Sleeman's eventual success in persuading the Government of India is a gauge of the triumph of the Evangelical, crusading philosophy of British Indian administration over the "preservation-of-Indian-customs" philosophy of the Orientalists. Official support for Sleeman's campaign came less than two years after Macauley's Minute on Education.

Even after Sleeman made a name and office—The Thagi and Dacoity Department--for himself, it was necessary for him to keep the Government of India reminded of the widespread Thug conspiracy; only this conspiracy justified the special judicial practices, blanket military aid, pay for spies, and special treaties with the native states allowing for free pursuit by the Department. Charles Hervey, Sleeman's successor in the Thagi and Dacoity Department, is quite explicit on this point:

> What is association or combination for criminal purposes? It is a secret society centred in certain well-understood oaths and rules, that bind and guide all those admitted into it, as agents for carrying out unlawful deeds in combination one with another—members with members, tribal congeries with their congeners, leaders of gangs with leaders—all the threads of whose action are drawn to those set rules and customs (each tribe having its own distinctive modes of guidance and procedure,) as the *guiding centre* of each organization, all mutually depending upon each other, and, as well, upon that "governing focus" (so to term those rules and principles which guide all,) as between all the atoms of the several confederacies. If, then, there were no such organizations, the secret associations concerned, would crumble away; and it is to reduce them to that extremity, to the *effacement* that the agents of the Government, that is *the special Thuggee Police*, are called into existence, *themselves acting in like manner upon their own set rules, by which to enable them to do so.*[19]

He further argues that it is the organization and its "crimes, secret, darkly planned, esoteric," that demand the special legislation allowing for the death penalty or transportation for association alone. The "Thugi" laws—resisted by many judges—provided "special punishments on proof, not of any specific act taken by itself, but of association . . . on proof of a *general charge*, that the arraigned party 'belonged to a gang of habitual dacoits (or Thugs, etc.); while engaged in dacoities, etc.' irrespective of whether the convicted party was or was not present in any one of the specific instances which supported the general charge upon which he was convicted." " . . . it was for *association* per se that he [a Thug] had been sent up for trial!"[20] All the reports of the Thagi and Dacoity Department—whether by Sleeman, Hervey or others—supported this conspiracy position.

In spite of thirty years of Thagi and Dacoity Department reports and popular books such as Caleb Wright's *A Description of the Habits and Superstitions of Thugs* (1846) and Edward Thornton's *Illustrations of the History and Practice of the Thugs* (1837) which took uncritically—often verbatim—from Sleeman's writings, the term was still not fully stereotyped until at least the late 1860's; that is, even within the government hierarchy there was no concensus on the answers to the question "Who or what is a Thug" and "What are the characteristics by which one knows them?" In 1867, Charles Hervey, then head of the Thagi and Dacoity Department,

18. Bruce, *Stranglers*, p. 36.

19. Hervey, *Records*, II, 445-447. One such "Thugi" law is quoted in James Sleeman *Thug*, p. 134.

20. *Ibid.*

berated fellow government officials who could not seem to recognize a case of Thug murder when they saw one,

> some correctly recognizing Thuggee in instances which were palpably the deed of experts, although death should not have taken place; others only doing so where death had resulted; some classing certain murders as cases of "Thuggee" without reference to the means resorted to in the perpetration thereof; others who wholly pass by cases of poisoning whether followed by death or not, although they bore evidence of being the acts of class criminals; some who restrict their notice to selected cases only of its occurrence, passing by other similar instances; some who endeavour to distinguish between different degrees of poisoning, some calling "murder by poison" *Thuggee*, others not doing so . . . . others who lump all such kindered offenses under round numbers without any narration of the attendant circumstances, contented only with quoting against them the sections of the Penal Code under which they were triable or were tried.[21]

Now perhaps we can understand the confusion in the various theories of Thugi we have examined; the late nineteenth-century official, the military officer, and the twentieth century historian are surely to be forgiven if British officials at mid-nineteenth century—contemporary to the Thug phenomenon—could not figure out what a Thug was ! The only people who seemed positive that they could tell a Thug when they saw one were from the Thagi and Dacoity Department.

This self-assurance is deceptive. If, for example, we take the "conspiracy" position as constantly articulated by the Thagi and Dacoity Department and analyze it with verbatim Thug testimony collected by the Department, we find no evidence of widespread organization. For example Malwa Thugs were unaware of practices of stranglers in Bengal or the Deccan. Spoils were never shared

21. Hervey, *Records*, I, 50-51.

with any far-flung Thug hierarchy. There was no consultation even within a single region on departure times or division of prime highways among bands. All these decisions were reached locally between band and leader. Discipline was never dispensed by a broad hierarchy; dissatisfaction with performance by a member merely meant expulsion from the band; dissatisfaction with an inept leader merely meant that his followers drifted off into other bands. Numerous examples exist of men—satisfied with their booty—returning home in the middle of an expedition.[22] Indeed, the British method of capture, using confessions of men who turned state's evidence against other gangs and individuals, suggests most strongly that there was not a central organization. Reprisals were not taken against the witness or his family once the immediate gang was captured. One need only recall what the Mafia traditionally does to "sqealers" to see the low level of Thug organization by comparison.

Thus, the confusion of later historians regarding Thugs ultimately comes from the unsupported theories generated by the Thagi and Dacoity Department itself. Attempts to resolve contradictory attributes of a Department-invented class of murderers alled "Thugs" have led into a welter of vague, contradictory, and inadequate characterizations. For lack of an adequate definition, the term "Thug" will hereafter appear within quotation marks. Clarity will not come to this term from more re-reading of the Department reports, unless the biases and assumptions are known and challenged. A theory that is the product of a study of eighteenth-century Indian institutions and social and political conditions, rather than Victorian morality, is called for. The remainder of this paper is an attempt in that direction.

3. From the Culture of the Yellow Scarf to the Bandits of Malwa

Even if "Thugs" were not tied to an India-wide organization but operated in a local and fragmented manner, did they perhaps form a culturally distinct group? Do contemporary depositions reveal,

22. The evidence is most extensive in William Sleeman's *Ramaseeana* (Calcutta, 1836) and *Rambles and Recollections of An Indian Official* (London, 1915).

for example, that all "Thugs" recognized a unique set of customs and spoke a distinctive argot? The answer, rather surprisingly, is negative. There was apparently no clear Thug subculture and many characteristics attributed to them alone—such as invoking the diety before starting on an expedition, making objects involved in the occupation sacred, falling in with travellers by deception, omens and signs, the specialization of tasks within gangs—prove to be common to many criminal groups. For example, invoking the diety:

> Robbers and murderers of all descriptions have always been in the habit of taking the field in India immediately after the festival of the Dasahra, at the end of October, from the sovereign of a state at the head of his armies, down to the leader of a little band of pick-pockets from the corner of some obscure village. All invoke the Diety, and take the auspices to ascertain his will, nearly in the same way; and all expect that he will guide them successfully through their enterprises, as long as they find the omens favourable. No one among them ever dreams that his undertaking can be less acceptable to the Diety than that of another, provided he gives him the same due share of what he acquires in his thefts, his robberies, or his conquests, in sacrifices and offerings upon his shrines, and in donations to his priests.[23]

This paper reports preliminary rather than completed research, and much remains to be done on the comparative symbolism and organization of criminal bands (and all habitually-travelling groups). At this stage, I do not want to reject the possibility that all leaders or bands called "Thug" by the British shared some common symbols from a larger Indian tradition, such as left-handed Tantrism, but the only distinctive and *unique* features that I find in all Thug groups so far studied are the use of a scarf to strangle victims and occasional eating of *gur*, a coarse sugar. The former

23. William Sleeman, *Rambles*, pp. 296-297.

is not a sure feature, since groups sometimes also used poison. A sticky bowl of sugar and a limp yellow scarf are slim evidence indeed for calling "Thugs" a "trade union" or a "fraternity of murderers."

If we are stymied in a cultural definition of "Thugi", a geographical approach proves more fruitful. If we plot the places of residence of the Thugs the British captured, these appear to be predominantly in Malwa, which the British called Central India. This area, in the eighteenth century, was the haunt of many sorts of marauding groups, big and small, which attacked not only within Central India, but also in Oudh, Bengal, Rajputana, Hyderabad and Mysore. All these groups, whether they struck whole towns, villages, or bands of travellers, depended on the weakness of the authority of any government above the local level. The local watch had no jurisdiction outside his immediate few square miles, so the marauding groups could escape after looting the village or murdering the travellers. Capturing the marauders was also beyond the means of those immediately affected—the victims' relatives or business associates. Only an overarching, non-local government could possibly mount the large-scale military or police expedition needed to suppress roving bands.[24] The freedom of operation of such bands in eighteenth-century Malwa is striking; this freedom strongly suggests the relative strength of local as opposed to overarching governments in the Malwa region which, viewed from a dynamic perspective, as we shall see, suggests a hypothesis of state formation. This theory, it is hoped, will provide an adequate conceptual framework for understanding the phenomenon that has been called "Thugi". First, however, let us place these "Thugs" and other marauders in a political and geographical setting.

24. Such pursuit, and the consequent general safe movement on the roads, was clearly in the interests of such an overarching government, for a number of elementary reasons: (1) Safe movement of land revenue, predominantly in cash, but also in kind from the hinterland to the capital; (2) Easy communication from the capital to the monarch's agents in outlying areas; (3) Rapid movement of armies to rebellious areas without expending men and equipment fighting thieves and plunderers en route; (4) Sure import into the capital of certain necessary articles—such as horses or guns—and certain desirable articles—such as fine cloths, jewels, spices, etc.; (5) Increase in revenue from tolls paid by traders, and (6) Religious merit and an increase in symbolic authority from building tanks and caravanassaries.

4. Malwa and the Powers Therein

Malwa—it calls to mind a vague area south of the Jumna river and east of Gujerat. Some lack of clarity is quite understandable, since the boundaries shifted with successive empires, Malwa being predominantly a rich province and seldom the seat of empire. In Mughal times the province of Malwa extended well into Rajputana, including Harrowtee (later split into Bundi and Kotah) and part of Mewar (Oudipur)—and encompassed the hilly tracts of Roth Bagur and Kantul, running south from Oudipur to the Vindhyas and separating the Malwa plateau from Gujerat. At times "Malwa" also included parts of Bundelkhund to the east.

The *Malwa plateau*, as opposed to the political division "Malwa", is quite easily defined. It is a table land approximately 2000 feet high bounded on the northwest by the hills on the west bank of the Chumbul, on the north by the Jumna, and on the south by the Nerbudda. The eastern boundary is a hilly tract running north-northeast from the eastern edge of Bhopal separating it from Gondwara and Bundelkhund. The western boundary is likewise a hilly tract—some fifty miles wide—running north from the Vindhya range between 74 and 75° east latitude. These hilly tracts on the east and west of Malwa (as well as the Vindhya range) are occupied by tribals distinct from the people of the plateau proper in colour, language, customs, religion, and style of farming—the tribals using shifting agriculture.

On the plateau, the rainy season comes in June or July and through August and September it remains mild (72°-77°F); from October through December to February, it gets progressively colder and often goes below freezing at night. March through May finds hot weather, days in the 90's and above, nights in the 70's and 80's. In this climate the "loose rich black loam" produced, in the eighteenth century, cash crops such as cotton, sugar-cane, opium, indigo, and tobacco and large crops of grain; particularly wheat, but also gram, peas, jowry and bajrie. Many areas had both a Kharif and a Rabi crop.

The basic feature of the eighteenth century historical process taking place within this geographical framework was the multiplicity of states, a hundred by one count, as many as six hundred by another. Any attempt to summarize the political history is clearly impossible in a paper of this scope. (See Raghubir Sinh, *Malwa in Transition or a Century of Anarchy: the First Phase 1698-1765*, Bombay, 1936, for the histories of some larger states). Perhaps a few dates and events will be of some use in understanding the model which follows.

Malwa was conquered in 1837 by Muslim invaders from the north and became a province of the Delhi sultanate. The next hundred and seventy-five years saw a three-way battle between Delhi, some Rajput houses and independent Moslem kingdoms. The Plateau was attacked by Sher Shah and decisively conquered by Akbar in 1561; many later-important Rajput houses became established as small states in the next fifty years with the help of Akbar and the Mogul court.

A "second wave" of Rajput invaders came into Malwa starting in the 1760's. They were collaborators with the Moguls and received grants of land in Malwa in reward for service. These Rajputs considered themselves purer than those who had come a century earlier and unlike their predecessors they did not inter-marry with the local populace. These second-wave Rajput kingdoms were, thus, not well established when the Maratha invasions began in the late seventeenth century:

> [In states] which had been founded in the last years of Aurangzib's reign—and the number of such States was the greatest in Malwa—the founders as well as their early descendants did not get enough time to organize their States nor to secure their hold over the lands and the people within the State, as they were kept busy in the distant South with the Imperial army. And the States yet unorganized and unstrengthened could least help the Empire in times of disorder, for they had first to grapple with the question of their own existence.[25]

The series of Maratha forays into Malwa (which included upwards of 12,000 horses) began in 1698, had a temporary hiatus between

25. Raghubir Sinh, *Malwa in Transition or a Century of Anarchy: The First Phase 1698-1765* (Bombay, 1936), pp. 15-16.

1703 and 1713, then began again in earnest. Yearly raids became regular, and by 1725 the Peshwa had appointed tribute collectors in Southern Malwa. (Incidentally, other invaders were also taking over areas of Malwa at this time. Dost Muhammad Khan Rohilla laid the foundation of Bhopal State between 1709 and 1717).

After decisively beating the Mogul army in 1728 and settling with Jai Sing of Amber, the Peshwa granted land to his major generals, the Puars and Holkar, in Malwa all through the 1730's. Conquest of the rest of Malwa followed during Nadir Shah's invasion in the North. Finally, legal recognition of Maratha supermacy was given by the Emperor when he granted the peshwa *Naib Subahdari rights over Malwa, and with the death of Jai Sing in* 1743 no power was strong enough to oppose them.

In the 1740's, Rajputana was the scene of Maratha invasions. Often called in by one side in a succession dispute, one general or another quickly established rights to tribute. By the mid 1750's Kotah, Bundi, Mewar, Marwar, and other Rajput states were committed to give tribute to the Marathas even if they strongly resisted paying it. Ajmeer, the stronghold in central Rajputana, was turned over to the Marathas in 1756.

A new opponent appeared in the 1750's, the Afghan Abdali. The initial invasions of 1750 and 1752 were followed by much larger-scale invasions in 1757. Maratha power north of the Chumbul River was virtually eliminated even before the military disaster of Panipat in 1761.

Dozens of Maratha chiefs died on the field at Panipat and a whole new generation figures in events after 1765. These include Mahadji Sindia, Ahalyabai Holkar, Tukoji Holkar, Zalim Singh Jhala (of Kotah) and the Pindari leader, Amir Kahn. Only by the late 1760's was Maratha power restored; and invasions of Rohilkund Jat territory near Delhi, and Oudh began.

The death of the Peshwa in Poona in 1772 and support by the *British Bombay government of one of the claimants (Raghoba* Rao) set off a decade of war and negotiation which has been well chronicled elsewhere. (For Sindia's part in it see S. N. Roy, *A History of the Native States of India*, Vol. I, *Gwalior*, (Calcutta, 1888). The result was a draw; status quo ante prevailed at the Treaty of Salbai in 1781, with the important exception that the

Company opted out of all affairs in Central India, Delhi, and Rajputana.

The period from the Treaty of Salbai to 1795 was the ascendency of Mahadji Sindia; he was the arbiter of Delhi affairs, and the strongest power in the Maratha confederacy; after his defeat by the Rohillas in 1788 he became one of the foremost military powers in India, via his shift, with the help of the French adventurer De Boigne, to a European-type infantry and artillery.

The mid 1790's clearly mark the end of an era. Ahalyabai Holkar died in 1795 and Tukoji Holkar followed her two years later; thereafter the Holkar kingdom was in chaos. Chote Khan, minister of Bhopal and *an important figure of stability died in 1795.* Both the Peshwa and, more importantly, Nana Farnavis—the holder of any real power at Poona—died in the middle of this decade. Mahadji Sindia's death preceded Nana's by only a year and De Boigne—Sindia's general—left India in 1796. Finally the active involvement of the British in the affairs of indigenous states began once again with the "protection" of the Nizam in 1795.

5. A Structure and a Process[26]

Let us look at Malwa a few years before these morbid events Beginning with a static view, Central India in the late eighteenth century had a five-tiered power structure. The Peshwa of Poona stood at the top. His real power in day-to-day affairs was small, but his authority to grant or withhold sanads on land conquered by

26. The following were used extensively in developing both the static power structure and the dynamic process models:

Broughton, Thomas D. *Letters Written in a Mahratta Camp*, rev. ed. (London, 1892).

Cohn, Bernard S., "Political Systems in Eighteenth Century India: The Benares Region," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, CXXXII (July-September, 1962), 312-320.

Forster, George, *A Journey from Bengal to England through the Northern India . . .* (London, 1808).

Franklin, William, *Military Memoirs of Mr. George Thomas . . .* (Calcutta, 1803).

Ghosh, B. *British Policy towards the Pathans and Pindaris in Central India 1805-1818* (London, 1963-1964).

Maratha chiefs, was very important. Also, the major chiefs—Sindia, Holkar, and the Puars—were both legally generals in the Peshwa's army and owed their initial rise to the Peshwa's patronage. There are numerous examples of Maratha chiefs returning to Poona at the Peshwa's behest to engage in political and military actions.

The second level was the Maratha conquerors, such as Sindia and Holkar. Current literature identifies an ideal-type of Central Indian Maratha administration, which included both local and state revenue and treasury officials, a political department, registry officials, the prince's household, and pay-and-muster officials for the army. The state also supported a large military establishment, perhaps numbering up to 20,000 infantry, 10,000 cavalry, and 5,000 garrison troops. A third or less of this army would be under the direct control of the prince; the rest would be under subordinate Maratha chiefs who as assignees of lands for support of troops constitute the next, or third, level in the power structure. The prince had virtual-

Fn 26 (*contd.*)

Habib, Irfan, "Banking in Medieval India," *Contributions to Indian Economic History*, Vol. I (Calcutta, 1960), 8-14.

Luard, C. Eckford, "Some Views of an Indian Ruler on the Administration of an Indian State," *Asiatic Review*, New Series, XXII (1926), 278-298.

Malcolm, Sir John. *A Memoir of Central India* (London, 1932).

[An Officer of the East India Company]. *Origin of the Pindaris* (London, 1818).

Roy, Surendra Nath. *A History of the Native States of India*, Vol. I, *Gwalior*, (Calcutta, 1888).

Sardesai, G. S., "The Rise of Mahadji Sindhia," *Modern Review*, CXXV (March, 1944), 209-211.

Sarkar, Jadunath. *Persian Records of Maratha History* Vol. I, *Delhi Affairs* (Bombay, 1953).

Sen, Surendranath. *Administrative System of the Marathas* (Calcutta, 1925).

Sinh, Raghubir. *Malwa in Transition or a Century of Anarchy: The First Phase 1698-1765* (Bombay, 1936).

Sinha, Har N. *Selections from the Nagpur Residency Records*, 3 Vols. (Nagpur, 1950).

Tod, James. *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (Calcutta, 1898).

Twining, Thomas. *Travels in India a Hundred Years Ago, with a Visit to the United States* (London, 1893).

Tytler, Alexander. *Considerations on the Present Political State of India* (London, 1816).

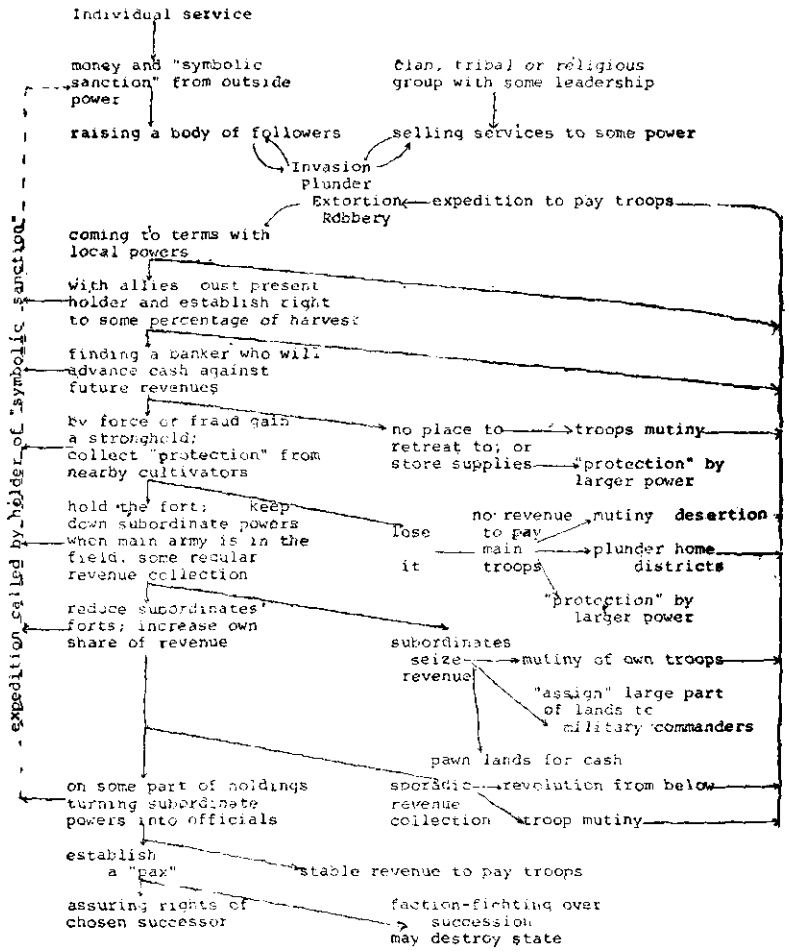
ly no control over internal administration of assigned lands. These subordinate generals were bound to the prince by no ties of family or clan.

East and west of the Chumbul River, below the Marathas stood some fifteen major and many minor Rajput clans some of whom had come as conquerors some centuries before and obtained Mogul sanads over their possessions; others were of recent origin (see above, p. 18). Cousins, brothers, kinsmen held separate estates, over which a senior member with large holdings had some influence. Beyond some common finances and obligations in the field to the head of the clan, estate management was autonomous. The military contingent might range from under 1000 for a small state like Banswara to 15,000 for Kotah, the largest independent Rajput state close to the Maratha dominions. These troops were usually scattered among many estates and concentrated at the fort which was a universal feature of such estates.

Finally, below the Rajputs was one more level before one reached village administration. The men at this level were called zamindars of pergunahs, or wuttundars. They were large local landholders, who contracted the revenue for an area of perhaps twenty square miles and extracted a fee from other cultivators. They maintained a small body of troops (25-150) and often fortified either a village or their own homes. These watandars were definitely drawn from a variety of castes and were—in some sense—a holdover from the Moguls since most held sanads from the Mogul emperor, though a few had sanads from the Peshwa, for special services.

Power-structure analysis, though neat, and often done for various parts of India, is, I think, substantially misleading. Without an understanding—not of the structure—but of the *process* by which these various relations developed, we cannot hope to understand the importance of any specific group, like a small "Thug" band.

The diagram which follows is a flow-chart, representing the general process of state formation in Central India in the eighteenth century. The dynamic is the universal desire for maximum stable land revenue, not land as such, and maximum political control, that is reducing the largest possible number of people to clientship or dependency, relations. The counter-dynamic is the short-run need to pay troops. Groups and individuals enter this on-going



system at various times throughout the century. The Mulhar Rao Holkar and Ranoji Sindia raised their troops and moved to the "invasion" stage by the 1730's, while Amir Kahn entered some forty years later. Note that there are two entrances (at the top), and only one exit—establishing a "pax" at the bottom. The majority who do not reach the "pax" stage are thrown back on plunder as the only means of paying the troops. If we look at Central India at any given moment, we will find individuals and groups at all stages in this process; some will besieging strongholds, some negotiating with bankers, some plundering their neighbours, some finding allies among Rajputs or Bhils, and a few with peaceful and prosperous states.

Let us by way of illustration follow the fortunes of an individual through this system. He is presented at court—perhaps the Peshwa's—through the influence of a patron. Proof of ability leads to increasing numbers of troops under his control. The individual ruler he serves decides that an area, either unconquered or in a state of rebellion should be invaded. Our ambitious parvenu is given just enough money to raise troops, rather little since mercenaries furnished their own horses and equipment, and a "symbolic sanction", for example a sanad to collect chouth in the area, or the "right" to quarter his troops on the conquered lands. Invasion and plunder follow, with extortion of towns or villages which pay not to be plundered.

He then comes to terms with local powers. This is meant quite literally. For example, the invading Marathas offered lower land revenues than the prevailing Muslim administration. The Rajputs switched allegiance quite readily. The invader needed to use them to collect revenue. The aid of these lower-level powers might be active, on the side of the invader, or passive, merely withholding aid from the formerly dominant power.

The next stage—and it is a crucial one—is finding a banker to advance cash against future revenues. Until some banker considers the invader's claims legitimate enough and his prospects for collecting regular revenue bright enough, he is forced to plunder somewhere every few months to pay his troops, especially if his "initial sponsor" makes no payments beyond the first one. The advance by the banker is on a yearly basis (it is a form of risk capital) and

allows the undertaking of a siege, a long-term proposition often requiring heavy equipment. Reliance on a banker became more and more necessary as the eighteenth century progressed because continuing support from the original source of troops and "symbolic sanction" (either the Peshwa or the Emperor at Delhi) became less and less dependable. For example, visits by the Peshwa's Vakils to the North became more sporadic and less likely to be accompanied by any military force.

The steps from the "seizing of a fort" to reducing "subordinates' forts" represent increasing stages of likelihood of regular revenue collection. For every successful movement to a later stage, there is the alternative of failure. Reaching any stage does not imply a stable situation, as there is still not enough land revenue to pay troops. We shall return to the implications of this. "Reducing subordinates' forts", may be viewed as a transition stage; it is possible to pay troops out of land revenue, but equally possible that plundering must be resorted to.

The next three stages represent the exit from this system of necessary plunder. They differ only in the degree of development of government infrastructure. The "turning subordinate powers into officials" stage is, perhaps, best exemplified by the lands held by De Boigne, Sindia's general, in the late 1780's and early 1790's. He had a regular revenue administration and audits; he developed agriculture, cast guns and protected the land from marauders. In contrast, the "pax", the next stage, implies many more government functions—measurement-type revenue system, regularizing dues from travellers, minting money, a state justice and police system, regular diplomatic relations with other states, cash salaries for troops, continuity of members of administration and neutralizing internal marauding groups by grants of land. Examples of a kingdom as stable as this are hard to find: Ahalyabai Holkar's kingdom would probably qualify, Zalim Singh's Kotah might, as would Sindia's dominions for short periods. From initial invasion to stable exit is at least a thirty to forty year process with heirs completing the process started by the father; only Zalim Singh did it in his own lifetime. The line running from the bottom to the top of the chart, on the left-hand side, represents the service which must be given to the power that furnished the initial troops. For example, the

Peshwa might call Sindia to Poona to undertake a joint mission against Tipu or the Nizam. This call might come at any time and involve a war during which the newly conquered area might rebel. Thus, the call to service could entail a loss of several stages (movement upward on the chart).

What is the utility of this rather complicated model? First, I think it organizes and makes sense out of what has always been assumed to be a completely chaotic area in this period. Second, there is evidence that at least some people at the time were operating with this process in mind:

> [Mahadji Sindia's] genius saw that to realize his plans, the mere predatory hordes of the Mahrattas could never prove adequate. It was a circle of plunder; and, as one country was exhausted, the army had to march, with numbers increased by those whose condition their success had made desperate, to ravage another. They had, in their first excursions, little or no means of reducing forts; nor did their system of war admit of protracted hostilities in a difficult country, and against a resolute enemy. These wants were early discovered by their enemies. The Bheels from their mountains, and the Rajpoots and others from their strong holds (which were multiplied by fortifying every village), not only resisted, but retorted upon the Mahrattas, by laying waste their lands, the wrongs they had suffered. This evil was only to be remedied by a regular force. We are distinctly informed, that its existence led Madhajee Sindia to determine upon the measure he now adopted, of raising some corps of infantry.[27]

Third, it suggests that "states" and "marauders" were not different in kind, but only in relative degree of success in conquest, revenue collection, and infrastructure-building. All were involved in the same process, with the same ends, using the same sources of legitimatization.

27. John Malcolm. *A Memoir of Central India* (London, 1832), pp. 126-127.

The striking feature of the second half of the eighteenth century is not the existence of this process, but the shift from a predominance of relatively stable states to a mix containing great numbers of marauding groups. I would now like to lay out a hypothesis to explain this change, which in the end returns to our beleaguered term "Thug".

The hypothesis is that after the battle of Panipat in 1761, few Marathas accompanied the Maratha chiefs when they once again established their power north of the Nerbudda river. The Maratha chiefs were, therefore, forced to rely on mercenaries, (some of whom received the new name "Pindari"):

> The strength of the Maratha Cavalry continued to be its most distinguishing feature till about the year 1750, when contact with the French and British armies discovered [sic] the superior advantages in modern wars of regularly-trained infantry batallions protected by artillery, the third arm in modern warfare The success of the English and the French induced the Maratha leaders to have recourse to this new agency and for the first time we find mention of the *Gardis* or the trained batallions. The weakness of this new addition to the military force consisted in the fact that, unlike the Mavales or the Shilledars, who each owned his plot of land and served the State, not as mercenaries, but as militia, the Gardis were mercenaries pure and simple, made up of foreign recruits of different nationalities, who had to be paid fixed salaries all the year round, and only owed loyalty to the commanders who paid them their wages.[28]

Other powers already in the area then augmented clan troops with greater and greater numbers of mercenaries The demand for cash rose astronomically, since mercenaries had to be paid virtually year-round and could not and would not be paid in small grants of land. The continued success of the British in using trained mercen-

28. M. C. Ranade, "Introduction to the Peshwa's Diaries," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society, Bombay Branch*, XX (1900), 456-457.

aries only made the situation worse: to compete, indigenous states had to arise European-type infantry, which cost from four to ten times as much as native cavalry. For example, 1000 European-type infantry troops cost 25,000 Rs. per month in 1795.[29] Perhaps more importantly, because of the new European-type artillery, the military advantage shifted drastically from the defensive to the offensive power. Hill forts, especially small ones, provided little protection, and long sieges were replaced by intense cannonades and rapid breaching. Thus mobile marauding groups—with efficient artillery—competed militarily at least on equal terms with established states; leaders of states who could formerly retire to hill forts now had to meet the marauders in the field, with baggage trains of supplies and expensive mercenaries and artillery:

> Under the later Peshwas, these forts appear chiefly to have served the double purpose of State granaries and State prisons. State prisoners were sent to the forts for custody, and the condemned criminals of both sexes were sent there for penal servitude. In the latter half of the century, the forts are chiefly mentioned in this connection. Against the more improved means of warfare represented by the artillery, these hill-forts ceased to be valuable for the purposes of defence, and in many places were neglected and allowed to go into disrepair. In the war with the English, the forts offered little or no protection, and submitted without firing a shot.[30]

All this cost money. More and more states were forced into the position of being unstable, in the sense that the regular revenue was insufficient to pay their troops. Every year these states had to use the troops in one or more of three ways, (1) forcing more revenue from their own lands, (2) attacking neighbouring lands, or (3) allying for the purpose of war and plunder with another power. Every decision to go on a campaign was like a chance card in

29. Surendranath Sen, *Administrative System of Marathas*, rev. ed. (Calcutta, 1925), p. 445.

30. Ranade, "Introduction," p. 459.

Monopoly. It could bring gratuitous revenue, but the risks were very high. If it went on too long, the leader might be forced to plunder his ally's lands in order to pay his troops, or mortgage the revenues of his own lands to a banker at a great discount, for ready cash. There was also high probability of revolt from below every time the major part of the army left its home territories. Thus there was operating a "plunder dynamic" of the powers higher on the chart ("marauders") trying to seize the treasury and standing crop of powers lower on the chart ("states") while attempting to establish longer-term rights to revenue. Powers lower on the chart—having more stable revenue—were often forced to plunder when taxes and tribute were insufficient to pay the troops (for example, because the standing crop had been seized by marauders).

Those hurt worst in this process were at the lower levels of the power structure, previously analyzed. The overlord (perhaps a Maratha prince or his assignee) was constantly trying to increase his percentage of the crop (often by military means) while the rest was likely taken by marauding bands. Reliance on income from local produce became more and more chancey.

Therefore, every level in the power structure tended to link up with and give protection to some groups of part-time marauders, to have a *non-local* source of revenue. These ranged in size from Pindari armies of ten thousand horse to a motley handful of thieves. John Malcolm, the first British administrator of Central India writing in the 1820's enumerated eleven types, or more properly styles, of marauders in late-eighteenth century Malwa. To each was attributed certain characteristics of organization and operation, by the stereotyping process discussed above. Most of these styles—including that identified by Malcolm as Thaggi — were those of locally-recruited, locally-based marauders.[31] Malcolm emphasized the point here.

> Almost every large village which retained its inhabitants subsequent to the ravages of Jeswunt Row Holkar and the Pindaries had a band of this description either living in it or in communication with the Potail;

31. Malcolm, *Memoir*, pp. 174-191.

> and the latter received, for the countenance and support he gave them, a fixed share of the booty.[32]

Research to date, thus suggests that what the British saw as "Thug"—"a national fraternity of murderers"—consisted of a small core of families members of which had been murderers for several generations. These and many other men recruited bands in their local areas during the severe dislocation of the last decade of the eighteenth century and especially after the British defeat of the Marathas in 1803. After 1815, the British were occupied with establishing regular relations with various levels of the prevailing power structure and with destroying the large scale marauders ("Pindaris" and tribal groups); smaller-scale groups (such as "dacoits" and "Thags") flourished, preying on the traders and pilgrims travelling on roads which were somewhat less dangerous because of the elimination of the large-scale marauders. It was the writing of William Sleeman and the Evangelical, crusading tone of the British Indian administration of the 1830's that played up these locally-organized, small-scale marauding groups (given the name "Thugs" by the British) into a hideous, widespread religious conspiracy, somehow typical of India and Indian "national character". We cannot and will not know the nature of the "Thugs" or any other marauding group of the eighteenth century until we return them to a historical and geographic setting, and view them in the context of the on-going structure and processes of power.

32. *Ibid.*, pp. 173-174.