The campaign against thugs in the Bengal press of the 1830s

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At the beginning of the 1830s, the Anglo-Indian press entered a phase of expansion. Calcutta newspapers, in particular, added more pages, widened their circulation and readership, and drew on an increasing number of small rural or "Mofussil" papers. The papers' relationship to their readers – who were also, in the "local news" columns, their correspondents – also changed. The papers were no longer read only for news from Britain, but also for information on the increasingly cohesive and self-defined communities of the British in India, the largest of which was located in the Bengal presidency, centered on Calcutta. These changes coincided with the campaign to suppress the criminal fraternity of thugs, beginning in 1829 with the actions of W. Borthwick at Indore and F. C. Smith and W. H. Sleeman in Sagar and the Narmada territories, and expanded to cover most of India by the end of the 1830s. In the course of this campaign, members of thug gangs – organizations dedicated to robbery and murder – were rounded up by the Thuggee Department (TD) of the East India Company's government, evidence was gathered against them by means of "approvers" (informers), and thousands were hanged, transported or sentenced to life imprisonment. There is no simple cause-and-effect relationship between these two developments in the history of British India; but they are linked to one another, and to the broader historical context, through the network of complex public and administrative connections between the East India Company's government, its British servants and other British residents, and the indigenous people of India. This article examines one aspect of these relationships: the ways in which the campaign against the thugs pursued by the TD made use of, and was represented by, the Bengal press.

The British press in Calcutta expanded in both capacity and circulation in the early years of the 1830s. This is most clearly evident in the India Gazette (which circulated 350 copies, twice weekly, in 1829, and increased this to 373 daily plus another 195 ter-weekly by 1833), but is also visible in other Calcutta papers. Even the John Bull, a conservative daily which had lost up to half

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1 The Thuggee Department was formally instituted in 1835, under W. H. Sleeman; however, it had been functioning as a separate operation within the remit of the political agent in the Sagar and Narmada Territories since 1828. It became the Thuggee and Dacoity Department in 1839, and continued to exist (though with its functions limited to the gathering of intelligence on criminal activities) until 1904, when it was replaced by a Criminal Investigation Department (Freitag 150-52). For convenience, I have referred to it as the "TD" throughout.

2 The question of whether "thugs," in the sense of religiously-motivated, secretly organized ritual killers, ever existed, or whether they were an invention of a colonial society in need of a recognizable enemy, is still a matter for debate: see works by Chatterjee, Freitag, Gordon, Singha, van Wœrkens.
its subscribers in 1829/30, saw this decline reversed when it was taken over by the liberal and combative J. H. Stocqueler in 1833, and re-invented as the Englishman. The different papers' circulation lists were weighted in varying proportions towards civil, military and "mercantile" subscribers, so that the four main Calcutta papers (including the Bengal Hurkaru and the Calcutta Courier as well as the two mentioned above) served, between them, a cross-section of British Bengal. For the Calcutta press, this was also a period of relative freedom from censorship, when editors (whose politics were generally on the liberal side) were able to comment on government policies, and print material attacking or satirizing members of that government, without fear of retribution.

While several prominent officials, both among the Court of Directors in London and in Bengal itself, found the idea of a free, critical press in India "dangerous beyond expression" in its tendency to promote unrest among both the European and Indian publics,\(^4\) the Governor-General, Lord William Bentinck, did not favour the use of open censorship. "In all the encounters with editors at Calcutta," he wrote, "the government have always been beat" – and the press was in effect free from intervention several years before policy was brought into line with practice by Sir Charles Metcalfe in 1835.\(^5\) Relations between the press and the government had undergone a decisive change since the days when an editor of the Calcutta Journal could be expelled from India "for undue freedom of criticism of public officials" (Spear 142). In this relatively open climate, the press could, and did, engage in sustained debate of issues of government policy.

The most important part of the Calcutta papers, and their main selling point for their contemporary readers, was the "home," i. e., British, news contained in extracts from European papers. This content outweighed any other, as J. H. Stocqueler's memoirs imply when he celebrates the coup of acquiring a copy of a European paper days before his rivals, and so bringing about a resurgence in the Englishman's popularity and adding "$1,200 per annum to the permanent receipts of the paper" (97). While they included far more "local" material than the papers of twenty years before, this tended to be primarily about the British community in India. The Calcutta Courier, in particular, focused almost entirely on the bankruptcies, military/naval/civil postings, courts martial and proceedings of societies that constituted the staple fare of Calcutta, but other papers were not

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\(^3\) Bengal Hurkaru 7-8 Oct 1833. Circulation figures for all the Calcutta newspapers look absurdly small by modern standards, but they must be read as indicators of far larger readership figures. See Barns 181.

\(^4\) Colonel Conway to Bentinck, 7 Jun 1829 (Philips 229); see also the letters of Sir John Malcolm, 28 July 1829, William Astell, 3 Jun 1830 (Philips 262-3, 450-51).
very different in their coverage. News of "native affairs" tended to be local and particular: cases where a shopkeeper complains of assault, sensational murders for love or revenge, or violent robbery. Otherwise, the "India" space was filled by long-running debates and correspondence on matters such as the abolition of *sati*, the education of the "natives," the establishment of a steam link to the UK, the provision of ice for Calcutta, and inter-paper editorial squabbles. The Calcutta papers also derived news from one another: an interesting extract or letter in one paper was promptly copied into the columns of its rivals. The campaign against the thugs fitted well into the preoccupations and structures of this Calcutta press. The papers' hunger for news to fill their expanding columns led them to feature the stories of sensational violence which characterized the thugs, and the custom of copying items of interest across papers meant that these were quickly disseminated across a wide geographical and social range of readers.

The TD's campaign was good for the Bengal press, and press publicity was, from the beginning, essential to the TD. The focus on information, its circulation and dissemination was a feature of the campaign against thugs from its inception. C. A. Bayly has argued that the definition of a specific crime of "thuggee," leading to the deployment of government resources against it, had its roots in an "information panic" engendered by the colonial administration's awareness of its own lack of knowledge of India, especially in the newly acquired territories of north and central India where "thug" activities (as distinct from the proceedings of bandits and other criminals) began to be recorded as a distinct category in the early years of the nineteenth century, and then again in the late 1820s (*Empire and Information*, 174-6). The success of Sleeman and Smith in the 1830s in obtaining government backing and resources for the TD's activities, compared to the failure of Thomas Perry and Lt Moodie who had made similar appeals up to twenty years before, is ascribed by Bayly at least in part to the intervening changes in the larger political landscape of British India, when the government welcomed opportunities to act within the domains of "independent" states (174).

There is another relevant factor: Martha McLaren points to the growing importance of written "communication of information, explanation and opinion" in the process by which decisions were made at the level of government, and the value set upon officials' ability to write with clarity,

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5 Bentinck to William Astell, 14 Nov 1830 (Philips 549); see also the letter of Sir Charles Metcalfe, 17 Jun 1832; and the "Petition of Adams and others to the Indian government," and the government's response (Philips 834-5, 1415-20).
6 See the Thomas Perry papers of 1808-1812, Add MSS 5375, Cambridge University Library; and the account of Lt. Moodie's attempts to induce the government to take more decisive action against thugs in the Sagar and Narmada Territories in 1824, Board's Collection IOR F/4/984 27697, British Library.
logic and "morally and practically acceptable rationales" for the actions they suggested (3-4, 34). Smith and Sleeman's tireless writing of report after report (and the later reports written by other TD officials) supplied exactly the detailed and precise information that government had found itself wanting, and did so with that combination of pragmatism and moral resolution McLaren identifies as likely to gain the "attention and respect" of the high-ranking officials who read them.⁷

The key moment in the campaign, however, happened when these communications were taken out of the narrow circle of official and bureaucratic correspondence, and moved into the public domain. The first instance of this appeal to public sympathy and interest in the campaign was W. H. Sleeman's letter to the *Calcutta Literary Gazette* of 3 Oct 1830. It described some of the practices, ceremonies and beliefs of thugs, the crimes they committed, and the danger they presented to the security of the Company's territories: "[thuggee] is spreading throughout our dominions…. It is an organized system of religious and civil polity to receive converts from all religions and sects and to urge them to the murder of their fellow creatures." Sleeman further declared that it was "the imperious duty of the Supreme Government of this country" to act against them.⁸ This letter is generally cited as the spur to government support for the campaign (Bruce 83-4), but it might be more correctly regarded as the excuse G. W. Swinton, the chief secretary, required to translate his enthusiasm for the business of eradicating "thug" organizations into a solid commitment. Some months before, he had already suggested to Bentinck the value of appointing "an Officer like Captain Sleeman," with authority to act on his own initiative, and the "Exclusive duty" of seizing thug gangs (Board's Collection IOR F/4/1251/50480 (2), 621-5). In any case, the result was that Sleeman was given the responsibility of tracking and capturing thugs and bringing them to trial.

As well as causing the government to take action, Sleeman's letter was also noticed beyond the small-circulation *Calcutta Literary Gazette*. The *Bengal Hurkaru* 's editorial column carried a summary of it, and combined this with the assertion that the government's recent prohibition on military escorts for travellers should not be applied to "Officers travelling through provinces where property and even life itself are exposed to the assaults of Robbers and Thugs [sic]" (26 Oct 1830). The episode set the tone for the press's dealings with thugs and the TD for the next ten years: the

⁷ See, for example, the extracts from Smith's report "on the suppression of the thags" (Philips 835-46); Sleeman's "memorandum on thagi" (Philips 947-50), and Sleeman, *Ramaseana and Depredations Committed by the Thug Gangs*.

⁸ Board's Collection IOR F/4/1251/50480 (2). Some extracts from this letter are reprinted in Bruce 81-3.
TD fed the press sensational details of thug activities, and their own successes against them, in order to argue for increased resources for themselves.

The idea of using the press to publicize the government's efforts against thuggee originated with H. S. Graeme, the Resident at Nagpur, who suggested in 1830 that details should be published "from time to time in the public prints of trials connected with these atrocious cases of murder" (Bengal Political Proceedings IOR P/517, 21 Jan 1831, 29-35). Throughout the 1830s, notices of actions against thugs were published in the Calcutta Gazette (the paper of government) and copied into other newspapers. These notices were frequently used by editors as the basis for articles on the progress of the TD's campaign. Notices of the seconding of named officers to the TD, and appointments of judges and magistrates, for example, were accompanied by editorial insistence on "the pressing necessity that exists for the speedy adoption of such measures on the part of Government, as would be likely to ensure the suppression of that horrible system of Thuggee"; and the hope that "the day is not far distant when the horrible system of assassination that has so long been a disgrace to India will be finally and for ever put a stop to…" (Cawnpore Examiner, rpt. in Calcutta Courier 2 Feb 1835).

The other recurrent item among the official notices is the several government orders that abstracts of trials held by officials of large numbers of thugs at various locations should be published, "in order that the public at large may be apprized of the extent to which that atrocious crime has been carried by the Thug Fraternity, and that the native portion of the community especially, may be put upon their guard against these insidious murderers" (Calcutta Gazette 21 Jan 1837). These abstracts give details of the numbers tried, the sentences imposed, and the numbers of victims attributed to the prisoners. Again, the emphasis is on the need for "all possible publicity": the order states that other newspapers should be employed (including the Fort St George Gazette in Madras), and collectors and magistrates should be instructed "to cause the same to be distributed by beat of tom tom throughout their respective districts" (Board's Collection IOR F/4/1686/68003, 261-8). The newspapers were thus the government's chosen vehicle for impressing on both the British and the Indian populations the serious and determined nature of their campaign against thugs.

While these aspects of the TD's publicity were deliberately courted by officials communicating with the newspapers, it required new developments in the nature of the Bengal press itself to facilitate the circulation of news of thugs' activities and TD actions against them. The appearance of small, provincial news-sheets, both British and Indian, in the Bengal rural areas (the
"Mofussil press"), whose articles were copied by the larger Calcutta dailies, led to stories of local criminal activity becoming widespread knowledge, where they would previously have gone unnoticed outside of the immediate area. Newspapers like the Mofussil Ukhbar, the Delhi Gazette, the Cawnpore Examiner and the Moorsheedabad News were recognized by the Calcutta press as unparalleled sources of information: "To us at the Presidency," wrote the Englishman, "the importance of the Mofussil Journals has consisted solely in their accumulation of news utterly beyond our reach…" (2 Apr 1834). Because the regional press could not rely on "home news" (which they had no chance of obtaining, unless from the Calcutta papers), so their "chief aim," in the words of the Cawnpore Examiner, became to "collect the news of this and surrounding Stations," and they relied on "the intelligence and constancy of [their] correspondents" for their material (16 Aug 1834, rpt. Bengal Hurkaru 26 Aug 1834). Among the most constant of these correspondents were TD officials, whose communications of approver depositions and letters on the progress of the campaign were immediately appropriated by the Calcutta press. The Meerut Observer, for example, wrote a sardonic protest to the editor of the India Gazette, complaining that his coverage of matters relating to the thugs was plagiarized from their own accounts, and that the Calcutta press, left to themselves, were irredeemably ignorant "of the state of any part of India, beyond the Hyperborean regions of Barrackpore, or the 'Ultima Thule' of Budge-Budge" (India Gazette 6 Nov 1832).

The regional papers bridged that gap in knowledge, providing the vital link between the life of the "mofussil" and the reading public across Bengal: through their interest, the TD's narratives of Indian criminality and British justice were circulated far beyond the stations and cantonments where they had originated.

Regional papers were also the means by which the public was to be convinced of the reality of the "thug" menace: as the "atrocities committed by the Thugs would appear incredible to persons unacquainted with their character and manner in life," so selected depositions of captured thugs were to be handed for printing to the editors of newspapers, to ensure that their readers did not remain in ignorance. The long "Narrative of Three Thugs" (Shekh Nijabut, Oomeid and Kulooa), for example, was printed in the Agra Ukhbar (one of the rural "native papers") in 1832, and

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9 Researching these regional papers has its own difficulties: I have been unable to obtain some of the titles and have had access to incomplete runs of others. It will be seen that I am relying on items copied into the Calcutta papers for many of the references used; this is clearly unsatisfactory, but does at least have the merit of underlining the extent to which the Calcutta press drew on regional papers for their information.

10 The item in question is the long letter on the origins and causes of thuggee, signed "R." (India Gazette 11 Oct 1832), discussed above.

11 See the correspondence between Smith and Swinton in May and June of 1832 (Selected Records from the Central Provinces 80-82; Board's Collection IOR F/4/1406/55521, 489-90).
translated from that paper into the *India Gazette*. It follows the invariable pattern of depositions recorded by TD officials, describing succinctly how a gang of thugs noted the omens for their enterprise, travelled the roads, met with travellers, killed them and disposed of their bodies, and divided the spoils. During the 1830s, many other such items were contributed to the newspapers by members of the TD, demanding public attention and government resources, and combining references to past successes with an insistence on the present and growing threat to society posed by the thugs. The "deposition of Runnooa Moonshee taken before Captain Wade, Political Agent at Loodhiana, 25th Aug. 1834," appearing in the *Mofussil Ukhbar*, is introduced by a letter from Sleeman commenting that Runnooa's evidence "will tend to show with what facility these people [thugs] establish themselves in new communities, and connect their dreadful trade of murder with the pursuits of agriculture," thus alerting the Indian public to the thugs' ability to "gain the goodwill" of their neighbours (*Englishman* 18 Nov 1834; see also Sleeman, *Ramaseeana*, 2.472-480).

It is notable that the tone and content of these contributions does not vary over the 10 years of the 1830s, despite the TD's claimed successes and the thousands executed, transported or jailed. The 1832 letter signed "R," on the origins and causes of thuggee, contains all the TD preoccupations: the need to attract "a large portion of the attention of the Press"; the "wily and audacious ferocity" of the thugs, and their "deep and well planned schemes for the destruction of their species"; the "strenuous and successful" efforts of TD officials against them; and the need for "those who are appointed to watch over the safety of the lives and property of the subjects of the British Government" to co-operate with the TD in their endeavours (*India Gazette* 11 Oct 1832). It finds an echo in many other such items in the following years, down to 1840, when G. Vallancey of the TD writes to the *United Service Gazette* with a familiar iteration of thug history and practices, "it being desirable that the Public should be made acquainted with the ramifications of this dreadful system, and the operations going on for its entire suppression in Southern India" (*Calcutta Courier* 2 Sept 1840).

The cumulative effect of these notices and reports is to build up a narrative that presents the campaign against thugs as an action of special merit. All the TD's productions tend towards the conclusion that these were extraordinary criminals whose defeat required extraordinary measures.
(Singha 124). Thugs spoke a different "language," *ramasee*; they were neither Hindu or Muslim, but worshippers of Kali the goddess of destruction; they killed without pity, and recounted their murders without shame: "We killed the travellers while in a mirthful humour..., and their bodies we deposited under some grass" ("Narrative of Three Thugs," *Agra Ukhbar* 10 Oct 1832, trans. in *India Gazette* 26 Oct 1832). Individual voices are lost in the formulaic depositions circulated by the TD, which heighten the effect of impersonality in their flat and repetitive accounts of murder after murder. Even the sensational accounts of executions printed in the newspapers underline the thugs' lack of human weakness, and their "indifference to their fate," in their flamboyant control over their own deaths: "One of the condemned, when the cap and rope were put over his head, told the executioner to do his work quickly; and about [half] a minute after this he addressed the culprit next him to know if he had yet been hanged. The reply was, not very intelligible – on which he slid his feet over the platform, and after the manner of Thugs hanged himself" (*Delhi Gazette*, rpt. in *Calcutta Courier* 17 Mar 1834). The effect throughout is to render thugs completely "other," inhuman in their lack of concern for their own lives as for those of others. Their defeat, by whatever means, could be a cause only for celebration.

The strength of this TD-sponsored narrative may account for one of the most notable features of the coverage of the campaign against thugs in the Calcutta press: the failure of any paper to offer a serious attempt to question either the TD's own justifications for its increasingly ambitious operations, or the underlying rationale for its existence. The procedures of the TD, and the legislation enacted at its instigation, were unprecedented. Act XXX of 1836, for example, which made membership of a thug gang punishable by life imprisonment, was applied retrospectively, both within and without the Company's territories, and in other respects also departed from the previously normal procedures of criminal justice (Singha 84). In a press used to debating the actions, motives, and merits of the government, the apparently unquestioning acceptance of these innovations is remarkable. It is perhaps less surprising that the achievements of individual TD officials should be celebrated, since every communication relating to thugs was testimony to their industry, but the tone of the newspaper reports is panegyric: "The names of Sleeman and Smith are hailed by every traveller in this part of the country now as the saviours of their lives and property, and a Thug is seized with terror at the very mention of either of the above gentlemen..." (*Calcutta Courier* 8 Jun 1833). Editorial reviews of *Ramaseeana*, Sleeman's compilation of papers relating to letters were written by a Calcutta resident "engaged in the manufacture of silk in this country" (*India Gazette*, 29 Aug 1836).
the campaign, were united in praising TD efforts against "a fraternity of the most remorseless assassins that ever shed human blood." The Calcutta Christian Observer found Bentinck's actions in ordering the campaign alone sufficient to make him "seem as an angel from heaven to succour and comfort suffering humanity," and to entitle him to "everlasting honor among men, to the gratitude of all India and of the world" (528-46).

Against this background of general public approval, few dissenting voices were heard, and where they existed, they were strongly contended against. A letter signed "Fiat Justitia" in the Agra Ukhbar focused on "Thug criminal justice" and condemned this "for its stronger resemblance to a Star chamber, than to a judicial tribunal." But the counter-argument came immediately, when another correspondent argued that the special powers given to the TD were justified, as they were employed against "a depraved and heartless race, unmoved by the cry for mercy; whose thirst for blood is but rendered more strong by each succeeding sacrifice… . For such a curse on the human race, no Star Chamber, no Inquisition, would be vested with too great powers." The power of the TD's version of the danger presented by the thugs is apparent in this echo of its officials' description of them. Potential doubts about the policies of the TD's officials are safely diverted into expressions of unease about Indian character and motives, as when the Moorshedabad News comments: "we are by no means satisfied that frightful cases of individual suffering may not occur, should the sordid or vindictive feelings of the approvers lead them to conspire against any guiltless object of their resentment" (rpt. in Calcutta Courier 4 Oct 1838). In response to this or any other criticism of the TD's procedures, the rejoinder is the same: "to a crime so anomalous as this, you cannot safely or wisely apply the routine formalities of our courts of justice…” (Bengal Hurkaru 22 July 1836).

Even a sentimental response to thug prisoners at their most vulnerable, in scenes of execution or other punishment, is muted or absent in the press. It is most visible in the few accounts which mention the youth of some of those executed, such as the Delhi Gazette's observations on "a mere boy" among a number of other condemned prisoners, who "began to cry as the executioners prepared to lead him up to the scaffold; he did not appear to be more than thirteen years of age" (rpt. in India Gazette 10 Jun 1834). These accounts, however, are striking precisely because they appear so rarely; and they notably fail to query the justice of executing such prisoners, or to address the

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14 See the Calcutta Courier 14 Sept 1836, Englishman 23 Sept 1836, Bengal Hurkaru 29 and 30 Sept 1836; the quotation is from the Englishman.
15 "Thuggee," Meerut Observer, rpt. in Englishman 27 Sept 1836. I have been unable to obtain the original "Fiat Justitia" letter, which is quoted in part in the reply. It should be noted, also, that "Fiat Justitia" seems to have had a reputation as something of a crank writer: see the parody of his style and the editor's note (Englishman 20 Sept 1836).
question of their guilt. Later, when mass executions are replaced by transportation overseas, the occasional report mentions the plight of the families of prisoners, who accompanied the convicts to the coast and watched them boarding ship, "weeping for those whom they never can expect again to behold." The scene inspires no sympathy, however, as the United Service Gazette asserts: "We are quite sure that deportation is the very best punishment that can possibly be inflicted on criminals of this description, who hold life at a cheap rate, and have the utmost horror of being sent beyond the Sea" (rpt. in Calcutta Courier 28 July 1838). Again, the TD's narrative of the exceptional nature of these "criminals" is visible, negating any impulse on the part of writer or readers towards empathizing with them or their families.

Such is the force of the TD's presentation of the thug menace that the most practical of objections to the demonizing of "thugs" is hardly ever voiced. The one unanswered, and unanswerable, comment on the thug scares came from a Mofussil correspondent who expressed strong suspicions of "the authenticity of many of those cases of murders, robberies, &c laid at the doors of … thugs. A hot hue and cry is kept up on the subject, and with all fears and wonderment directed towards Thugs, … many other rogues going under usual denominations commit all kinds of plunder" (Bengal Hurkaru 7 Sept 1836). The writer appears to have been alone in this view, however – at least, judging by the lack of similar communications printed.

It is not my intention to suggest that this near unanimity of opinion is the product of editorial censorship or reluctance to print views contrary to that of the majority. The Bengal newspapers of this period are far from speaking with one voice, and are certainly not in the habit of supporting without question the initiatives and proceedings of the Company's government. On the contrary, the stance of the press since the late eighteenth century was rather oppositional than otherwise. Margarita Barns explains the lack of attention to matters pertaining to Indian affairs in the press of that period by the fact that "the raison d'être of this press was as a vehicle of comment on the British administration of the day by those who were outside the privileged circle of the Company's higher officers" (62). This tradition was continued into the nineteenth century, as is apparent in the controversy over Bentinck's economizing measures, especially the "half-batta" rule reducing allowances paid to troops stationed around Calcutta (Spear 143), and later over corporal punishment in the army in the 1830s. It is further confirmed by the papers' willingness to print such material as the "private advertisement" placed by an Indian banker's agent, Beharee Lal, proclaiming his innocence of the charge of employing thugs, despite Sleeman's insistence on his
guilt. Against this background, the absence of dissenting voices on the TD campaign suggests, not suppression of a point of view, but a genuinely widely-held public opinion of the value of TD activities.

While British reactions to TD activities are relatively easily read in the Bengal press, it is also possible to see, with some difficulty, intriguing glimpses of Indian reactions to the campaign supposedly being fought on their behalf. These are rarely expressed openly, though Indian subscribers to the Bengal papers were numerous enough to ensure that their contents would be known to literate Indians at least (Bayly, "Colonial Rule," 303). Their columns include the occasional contribution from a "Native Correspondent," though these tend in the 1830s to be literary in nature, and sometimes condescendingly introduced by editorial commentary on the excellence, or otherwise, of their expression. Despite the financial involvement with the Calcutta press of Dwarkanath Tagore, his interest had no apparent effect on the editorial policies of these papers, which continued to focus mainly on European affairs. The main avenue of research on Indian reactions to the TD's campaign, therefore, is necessarily – as with the British mofussil papers – the examination of material copied into the Calcutta press.

The main Calcutta papers all carry items copied or translated from "native papers," a term indicating papers written usually in both English and a vernacular language. They were intended to be read by Indians, though some – like the Samachur Durpan run from the Baptist mission press at Serampore – were also read by Europeans for "information that could not be obtained through official channels" (Ahuja 8; see also Bengal Hurkaru 8 Oct 1833). Many of the items from these papers reprinted in the British press suggest a positive attitude towards TD activity, as when the Mofussil Ukhbar cites "the native papers" at Sagar as rejoicing that "the Jail is full to overflowing with the captured Thugs, and that of the very shackles none remain out of use. The roads have become nearly free of these professional murderers, and the traveller now wends on his journey in

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16 This marked the culmination of Beharee Lal's long-running feud with Sleeman and the TD; he had originally asked that his innocence should be proclaimed by an official notice, and when this was denied, resorted instead to an advertisement in the Calcutta Gazette, 22 Oct 1836. The advertisement was copied by the Bengal Hurkaru and the Calcutta Courier (both on 24 Oct 1836).

17 The tally of one "native" subscriber per newspaper mentioned in Bentinck's minute on the press in 1829 was misleading even then, as it omitted papers delivered locally in Calcutta (Philips 138). Indian contact with the British press, both as correspondents and as subscribers, increased during the 1830s.

18 See, for example, the presentation of "Introductory Lines" from Baboo Gooroochura Dutt's School Hours (Calcutta Courier 25 Mar 1839).

19 Tagore, an Anglophile financier, acquired a share in the ownership of both the Bengal Hurkaru and the Englishman after the financial difficulties experienced by Calcutta agency houses in the early 1830s had led indirectly to the failure of the India Gazette, which was taken over by the Hurkaru in October 1834. See Kripalani 42-9.
security and comfort" (Calcutta Courier 4 Sept 1834). Similar articles reported with approval the mass executions at Sagar (where Smith sentenced a total of 556 men to death in 1832-33\(^{20}\)), expressing the hope that "this severe example … will exterminate these desparate [sic] bands of marauders, and tend to the pacification and security of these districts" ("Native Papers" in Bengal Hurkaru 29 Jun 1833). A letter "From a Native Correspondent" (written, unusually, directly to the Calcutta Courier) is effusive in praise of the efforts of the "Anglo-Indian Government" against thuggee (30 July 1840). The overall impression of these and other extracts tends to reinforce the image of a grateful "native" populace welcoming the TD's efforts on their behalf.

Where the papers report popular reactions, rather than the views of their editors, there is some evidence of a more equivocal response to the works of TD officials. This is most clearly visible in Bharatpur, where the visit of an "emissary from … the Thug Department" was greeted, according to the Agra Ukhbar, with "great horror" by the inhabitants, "who regard such a visitation much in the same light they would the plague" (Calcutta Courier 17 Jun 1836). The same paper's account of Sleeman's reception in Bharatpur earlier that same year is at best ambiguous, as it highlights "all the empressment [sic] his awful presence generally causes" (rpt. in Calcutta Courier 3 Feb 1836).\(^{21}\) At other times, the "native papers" protested openly against the treatment of Indians by TD representatives. This is apparent in the documents relating to proceedings taken in 1838 against some of "the Officers employed by Capt. N. Lowis in the apprehension of Thugs, aided by the approvers accompanying them," for extortion and oppression of the people of the locality. The case was taken at the direct instigation of the then Governor-General, Lord Auckland, whose "attention … was attracted to representations in the Newspapers," native papers including the Sumachar Durpan, on the matter. In this case, at least, the papers' efforts led to a more diligent adherence to regulations on the part of TD functionaries, a result that might have surprised Bentinck, whose minute on the press of nine years before expresses the most placid contempt for the "native papers" and their readers.\(^{22}\) It should be noted, however, that this episode was not, to my knowledge, copied into the Calcutta press, something that might arguably be attributed to its departure from the "norm," in these papers, of reporting Indians' gratitude for their protection, rather than Indians' dismay at their exploitation.

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\(^{20}\) Similar numbers were executed in surrounding years; see Sleeman, Ramaseeana 1.38-9.

\(^{21}\) The TD had a history of difficult relations with both British and Indian authorities in Bharatpur; see Bruce (145-50) and the letters of A. Locket and G.T. Lushington in Selected Records from the Central Provinces (92-98; 102-103).

\(^{22}\) See Judicial Letter from Bengal, 5 Jan 1838, Board's Collection IOR F/4/1825/75397, 29-31, 111-38; and Bentinck's "Minute on the press" and enclosures (Philips 135-40).
Apart from such isolated examples of editorial action, the main difference between the reports of the "native papers" and those of their "European" counterparts is in their acknowledgement of the Indian actors in the campaign against the thugs. For the British press, these are invisible: the impression is given of a few named British men single-handedly rounding up armies of thug prisoners. The United Service Gazette, for instance, announces that "a colony of Thugs of a new description has been discovered in the Pooree District by that active and zealous Officer Captain Vallancey, who is now busily employed in ferreting out these miscreants…" (Calcutta Courier 13 Mar 1840). The "native papers," on the other hand, remind us that most Indians' experience of TD activity was through other Indians: police or civil service officials, the military, the approvers sent out with (or sometimes without) warrants to name and take into custody those whom they accused of taking part in thug expeditions. In the Mofussil Ukhbar's "Extract from a native letter," Mr Wilson sets out for his thug-hunting expedition to Mynpoorie "accompanied by Moonshee Muhubut Alee, along with a number of sepoys and spies" (Bengal Hurkaru 11 Jan 1833). "Captain H. S. [i. e., Sleeman] the Magistrate of Sagur" does not himself capture thugs; he sends "some informers and a number of sepoys with Monshee Mozur Ally at their head… . The Moonshee has already seized a great number of them and is still warmly devoted to the furtherance of his purpose" ("Native papers" trans. for the Bengal Hurkaru 15 Jan 1833).

The TD's published accounts of its proceedings, and those newspaper articles written by British correspondents, embody a stereotypical vision of India where agency and criminality go hand in hand. Thugs are identified by name, and their actions and motivations described. Approvers are mentioned in the context of a persistent unease about the necessity of employing them to secure convictions, since they might conspire "for the sake of reward or from motives of enmity to accuse innocent individuals and convert their agency for the detection of criminals into a guilty source of gain or revenge for themselves" (Swinton to Smith, 8 Oct 1830, Selected Records 9-10). Their victims and their Indian pursuers are barely mentioned and invariably nameless. Subadar-Major Rustum Khan, for instance, commanded a detachment of troops at Sagar from 1830-1837 and was continually active in TD operations, but figures nowhere in any newspaper account.23 Among the mass of narratives of massacred victims, fearful relatives and corrupt or ineffective "native" authorities produced by Sleeman and his colleagues, the stories printed in the "native papers," brief though they are, stand out for their refusal to conform to this stereotype. The Indians named there have no space in the TD's version of the people they claimed to protect.

23 See Bengal Political Proceedings IOR P/517, 14 Jan 1831, 72; Board's Collection IOR F/4/1686/68001.
In one sense, this omission simply underlines the point made at the beginning of this essay: the British newspapers of Bengal functioned, and recognized themselves, as the voice of the British community; they constructed the ongoing story of that community's life in India. In early nineteenth-century British India, the sense of alienation from India and its people that equated "alone" with an absence of European company meant that for correspondents and readers alike, the identities and actions of Indian subordinate actors were of no interest. Equally importantly, the absence of these Indian actors allows the interaction of British and Indians to be contained within the "Orientalist" shaping of history suggested by Edward Said, where the British act, and the Indians are acted upon. C. A. Bayly points to the increasing prevalence of "disparaging and racialist stereotypes" of Indians in the British newspapers of the 1830s and identifies this as the expatriates' reaction to the activities of "newly educated Indians" in commerce and in public debates about policy and governance (Empire and Information, 218-9; 371). In this context, the TD's presentation of Indians as either villains or victims strikes a resonant chord with a press and public already disposed to this manner of thinking. The campaign against the thugs, in this reading, can be presented (albeit reductively) as a British attempt to normalize the deviant agency of those they defined as thugs, making them objects of colonial discipline, and so re-inscribing their own superiority as well as their benevolence towards their Indian subjects. The narrative of thuggee circulating in the Bengal press may be read, therefore, as a story apparently about Indian violence, but essentially about British attempts to combat that violence and maintain a peaceful order, an expression of the "commitment to reforming a depraved Indian society" that characterised this period of British rule (Metcalf 41).

While the campaign against the thugs is in this way typical of the reforming, utilitarian mood of British government in India in the 1830s, it must also be recognized as of its time in a more specific and pragmatic sense. No element of the campaign was in itself innovative. The compiling of lists and maps in order to record and classify thugs and their activities, the inquiry into their history and practices, the demands for special action to be taken by government against them even in the nominally independent states – all these were instituted early in the nineteenth century, and failed to evoke any public reaction, or any government support. R. C. Sherwood published in 1816 a description of thugs, "Of the Murderers called Phánsigárs," which rivals in detail and sensationalism any of the later TD narratives. It appeared in the Madras Literary Gazette in 1816,

24 An extreme version of this reading is put forward by A. Chatterjee, who classes "thuggee" as a purely British invention (126).
and was reprinted four years later in *Asiatic Researches* (13 [1820]: 250-81; rpt. in Sleeman, *Ramaseeana*, Appendix U). It was received on both occasions with general indifference. The TD flourished and expanded in the 1830s, on the other hand, because its inception coincided with two essential developments in British India: the drive towards paramountcy of the Company's government, and the new links being forged between the Bengal press and its British and Indian constituencies. One created the political conditions favourable to a movement towards India-wide strategies of civil and military policing; the other enabled the publicity and public debate that fuelled the TD's demands for government resources, allowing it to thrive even during a time when the Company was making cut-backs and economies across all its institutions of government.

The Bengal press, in foregrounding the concerns and debates surrounding the campaign, was also implicitly addressing the broader issues of how the British in India chose to deal with the Indians living alongside them. The voices broadcast in the columns of the newspapers are those of the community talking to and about itself – a point especially true of the British press in India, where the vast majority of its readers and correspondents were themselves in the employ of the Company's government, one way or another. Accounts of Indian criminality and weakness (and British knowledge and control) make up most of its writings on thuggee, while dissenting voices or intimations of discordant "native" reactions are muted or marginalized. In this way, the campaign against the thugs contributed to and reinforced the larger narrative of British rule in India.

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