

BAAGI OR THAGI ? REPRESENTATIONS OF THE THUGS IN SOME MAINSTREAM COMMERCIAL FILMS

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Abstract:

*This article studies the cinematic representations of the Indian Thugs. In doing so, it examines whether such representations conform to or problematize the negative stereotyping of the Thugs as ruthless murderers. The colonial stereotyping of Thuggee as a religion of murder has been problematized by modern scholars and historians, some of whom see Thuggee as an act of anti-colonial resistance. The Thugs in this view were actually rebels whom the British purposefully criminalized. This article provides a reading of the recently released film *Thugs of Hindostan*, showing how the film problematizes the criminalization of the Thugs by the British. In doing this, the film accepts the re-evaluation of the Thugs as baagis or rebels. By comparing the representation of the Thugs in this film with earlier cinematic representations, it is argued that this film's deviation from the popular practice of representing the Thugs as heinous criminals reflect a shift in current understanding of Thuggee.*

Key words: *Films on thuggee, the thugs, indiana jones, the deceivers, thugs of hindostan.*

This article studies the representations of the Thugs in some mainstream commercial films. Films on the Thugs, the Indian fraternity of criminals, are only a handful. Of these most are European or American productions. Except *Sunghursh* released in 1968 and *Thugs of Hindostan* released in 2018, no Hindi film, where the Thugs play a major role, has been released till today. Examination of the representations of the Thugs in these films becomes interesting, particularly when one compares these with some of the ways in which the Thugs have been conceptualized in academic discourses. It becomes apparent that while most of these films merely try to capitalize on the exotic associations that Thuggee evokes, at times a few of these also problematize the viewers' understanding of Thuggee keeping the prevailing academic debates on the subject in view. To prove my point, a study is made of the newly released film *Thugs of Hindostan* which questions and subverts the popular representations of the Thugs as dreaded (Indian) criminals. In doing this, the film seems to follow (perhaps inadvertently) a line of thinking suggested by some contemporary historians and scholars studying Thuggee.

This paper is divided into two sections. The first section briefly narrates the history of Thuggee, before focusing on the on-going academic debate centring British colonial representations of Thuggee. Scholars debate whether the Thugs were really criminals (*thagi*) as the British colonial authorities described them or rebels who fought against the British (*baagi*). As might be easily understood, being *baagi* carries more prestige than being mere criminal. Rebellion, for whatever cause, generally earns some sympathizers. That is why the *dacoits* in Chambal Valley prefer to call themselves rebels or *baagi-s*, thereby distancing themselves from common criminals. (Wagner, "Thuggee and Social Banditry", 370) The second section focuses on cinematic representations of Thuggee in some commercial films before zeroing in on *Thugs of Hindostan*. Despite this film's casual handling of history, the *baagi/thagi* debate is curiously invoked in the film. It is obvious that the representation of the Thugs as rebels or *baagis* accord them more status in public eyes. This perhaps indicate a not too unfamiliarity with some of the recent assessments of Thuggee by scholars. By comparing *Thugs of Hindostan* with earlier films featuring the

Thugs, one can understand how the viewers' opinion vis-à-vis Thuggee have undergone a transformation in recent years. The films here are thus seen as cultural artefacts which highlight the tastes, assumptions and expectations of the audience belonging to a particular period.

The Debate: Who were the Thugs?

While the phenomenon known as Thuggee may have existed since time immemorial as the British claimed, Thuggee actually entered discourse only in the nineteenth century. Prior to that, only a few references to the Thugs can be traced in written documents of the medieval period. The earliest reference to Thuggee can be found in the writing of the fourteenth century historian Ziauddin Barani (1285–1357) who informs that Sultan Jalal-ud-din-Khalji had deported several captured Thugs to Lakhnauti (modern Gauda or Gour in the Malda district of West Bengal) in 1290, in what Barani considers to be an incomprehensible act of clemency on the part of the Sultan. Reference to the Thugs, who betray and murder their victims by offering them poisoned sweets to eat, also appear in a devotional poem by the 16th century Hindu devotional poet and *bhakti* saint Surdas. In 1672 the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb issued a decree or *farman* permitting the execution of convicted *phansigars* or Thugs. The earliest European description of Thuggee appears in the Frenchman Jean de Thévenot's travelogue *Voyages de Mr De Thévenot contenant la relation de l'Indostan, des nouveaux Mongols & des autres Peuples & Pays des Indes* (1684), written towards the close of Shah Jahan's reign in 1666. These are all random references, not describing the phenomenon in much detail. The first scholarly article on Thuggee, entitled "Of the Murderers called Phansigars", was written by one Dr Richard C. Sherwood. It was published in the *Madras Literary Gazette* in 1819. But Sherwood's article failed to create any major impact. The actual breakthrough occurred in 1830, when Colonel (later Major) William Henry Sleeman (1788–1856) wrote an anonymous letter to the *Calcutta Literary Gazette* which was published on 3 October. Through this letter Sleeman goaded the government into action. The Thuggee and the Dacoity Department was created in 1830 to root out these two crimes. Thousands of Thugs were captured in the succeeding years and their depositions were officially recorded. With the publication of Sleeman's *Ramaseena or A Vocabulary of the Peculiar Language Used by the Thugs* in 1836, followed by Captain Philip Meadows Taylor's (1808–1876) bestselling novel *Confessions of a Thug* in 1839, Thuggee entered into popular discourse.¹ Both creative and academic writings on the subject began to proliferate. Even in the twenty first century, the subject remains a contentious one generating frequent debates and reassessments.

So who were the Thugs? Due to the paucity of Indian sources, one has to rely a lot on colonial British writings to know about them. The English word *thug*, which today means "a violent person, especially a criminal" (Oxford Advanced Learner 1602), has its root in modern Indian vernacular (Hindi, Bengali, Marathi) *thag* (meaning 'swindler'), which in turn came from the Sanskrit root *stha* (meaning 'to cover or to conceal'). It is certain that the word *thag* has been all along used in Indian vernaculars in the general sense of 'swindler, deceiver or cheater'. While it carries negative connotations, it does not always imply homicide. But as the British understood them, the Thugs were a special class of Indian criminals who followed a particular *modus operandi* in committing their crimes. The Thugs were believed to have been mostly hereditary criminals who murdered travellers on the road in order to rob their possessions. They were different from common robbers and thieves in that they always murdered their victims before robbing them. As Sherwood observes, "Phansigars never commit robbery unaccompanied by murder, their practice being first to strangle and then to rifle their victims." (Quoted in Bruce 14) Unlike dacoits and robbers, the Thugs never openly assaulted their victims even when the victims were numerically weaker than the gang. Instead, they chose to befriend and inveigle their victims first, falling upon them only at the opportune moment. It is this that has earned them the name of Thugs or deceivers. The Thugs always operated in gangs and were believed to have been efficiently organized. Each member of the gang was given his specific duties. Thus there were *jemadars* or leaders, *sothas* or inveiglers, *bhurtotes* or stranglers, and *bojhas* or people who concealed the corpses by burying them. The favourite weapon of the Thugs was

a piece of cloth called the *rumal* which could be tied into a noose to dispatch the victims silently. However, they were also known to use more conventional weapons like swords, daggers, and poisons occasionally. The British believed that all the Thugs worshipped Goddess Kali irrespective of their individual religious affiliations as Hindus or Muslims. Thus in British view, Thuggee was both organized crime and murderous cult at the same time.²

Despite Sleeman's boast of discovering Thuggee, the British did not actually 'expose' something unknown - as the references to the Thugs in the pre-colonial sources show. But it is also undeniable that they were the first to create a systematic body of knowledge on the subject. As might be expected, such knowledge was thoroughly informed by unequal power relations. As both Indians and disenfranchised criminals, the Thugs were doubly disempowered. Their status as convicted criminals allowed the British the liberty to represent them as they willed. On the other hand, the Thugs were never given the opportunity to represent themselves. Many of them were of course illiterate. Even when they were not, no access to print media was allowed to them. It is certainly true that the British allowed the Thug approvers to 'speak' while recording Thug depositions. But as such 'confessions' were inevitably extracted under duress, their authenticity is open to doubts. It is probable that these approvers, who were basically King's witnesses, said merely what the British wanted to hear from them rather than saying what they actually knew and felt. Colonial discourse thus 'constructed' Thuggee in this sense. Mary Poovey draws our attention to the fact that British campaign against Thuggee began at a time when the East India Company was facing criticism at home. The claim that they were protecting the ordinary Indians from an ancient evil allowed the Company to justify its continued presence in India. (Poovey 10) Radhika Singha further draws a link between the discovery of Thuggee and the expansion of British power in India. She argues that the campaign against Thuggee took place in the period when the rhetoric of reform was used to justify British paramountcy. Thus, what the British were claiming in essence was that their presence in India was needed for the welfare of the Indians themselves. As Máire ní Fhlathúin has correctly recognized, here is a variation of the 'rescue script' identified by Spivak - namely, white men saving brown men from one another. (Fhlathúin 36) Fhlathúin also points out that Thuggee "at various times allowed the officers of the TD [Thuggee and Dacoity Department] to establish their authority in progressively larger tracts of India." (Fhlathúin 32) To the British, the suppression of Thuggee therefore provided sufficient ruse to further their imperialist agenda. Scholars like Poovey, Singha and Fhlathúin demonstrate that it would be unwise to view Thuggee as a mere law and order problem tackled by the British. When the British under Sleeman launched a massive campaign in 1830 to eradicate Thuggee, they had more than one end in view.

Given the stakes that the British colonizers had in running the campaign against Thuggee, it is natural that the colonial writers represented Thuggee as a 'religion of murder' and the Thugs as villainous criminals. Among the writers who depicted Thuggee this way, one may mention W. H. Sleeman, Edward Thornton, Captain Meadows Taylor, Sleeman's grandson Colonel James L. Sleeman, and George L. Bruce. These colonial writers viewed the British triumph against Thuggee as the "monument to British rule in India." (James Sleeman 21) This understanding of Thuggee remained unquestioningly accepted till the 1950s. By this time India obtained independence in 1947 and nationalist historiography with revisionist agenda came into existence. Following the classification proposed by Alexander Lyon Macfie and later Darren Reid, one may say that there was a transition from "orthodox" interpretation of Thuggee to "revisionist" interpretation. (Reid 77) What I call the *baagi/thagi* debate had its origin at this period. In 1956 Hiralal Gupta's article "A Critical study of the *Thugs* and their Activities" was published in *Journal of Indian History*. Gupta's main contention was that Thuggee was not an ancient murderous cult as the British described. It actually had its origin in the British period itself. The socio-economic changes brought about by the East India Company's territorial expansions in the early part of the nineteenth century lead to the emergence of this phenomenon. Thus, Thuggee was a sort of British creation. (Gupta, *Stanglers and Bandits*, 261-262) Gupta's views inspired and influenced many later thinkers. Some of them like Stuart

Gordon, Amal Chatterjee, and Parama Ray went to the extent of arguing that Thuggee was nothing but “an orientalist construction formed with the intention of legitimizing increased British judicial power in India.” (Reid 76) Chatterjee, for instance, claims that the British justified “their domination of the subcontinent by creating a variety of 'others' and 'facts' about those others ... during the period of civilizing administrative conquest if the Thugs been 'unreal', some other 'police' matter would have been 'found'.” (Chatterjee 5) Such extreme scepticism has however been criticized in the recent times.

There are some revisionist historians who accept Thuggee as a social reality but see in it some traces of anti-colonial resistance. The Thugs in this view were rebels who resisted the British (*baagis*). Kathleen Gough, for instance, sees them as some sort of “Robin Hoods” who mainly targeted “merchants, soldiers, money-carriers and soldiers of the Company.” (Gough, *Stranglers and Bandits*, 264–265) Christopher Kenna feels that “*thagi* in particular seems to hover between crime and protest, social and anti-social banditry.” (Kenna, *Stranglers and Bandits*, 265) It is obvious that these theorists invoke Eric Hobsbawm's concept of 'social banditry' to interpret Thuggee. According to Hobsbawm's formulation, the social bandits were noble robbers who opposed the elites as the champions of the poor and were regarded as “honourable” and “non-criminal” by the population. (Hobsbawm 17–22) Such understanding of Thuggee as anti-colonial resistance is not as airy and baseless as it sounds. James Sleeman points out that the Thugs mainly targeted the Indian sepoy's working in the British army. Says Sleeman,

Sepoy's proceeding home on furlough with their small savings were specially favourite victims of the Thug, because they were unlikely to be missed until sometime after death, their relatives being ignorant of the fact that they had started for home, and the regimental authorities ascribing their failure to return to desertion. Certain gangs of Thugs, indeed, can be said to have specialised in sepoy's. (James Sleeman 19)

Thus by murdering the sepoy's the Thugs appear to be striking, perhaps unintentionally, at colonial rule. Moreover, Sleeman adds that often the ruling chiefs, landowners, village police and even the villagers themselves were in league with the Thugs. He cites an incident when the inhabitants of a village named Tigura gathered to protect some Thugs and tried to prevent their arrest. (James Sleeman 19) Other authorities also support this allegation of Sleeman. In Captain Philip Meadows Taylor's novel *Confessions of a Thug* (1839) the Rajah of Jhalone is a native chief who protects the Thug Ameer Ali and his father in return of a portion of the loot. In John Masters's novel *The Deceivers* the Rajah of Padampur is also shown to support the Thugs. Further, Masters shows an entire village dedicated to Thuggee in his novel. These British writers thus seem to indicate, perhaps inadvertently, that Thuggee had a mass base. Going by their expositions, one may easily detect a resemblance between Thuggee and Hobsbawm's social banditry where the social bandits come from and are supported by the common peasants. However, the one thing that goes against the Robin Hood image of the Thugs is that they preyed on all class of Indians, particularly the rural poor. As Kim A. Wagner points out:

Thuggee was a type of banditry entirely devoid of any trace of social protest. The thugs killed quite indiscriminately, they had no grudges, no scores to settle, no wrongs to avenge vis-à-vis their victims. The thugs did not loom large in the popular imagination of the rural population... (Wagner, “Thuggee and Social Banditry”, 372)

Moreover, the British believed that the Thugs never harmed Europeans on principle. As Sleeman notes, “it must be remembered that Englishmen themselves suffered no harmful effects from this malignant enterprise.” (James Sleeman 21) This goes against the rebel or *baagi* image of the Thugs.

Revisionist views like those described above remained in force for some time. Recently, however, “post-revisionist” interpretation of Thuggee has been forwarded by scholars like Kim A. Wagner who justly asks “if thuggee was a colonial construction then who were the four thousand men convicted of the crime?” (Wagner, “The Deconstructed Strangler”, 936) Wagner insists that Thuggee was neither colonial construction nor some sort of anti-colonial protest. Wagner, Martine Van Woerkens and others argue that

while Thuggee did exist, it was misrepresented by the British to suit their own purpose. Wagner, for instance, believes that the Thugs were mercenaries who were employed and protected by the rulers or landholding elites. They even paid a sort of 'thug-tax' to the *zamindars* in exchange of their support and protection. (Wagner, "Thuggee and Social Banditry", 362-363) Thus the Thugs were definitely bandits but not the secret society of murderous criminals as the British represented them. The views of these post-revisionist scholars thus challenge both colonial expositions on Thuggee and the assumptions of the revisionist historians. A lively debate regarding the nature of Thuggee thus continues even today.

Rebels or Criminals: Cinematic Representations of the Thugs

Keeping in mind the above mentioned facts, we turn our attention to representations of the Thugs in films. Martine Van Woerkens is the first to study such representations. She analysed three films - George Steven's *Gunga Din* (1939), Steven Spielberg's *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), and Nicholas Meyer's *The Deceivers* (1989). Woerkens argues that despite portraying the Thugs as stereotypical villains, these films also depict Thuggee as some sort of anti-colonial resistance - even if of the unacceptable kind. She feels that in these movies:

... the Thugs are also rebels led by power-hungry religious chiefs or iniquitous kings. They are bad rebels, Robin Hoods obeying Satan instead of God. And yet in these imaginings Thuggism is not only the horrid beast arisen from the darkness of the distant past, but also a protest that might have no outlet of expression other than murder. (Woerkens 285)

From Woerkens's exposition, it would appear that the rebel/criminal or *baagi/thagi* debate had informed the cinematic representations of Thuggee from the very beginning. Such, however, is not exactly the case because in these three films the criminal image of the Thugs remains so dominant that the viewers are allowed little scope to think of them otherwise. It is only with liberal stretch of imagination that one may read anti-colonial resistance in Thug activities depicted in these films. One may take the case of *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* to illustrate the point. This film has been rightly identified by scholars as "neo-Orientalist extravaganza." (Wagner, "Thuggee and Social Banditry", 359) When all is said and done, the film is not about Thuggee though one such character attacks Indiana Jones with a cord (and not a noose). The Thugs here are not criminals who prey upon travellers on the road. The element of deception that earned them the name Thugs or deceivers is totally absent in the film. Thuggee here is simply portrayed as a satanic cult whose followers seek some magic talismans - crystal *lingams* or phalluses called the 'Shankara stones' in the film to re-establish their dominion in India. The association with Satanism becomes evident when one observes the idol of Kali worshipped by the so called Thugs in the film. As Woerkens, and indeed anyone acquainted with Hindu iconography would notice,

In *Indiana Jones* Kali keeps only her name and her human-heads necklace from Hindu imagery. Her statue incorporates various elements, including some borrowed from Christian demonology. (Woerkens 283-284)

Moreover, during the final combat when Indiana drops the cult leader Molla Ram into a crocodile infested river, he screams "Molla Ram! Prepare to meet Kali, in hell!" Here again the film associates the Hindu Goddess with the Christian devil. With all its presentations of voodoo, black magic, Satanism and sorcery, *Indiana Jones* belongs more to the realm of the fantasy than the real. What one witnesses is the Manichean struggle between the Occidental good and the Oriental evil. The element of anti-colonial resistance is not at all given any serious consideration. It is true that at one point in the film Molla Ram promises to "massacre the British imperialists, crush the Muslims, and then cause the god of the Christians to crumble into dust." But the people who he actually works against are all Indians. We are informed right at the beginning that the theft of a 'Shankara stone' from its original home in the small Indian village had resulted in unleashing drought and misery in the land. Given such circumstances, the anti-colonial rhetoric of Molla Ram appears quite hollow. He is certainly not the 'social bandit' described by Hobsbawm whom the poor "protect", "idealize" and turn into a myth. (Hobsbawm 17) Instead, he works towards the destruction of the peasants.

The film actually encourages us to recognize him and his gang as megalomaniac power-seekers - no better than the Nazis, as Woerkens herself realizes. (Woerkens 283) The rebel/*baagi* image of the Thugs thus hardly emerges in this film.

Unlike *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, *The Deceivers* portray Thuggee realistically. That is to say, in depicting the operations of the Thugs, the film closely follows colonial accounts. It presents the adventure of the British officer William Savage who joins a Thug gang to reveal Thuggee to the world. As a matter of fact, the film is an adaptation of John Masters' popular 1952 novel of the same name. The film more or less closely follows Masters' main storyline. However, there is a deviation from the novel at the very beginning when the Thugs are shown murdering two native sepoy and their English commanding officer. Masters presents no such scene in his novel, probably because he believed with other British colonial writers that the Thugs never harmed Europeans. Also, at the end of the film the gang of Thugs and the British troops engage in hand to hand combat in which the Thugs are decimated. Again, this does not feature in the novel and is a cinematic invention. Judging solely by these two incidents, it would appear that the film does portray Thuggee as some sort of anti-colonial resistance. Yet, one must keep in mind that the Englishmen and their sepoy are not the only victims of the Thugs in this film. They also murder ordinary Indians, thereby compromising their rebel/*baagi* image. Moreover, the leader of the Thugs Chandra Singh (Chandra Sen in the book) is a wealthy landowner or a *thakoor*. Representing the aristocracy, he is not the fit person to become the leader of a peasant resistance. Masters himself did not conceive of Thuggee as some sort of resistance to British rule. Rather, he portrays it as a primordial evil, a destructive force embodied as the seductive dark Goddess Kali, which the protagonist William Savage overcomes. The film, which retains the novel's basic storyline, thus does not treat the Thugs as *baagis*. This hardly seems unusual given that the filmmakers in this case were foreigners whose sole intention was to capitalize on the crowd-pulling capacity of Thuggee without caring for the sentiments of the Indians.³

The persistence of the negative stereotyping of the Thugs once again becomes apparent in Harnam Singh Rawail's 1968 Hindi film *Sunghursh*, which stars leading actors like Dilip Kumar, Vyjayanthimala, Sanjeev Kumar, Balraj Sahni and others. It appears strange that a post-independence Indian film would unquestioningly follow British discourse to condemn the Thugs. In its defence, one may point out that the film is not actually about the Thugs. Rather, it is on romance and family vendetta. Bhavani Prasad in this film is a Thug leader who poses as a priest to deceive and murder wealthy pilgrims. Prasad is a votary of Kali, as his forefathers had been through generations. In fact, the crisis occurs when his son rebels against him and he is forced to murder him. Prasad tries to prevail upon his reluctant grandson Kundan to take up the ancestral profession. The film actually dramatizes the struggles of Kundan who is haunted by the sins of his ancestors. Having its focus on vendetta rather than on Thuggee, the film does not problematize British account of Thuggee. The question of seeing Thuggee as anti-colonial resistance does not occur here at all.

Finally, we turn to the newly released big budget film *Thugs of Hindostan* which stars veteran actors like Amitabh Bachchan, Aamir Khan, Katrina Kaif, Fatima Sana Shaikh and Lloyd Owen. Ironically, *Thugs of Hindostan* deceives or *thags* those audience who expect to find representations of the Thugs in this film keeping the title in mind. The film is not at all about the Thugs, though one such group makes a short and rather noisy appearance at the beginning. Attack on a band of itinerant merchants is depicted, but no murder is shown on-screen. The Thugs in this film pounce upon their victims in the manner of the bandits, instead of inveigling and befriending them first in the manner of the Thugs. True, certain allusions to British anti-Thuggee campaign are made in the film. The protagonist of the film is named Firangi Mallah, no doubt as a tribute to the Thug leader Feringhea immortalized by W. H. Sleeman in his book. It is Mallah who plays the role of the *sotha* or inveigler and brings the victims to the predetermined spot of attack. But one needs to remember that the Thugs did not operate in this manner. Each member of the gang had their specific duties allotted to them. While Mallah acts as the *sotha*, the

other Thug functionaries are not depicted in the film. And there is the conspicuous absence of Kali worship. Neither the *thagis* nor the *baagis* in the film are shown to worship Kali, which for the British was the very essence of Thuggee. The film's representation of the Thugs thus differs significantly from the way in which they were generally imagined in the colonial discourse.

In a sense the film appears to offer a revisionist interpretation of the British anti-Thuggee campaign. Immediately after betraying the travellers to the Thugs, Mallah betrays the Thugs to the British. Here he seems to perform the role of an approver, which his name sake Feringhea also did in Sleeman's time. The approvers were convicted Thugs who betrayed and handed over their former comrades to the British authorities in exchange of mitigation of their sentences. Mallah, however, betrays the Thugs solely to claim the prize money from the British. He acts as a sort of a double agent. One acquainted with the history of anti-Thuggee campaign knows that the British did not trust the approvers fully. While the approvers did not receive death sentence in exchange of helping the British, they were kept imprisoned for life. But nothing of that sort happens to Mallah who is allowed to go his own way. Is it insinuated in the film that the so called Thugs were rather ordinary criminals whom the British captured with the help of corrupt double agents like Mallah? Or does the film parodies the anti-Thuggee campaign? It is also to be noted that in apprehending the Thugs, the British in the film use deception as their main strategy. The question that naturally comes to the viewers' minds is - who are the real Thugs, the criminals or the British colonizers?

While the film's depiction of the Thugs may appear ahistorical at first, on a closer examination the film appears to intentionally question and subvert the very Thug paradigm. This it does by invoking the *baagi/thagi* debate. A brief summary of the plot would help us better understand the issue. Set around 1806, the film depicts a group of rebels or *baagis* lead by Khudabaksh Azaad and his protégé Zafira who seek to overthrow British rule and liberate India or *Hindostan*. In 1795, an officer of the East India Company named John Clive betrayed and killed the ruler of Raunakpur Mirza Ali Beg and his entire family. Only Zafira, the young daughter of the king, was rescued by his loyal retainer Khudabaksh Jahaji. Eleven years after, they surface as the nemesis of the British and particularly Clive. In order to capture Khudhabaksh, now nicknamed Azaad (independent), and his gang, the British hire the service of Firangi Mallah who is an unscrupulous double agent. They are forced to employ this mercurial spy because to the ordinary Indians, including their reluctant ally Maharaja Sangram Singh, Azaad is a hero. Here again the idea of the 'social bandit' is evoked.⁴ What follows is a game of betrayal and double-crossing in which the roguish Mallah finally redeems himself and emerges as the saviour of the Indians. Notably, when the British talk about Azaad, they refer to him as a criminal. At one point in the film Clive informs Azaad's sympathizer and secret ally Maharaja Sangram Singh that Azaad may be a *baagi* to the Indians, but to the British he is just a *thagi*. Here one straightaway jumps into the *baagi/thagi* controversy that has been raging in the academy in recent years. The film seems to imply that the British often conflated the *thagi* and the *baagi* - purposefully criminalizing all sorts of resistance to their rule. However, it is the British colonizers like John Clive who are the real Thugs as they break all trust and promises repeatedly. *Thagi* in this film is thus used in its basic sense of swindler, devoid of any cultist connotation. The title becomes ironic in implication when one realizes that the "Thugs of Hindostan" are not characters like Khudabaksh or Firangi, but British officers like Clive (probably an oblique reference to Robert Clive who on all accounts won the battle of Plassey in 1757 through treachery and deception).

Conclusion

Comparison between *Thugs of Hindostan* and earlier cinematic representations of Thuggee thus shows how popular understanding of Thuggee has undergone a change in our age. One must remember that commercial films such as these are always made keeping in mind the assumptions and expectations of the audience. Otherwise such films would have little chance of commercial success. These films thus may be treated as indices of popular taste. The fact that *Thugs of Hindostan* attempts to problematize our notion of Thuggee shows a shift in public taste and understanding. Till the early years of the twenty first century

popular understanding unquestioningly accepted British colonial accounts of Thuggee. Wagner points out that even as late as 2004 the people of Sindouse continued to believe in the colonial representation of Thuggee as a crime. (Wagner, “Thuggee and Social Banditry”, 376) Thus, the Thugs were invariably presented as criminals in the mainstream films keeping the public understanding in view. Now, situations appear to have changed in the present times. Thuggee has become too distant in time to retain its hold on public memory. Hence the matter can be problematized afresh, allowing the audience to think critically. Of course, this is not to suggest that the ordinary uninformed audience would at all care about Thuggee and its differing interpretations. But the bold reinterpretation of Thuggee that *Thugs of Hindostan* offers indicates that the producers feared no outcry from the informed viewers. Somewhere there seems to have been an expectation that the informed viewer will enjoy the questioning of British discourse on Thuggee. This film's problematization of Thuggee is therefore an advance over the stereotypical representation of the Thugs found in earlier commercial films.

Notes:

1. This section has been constructed from the materials provided by Woerkens and Wagner.
2. The description of Thuggee given here has been summarized from Martine Van Woerkens' classic account of Thuggee in her *The Strangled Travelers*.
3. *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* was actually censored in India for hurting the sentiments of the Indians. The ban was later revoked.
4. At one point in the film Azaad is shown tilling the ground. He claims that he is a peasant first and a rebel later. Thus he becomes the quintessential social bandit.

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