Some Evils Ended

An excerpt from a British historian’s book written soon after India’s Independence, first published in two parts in 1953 & 1954.

Its Dedication reads as – “To the People of India and Pakistan, whose tranquility was our care, whose division is our failure, and whose continuance in the family of nations to which we belong is our Memorial”!


….. One more evil must be mentioned in more detail. There had always been stories of travellers who were strangled by Thugs, but the mysteries of that murderous society were closely guarded and they left no survivors. Again, it was Lord William Bentinck who gave orders which ended the Thugs. Sleeman was for most of time in charge of the operations; he had a dozen young men working under him, mostly soldiers turned political with a few civilians.

The first step was the most difficult. But once a member of a gang had confessed, then others of the gang would usually hurry forward to gain a pardon and gradually the doings of that group would be cleared up. It was slow laborious work. A gang would set out in the autumn; they would come back in the spring, having murdered anything up to a thousand travellers.

They would camp near a town or a large village; one or two chosen men would go to the shops and wander about the streets. As soon as they saw a small party of travellers they would move nearer and seize on some chance of getting into conversation. The talk would slide round to the dangers of the road and heads would be shaken at the folly of travelling without a sufficient escort. The travellers would speak cautiously of joining parties for safety; the stranger would be reluctant but in the end the two parties would ride on together. Never, the travellers would think, had they met such good company. But a night would come when the company would seem even better than usual, the tales told with more gusto, the jokes more ready and thelaughter more uproarious. Then suddenly the leader would cry in a loud voice : Bring the tobacco!” and clap his hands as though to summon a servant. And that clap would be the last thing the travellers heard on earth. In a few more minutes their bodies would be stripped naked and tumbled higgledy-piggledy into a grave already dug; a few more and the grave would be filled and the senior gravedigger would be dragging a thorny bush over the sandy soil to hide all traces.
The killing was done by a handkerchief, a square of cloth, in one corner of which was knotted a silver coin consecrated to the goddess Kali. The knotted coin made a grip for the left hand; the free end went round the victim’s neck, then a quick twist, and in skilful hands the victim would be dead before he reached the ground.

It was not just plain crime for gain. Destruction of life was the first object; the booty was the devotee’s earthly reward, granted him by the goddess. The Thugs believed that they were carrying out a divine mission and that as a reward a heaven of their own would be reserved for them. One Thug told Meadows Taylor that he had personally murdered seven hundred and nineteen people and that he would no doubt have reached a thousand if the government had not caught him. His only regret was that he had not killed more.

There was excitement and adventure in rounding up the Thugs – but there was plain slogging hard work when they were caught. It was the task of Sleeman’s young men to build up a list of the members of each gang and a narrative of the incidents in which that gang had been involved in each hunting season for the last ten or fifteen years. In court a discrepancy in the evidence would be taken as a sign of innocence. It must be all pieced together. The judges must have clear, corroborated, uncontradicted testimony, because they stood for the rule of law as against the individual whim that had ruled before.

Between 1831 and 1837 more than three thousand Thugs were convicted. It would be a fair guess that there had been at least ten thousand operating before Sleeman’s net drew tight. Forty or fifty gangs; perhaps twenty or thirty thousand travellers killed every year. It is guesswork, but that is the kind of figure.

The thing was ended. This evil was completely stamped out and the craft forgotten; it was done by long monotonous hours of questioning, by the laborious comparison of a hundred reports.

But of course it is open to anyone today to argue that the servants of the Company were on the wrong side, that they should have thrown in their lot with Kali and Siva and kept down the population, which is now certainly far too large.