



Thuggee and Sati Revisited: The Persistence of the Colonial Gaze in the Merchant Ivory Film *the Deceivers*

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Abstract

Films on Indian themes made by western filmmakers have often been ridden with stereotypes and clichés. The wave of Raj films that came out of British and American production companies in the years since India's independence have largely been nostalgia-driven, and they almost invariably end up exoticising the region. However, with regard to films made by the non-Hollywood film company named Merchant-Ivory Productions, audiences had come to expect more sophisticated and nuanced treatments of themes drawn from Indian history. This paper examines one of their films, *The Deceivers*, which deals with the twin themes of Thuggee and Sati. The discussion of the film is set against the broader context of the literature and cinema spawned by Western interest in the Raj era. While it is certainly more aesthetically sophisticated than the Hollywood type of Raj films, *The Deceivers* nevertheless falls short of engaging with the complexities of 19th century India in any meaningful way and is especially blind to the tendency of colonial propaganda to criminalise entire ethnic groups. Such attempts at cross-cultural representation are nevertheless valuable from a

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pedagogic point of view in the specific context of postcolonial approaches in the humanities classrooms in our colleges.

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No list of unique, artistic and independently made films from the second half of the 20th century will be complete without the ones that came from the stables of Merchant Ivory Productions. Some of the most critically acclaimed films produced by the company were the fruit of collaboration between the novelist/screenplay writer Ruth Praver Jhabvala, the director James Ivory and the producer-director Ismail Merchant. This ardent trio created a set of films that were especially praised by many for their aesthetics and their fairly successful adaptation of works of literature. At a time when film-making was heavily dominated by studios, the very young and dynamic Ismail Merchant, a Bombay bred Indian, whose family had no connection at all with the film industry, established himself as an independent producer of feature films. He sought partnership with the American director James Ivory and the German-born writer Ruth Praver Jhabvala to form the independent film company called Merchant Ivory Productions in 1961. In an interview with Robert Emmet Long, Ivory states that Jhabvala wrote most of the screenplays, he directed, while Merchant produced most of the films and occasionally directed a few (Long, 2005, p. 3). Richard Robbins, the composer, is the fourth member of this collaboration. Merchant Ivory Productions has been one of the most successful (with the longest standing partnership of five decades) independent production companies in cinema today.

Merchant was aware of the expanding local film market in India that catered mostly to an Indian mass audience (1998, p. ix). Though he grew up on these films, they weren't the kind he wanted to make. As a teenager he was enamoured by other cultures: "their lives, their cuisines and, of course, their cinema" (Merchant, 2002, p. 16). He was impressed by the imported Hollywood films of the likes of Frank Capra, George Cukor, and Alfred Hitchcock. While in New York, Merchant was greatly influenced by Fellini, De Sica, Bergman, Truffaut, and Satyajit Ray (1998, p. x). However, his heart was set on making movies that centred on "universal truths" with "universal appeal" (Merchant,

1988, p. ix). He wanted to do something that had never been attempted before: “make Indian films for an international audience” (Merchant, 1988, p. ix). By the time of his death in 2005, Merchant had co-produced nearly 40 films in partnership with James Ivory. A good many of these films dealt with issues and situations specific to India while the others dealt with themes from Western, particularly European, settings. The Merchant Ivory films that either had an Indian storyline or were set in India were shot in India. The non-Indian films were shot in the US, England, France and Italy as demanded by the various scripts.

When it comes to the genre of films on India during the period of British rule, the so-called “Raj films,” the forays made by Merchant Ivory Productions have been quite noteworthy. Theirs were among a handful of Raj films considered by reviewers to be somewhat more nuanced. Merchant Ivory Productions had always had a steady and loyal audience that waited for the films, most of which were literary adaptations and classed as period films. Merchant in his book, *Hullabaloo in Old Jeypore: The Making of the Deceivers* expounds the obstacles that went into the filming of *The Deceivers*. Since Ivory and Jhabvala were not interested in making a period-action thriller, Merchant struck out on his own, for the first time, to work with new collaborators. *The Deceivers* (1998), based on a 1952 novel (of the same name) by John Masters, was directed by Nicholas Meyer, who is best known for his involvement (script-writing/directing) in the *Star Trek* films. On reading Masters’ *The Deceivers*, Merchant felt a strong desire to see it transcreated into cinema.

Christopher Reeve and Treat Williams were initially considered for the role of William Savage, the protagonist, but Meyer fortuitously persuaded Pierce Brosnan, happily an Englishman himself, for the sake of authenticity. In *The Deceivers*, Brosnan essayed the role of William Savage, an English collector for the British East India Company, who discovered the existence of a secret Thuggee cult and disguised himself as a Thug in order to expose the dreaded cult. Shooting took place over a four-month period in India near Khajuraho and in Rajasthan, while the post-production work was completed in London [i](Merchant, 1988, p. 81). Merchant considered himself lucky to work with Ken Adam, British movie

production designer, who was well known for his set designs in James Bond films in the 1960s and 70s. It was immensely important for Merchant to “have a designer with flair and a knowledge of the period” (1988, p. 21). Adam’s wife, Maria Letizia, also his assistant on the sets, assured that every realistic detail of the period film would be painstakingly recreated. They were helped by the team of Jenny Beaven and John Bright who designed the period costumes.

The Raj-era did inspire a range of books, both fiction and non-fiction: E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India*, Paul Scott’s *Raj Quartet*, Rudyard Kipling’s *Jungle Book*, and Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*. Masters, in a series of novels, has created a fictitious family with the surname of Savage. The males of this family are made to serve in India either as part of the East India Company or the Indian army. Masters himself had served in the British Indian Army. Captain Rodney Savage who is the protagonist of Masters’ *Nightrunners of Bengal* (1951), is a descendant of William Savage. Captain Rodney Savage survives the mutiny and his descendant, another Rodney Savage, appears in two of Masters’ novels, *Bhowani Junction* (1854) and *To the Coral Strand* (1962), which are about India gaining independence. *The Deceivers* (1952) features Rodney's father William Savage, of Madhia district, who happens to find a mass grave of murdered travellers and finds out about the Thugs and their ceremonial slayings.

It can be said of ‘Raj fiction’ in general that much of it is written by British writers in the post-independence era and caters primarily to a British readership, comprised significantly of older Raj returnees and marked by a strongly residual nostalgia for the days of the Raj. One such book, John Masters’ novel *Bhowani Junction* (1954), was made into a film with the same title in 1956. The film is set in 1947, in the last few days of the British Empire in India. The British are on their way out of India as Indians are gearing up to take control of independent India. Set against this boisterous backdrop is the story of Victoria Jones (played by Ava Gardner), a young Anglo-Indian girl in search of her ethnic identity. Her dilemma is that she is half-British and half-Indian. The story is narrated by Victoria’s superior officer, Colonel Rodney Savage (played by Stewart Granger), a British soldier assigned to protect the railways in Bhowani Junction. The British officer goes to improve conditions

for Indians, as is customary in much of Raj literature, but he is at least not the objectionable empire builder with a patronising attitude towards the “natives,” as one observes in Kipling’s “whites” who carry with them the ‘White Man’s Burden’.

One persistent sub-genre within the output of Raj fiction and cinema is that dealing with criminal social groups such as the Thugs. George Stevens’ *Gunga Din* (1939) was perhaps one of the first films that were set in 19th century India when Thuggee was prevalent. This film stars Cary Grant, Victor McLaglen, and Douglas Fairbanks, Jr. Sergeants Cutter (played by Grant) goes in search of a golden temple, in the course of which he and Gunga Din (played by Sam Jaffe) stumble upon the meeting place of the Thugs. This film was loosely based on the eponymous poem by Rudyard Kipling (*Gunga Din*, 1865). Luigi Capuano’s *The Mystery of Thug Island* (1966) is another movie wherein a European child is brought up by Thugs.

Merchant Ivory Productions’ own work on the Thug phenomenon, *The Deceivers*, is set in India in 1825. The movie opens with the following expository title card: “This is the story of a secret society of murderers . . . and of the man who exposed their crimes. It is based on fact” (Merchant & Meyer, 1988). William Savage, is a colonial administrator of the East India Company and tax collector of the fictional district of Madhia. Savage discovers a mass grave of travellers with strangulation marks on their necks, and among them a recently killed British officer. Thus he stumbles upon the fact that the country is being pillaged by Thugs, members of a Kali-worshiping Thuggee cult also known as Deceivers, who waylay, rob and ritualistically murder travellers.

References to Thugs are certainly to be found in Indian sources well before the era of British rule. Kabir, the great 15th century mystic poet, often made use of ‘thug’ as a metaphor for the divine deceit of God. The Janamsakhi-texts describing the life of Guru Nanak also refer to it. While a foreign traveller in 17th century India, the Frenchman Jean de Thevenot, described Thugs as very cunning robbers, the Englishman John Fryer described an execution of a phansigar (strangler) on the basis of a Farman by Aurangzeb in 1672.[ii]

As is common with such histories, the accretion of legend with the passage of time comes to colour the public memory and it becomes difficult to separate whatever historical kernel there might be from later elaborations produced by fertile imaginations. The Thuggee films are no exception to this process. *The Stranglers of Bombay* (1959 – originally called *The Horror of Thuggee*) is a Terence Fisher film portraying the fascination with Thuggee in Bombay in the 1930s with David Z. Goodman grounding his script on Sleeman's travails in India to expunge the cult. This Hammer Studios film was not shot in India at all. The role of the magnetic high priest of the Thugs is played by a Cypriot-British actor named George Pastell. One has to employ a willing suspension of disbelief while listening to his British accent as he rages, "She (Kali) gave our ancestors this sacred cloth (rumal) and said, 'Kill, kill'" (Carreras, Hinds, Hyman, Nelson-Keys, & Fisher, 1959). This film investigates the murders of both English and Indian victims by the Thugs. In the process it looks at ruling class ineptness. Thuggee seems to be presented as organised crime that would never have been possible without the help of local authorities. The film takes an anti-colonial stance as it critiques how the British ruled India with their upper class ignorance and noxious stupidity: "Whoever rules decides the truth" (Carreras, Hinds, Hyman, Nelson-Keys, & Fisher, 1959). The East India Company does very little to stabilise the country: "Goodman never goes so far as to suggest that there was anything inherently wrong, immoral, or even misguided about colonialism per se, but he's not at all shy about depicting colonial administration as a haven for cronyism, corruption, and pigheaded ineptitude." [iii] However, the film ends with an expository title card informing viewers that the Thuggee cult gets eventually annihilated by the British, and a quotation by Sleeman: "If we have done nothing else for India, we have done this one good thing" (Carreras, Hinds, Hyman, Nelson-Keys, & Fisher, 1959).

As in the film, so in history, Colonel William Henry Sleeman, the British officer quoted above, was the man who is credited with the operation to flush out Thugs in 1835. Sleeman in his book *Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official* (first published in 1844) writes about the suppression of Thugs. According to him, it was very difficult to procure evidence against Thugs in spite of the many "approvers" employed all over India. Recovery of property

or money from the Thugs was nearly impossible as they were known to spend it freely.[iv] Sleeman writes about courts being formed to convict the Thugs with as much evidence as was available. He also writes about high functionaries taking great pride in “relieving the people of India from this fearful evil.”[v] Savage’s character in *The Deceivers* is said to be based on Colonel William Henry Sleeman. In spite of the British being in power, Thuggee continued to flourish as observed by Edward Thornton in 1837: “no systematic efforts were made for the suppression of practices which no civilized Government could be expected to tolerate, after it became informed of their existence.”[vi]

In this regard, it is worth noting in passing, that Steven Spielberg’s *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom* (1984), which was initially banned from being publicly screened in India, is set in 1935 and also has a reference to Thuggee. It has Indiana Jones (played by Harrison Ford) coming to a small village in India and discovering the Temple of Doom. Here he discovers the Thuggee cult and he rescues the enslaved children of the village and the singer Willie Scott (played by Kate Capshaw) from them. Instead of the usual gur it is the blood of Kali that is forced into Jones’ mouth as part of the ceremony of initiation. Jones is no longer in control of his senses. He is brought out of his zombie like state only after a torch of fire is brought very close to him. In *Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*, just as in *The Deceivers*, the white men become saviours by rescuing helpless natives who are being depredated by the other natives. One of the readings of the eating of the gur (or the drinking of the blood) possibly signifies “Westerners being contaminated by Kali.”[vii]

The word Thug, Thuggee or Tuggee is a derivative of the Sanskrit, sthag and Pali, thak. This means to hide or conceal, mainly a secret concealment. According to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, the word Thug denoted a “member of a well-organized confederacy of professional assassins who travelled in gangs throughout India for several hundred years.”[viii] The cult accommodated people from just about every class and sect but paradoxically seemed to work as a “quasi-religious fraternity.”[ix] According to Edward Thornton, “The profession of a Thug, like almost everything in India, is hereditary.”[x] The techniques of killing perfected by the thugs

astonished most observers when they finally came to light. A rumal (scarf) with a few concealed coins was lassoed around the necks of unsuspecting travellers until the bones of the neck were broken. This ritualistic killing was believed to be pleasing to goddess Kali. The cult was said to have flourished for two hundred years during which it was believed to have killed something like two million people across India, including dozens in Savage's district, Madhia. Having spent nineteen years of service in India, Savage is able to speak four Indian languages and is aware of Indian cultures. After dyeing his skin brown in order to pass off as a native, he infiltrates the Thuggee cult with a view to exposing them. At constant jeopardy of betrayal, Savage undergoes a disturbing psychological metamorphosis into a Thug. As he travels with the Thugs he almost falls victim to the cult's ways as he comes to experience the euphoria of ritual killings. He eats the gur (consecrated brown sugar offering to goddess Kali) in spite of the warning given by Hussein (a thug, played by Saeed Jaffrey): "Because once you've eaten it, you will be hers" (Merchant & Meyer, 1988).

If one looks carefully at the relevant period literature describing the political structures of the day, they explain the role of Thuggee in the colonial perspective. David Bayley in *Police and Political Development in India* is of the opinion that a Thuggee and Dacoity Department was founded in 1830 and was directed by Sleeman from 1835 to 1839 (1969, p. 48). Bayley adds that it was later replaced by the Central Criminal Intelligence Department in 1904 (1969, p. 49). Thuggee was finally curbed and terminated for good in the mid to late 1800s. During Sleeman's initial operations many Thugs were said to have been imprisoned for life or hung. As a result, the average Indian traders and merchants were secure from the threat of Thuggee. As *The Deceivers* ends the expository title card reads: "It took twenty years to wipe out Thuggee. Rather than betray the cult, over 400 thugs put the hangman's noose around their own necks. Thuggee had claimed almost two million victims" (Merchant & Meyer, 1988). By the end of the 19th century, it was claimed that Sleeman had purged India of Thuggee. The colonial explanation was as follows: Since the Thugs were obligated to the goddess Kali, they embraced death without remorse, believing that they had displeased the goddess and that it was her will that they die. The Thugs, being bound by these superstitious/religious

beliefs, could have believed that Thuggee was thus legitimate. Thuggee may after all have served a purgative purpose in the complex ritualistic and superstitious worship of goddess Kali.

The fascination with Thuggee, on the part of the largely western audiences, does not end with films. Philip Meadows Taylor's *Confessions of a Thug* (1839) is a work of imperial writing about 19th century India. Taylor had been a Superintendent of Police in India during the 1820s. In this capacity, he discovered proof of the crimes committed by Thugs. In the course of confession to Taylor, Ameer Ali alias Feringeea, recounts his life as a devoted follower of Thuggee. This fact has also been confirmed by Thornton.[xi] Taylor's book was responsible for the word Thug being introduced into popular parlance in England. Mike Dash's *Thug: The True Story of India's Murderous Cult* (2005) is a more recently published history of Thuggee. In it, Dash has devoted two entire chapters to Feringeea and Sleeman. In his novel *The Thing About Thugs* (2014), Tabish Khair brings the protagonist Amir Ali to 19th century London. As Ali has confessed to Sleeman, the British officer, he has been brought to London to be shown off as a transformed thug. Historically, this confirms the coloniser's condescending attitude towards the colonised. Kevin Rushby in his *Children of Kali: Through India in Search of Bandits, the Thug Cult, and the British Raj* (2003) combines travel journalism and history to unravel the legends of Sleeman and the Thuggee cult. He extends the scope of his study to also include Veerappan, the brigand from the forests of south India, who was killed in a police encounter in 2004. Rushby associates the past with the present and re-considers the estate of the British Raj as colonial awareness of power and authority. The expectations of filmmakers/audience/writers/readers illustrate the workings of the popular imagination and, as such, are germane to approaches stemming from popular culture studies. There is much here that can be pedagogically exploited in the culture studies classroom.

The discourse about Thugs presents other features that many later books and films dwell on. Precious little was known about the cult even to close kin of the cult members. Anyone who betrayed loyalty to the cult was called an "approver" and was done away with mercilessly, as can be seen in *The Deceivers*. It was believed

that the Thugs were never wantonly vicious to women. The Thugs spoke a secret language that had codes meant exclusively for them. The Thugs in *The Deceivers* use a specific gesture of greeting when they meet, followed by "Ali, my brother" (Merchant & Meyer, 1988). Sleeman recorded this peculiar Thug language called Ramasee and this was published as *Ramaseeana* in 1836. Sleeman has listed out an exhaustive glossary of Ramasee. There is also additional information. For instance, that different terms for the same things have been invented by Thugs situated at a distance from each other, making the cult exclusive and impenetrable.[xii] Thuggee has no place for any European, thus confining membership exclusively to Indians. However, it is interesting to note that the Thugs transcended most social barriers. Thuggee had men from all castes, classes and communities. Thus, it was not uncommon to have Muslims in the cult of brotherhood. Owing to this diffuseness of Thuggee in the Indian society it probably would have been difficult for Sleeman to have had much early success in capturing the Thugs. However, the fact that he persisted and, against great odds, eventually accomplished the eradication of the cult earned for him the status of hero among his white compatriots. His achievement was upheld as further vindication of the colonial regime's claim that it was a great civilising force in this part of the world. This is not to say that there were no admirers amongst the Indian populace.

Recent revisionist history, drawing largely on perspectives such as critical theory, subaltern studies and postcolonial studies problematise the colonial constructs of Thugs and Thuggee. For instance, Sadhana Naithani, in her review of Martine Van Woerkens' *The Strangled Traveler: Colonial Imaginings and the Thugs of India*, observes that the work is a "re-evaluation of the Thugs post the ideas of Michel Foucault and Edward Said." [xiii] Woerkens asks pertinent questions in her book about the existence of Thugs in colonial society as "barbarian spectacles of India." [xiv] Sleeman's conversations with the Thugs are the only authoritative record of evidence on the subject since the 1930s as there is no document in the vernacular that could help to "confirm, invalidate, or balance the colonizers' accounts." [xv] Woerkens juxtaposes Taylor's *Confessions of a Thug* with that of Sleeman's recordings and comes up with an interesting question: "Were the Thugs an

invention of the colonizers?"[xvi] Some colonialist historians like George Bruce and Sir Francis Tuke believed that India housed the Thugs and that "the English accomplished a civilizing mission by exterminating them." [xvii] According to others like Stewart Gordon, Pouchepadass and Sandria B. Freitag, "Thuggism is a myth invented by the British in order to extend their control over a mobile population, or to seize criminal jurisdiction in areas that had until then been in the hands of the Moghul rulers, and so forth." [xviii] Merchant, to an extent, explores this ambivalence in his film *The Deceivers*: the Thugs appear to be well protected by the mystique that seems to surround them. They are presented as enjoying protection from both corrupt local despots and equally corrupt foreign colonial officers. At times, the Indian princes and landowners would hinder British authorities in order to safeguard them.

Parama Roy in *Indian Traffic: Identities in Question in Colonial and Postcolonial India* interrogates the discourse on Thuggee: What could happen "when Indians rather than Englishmen "go native"?" [xix] Or what happens when mimicry becomes mimesis? [xx] She adds that the Thug's conformity to everyday Indian identities might be a matter of enactment and that for a colonial state, the problem of Thuggee can only be determined through "the criminalization of the thug's capacity for impersonation and through the production and sequestration of a distinct identity designated as thug." [xxi]

The Thugs were perceived as capable of propagating anarchy and of probably challenging British rule. Mahasweta Devi confirms that many tribes in different parts of the country under the colonial regime were "officially notified as 'criminal'." [xxii] Henry Schwarz in *Constructing the Criminal Tribe in Colonial India: Acting Like a Thief* (2010) feels that some historians see the suppression campaign against Thugs as a way of "asserting symbolic authority as much as upholding the law and maintaining the peace" (2010, p. 50). By mid-1830s the Thugs were considered commendable adversaries with organizational scope to rattle British authority. As a result, they "defied the very basis of British law protecting property and taxing settled cultivators, by 1829 some members of the central government deemed their extermination as warranted"

(Schwarz, 2010, p. 50). Schwarz thus adds that in some sense Thuggee became an “allegory of empire, or, more precisely, an allegory of knowledge of conquest” (2010, p. 53).

The Thuggee rhetoric and customs were probably misconceived and thus could have posed a critical problem to British control. Schwarz cites Wagner who contests that the British were aware of Thuggee in south India since 1807, and in central India since 1809, as a source of political worry, but it was Sleeman’s copious writing that made it a moral contention and made Thuggee appear like a religious cult (2010, p. 56). This intractable historical enigma of the Thuggee problem could have something to do with the “nature of colonial knowledge” (Schwarz, 2010, p. 48). Sleeman’s construction of the narrative around Thuggee has pitted the discourse in favour of the British as imperialists while postcolonial readings of Thuggeeinfluenced by Edward Said’s works make it a site for postcolonial contestation. The debates surrounding Thuggee thereby become, as Alex Tickell contests in *Terror and the Postcolonial: A Concise Companion* (2015), a “contending knowledge system” (p. 186).

It is worth noting the fact that the word Thug has taken new connotations globally in our times. There is for instance an ‘Idiot Savant Avant Garde’ music band based in Los Angeles that calls itself Thuggee Cult. Can the Subaltern Freak? is the debut mixtape from Thuggee Cult. The group chose its name as an attempt to take back the word and return it to its pre-colonial roots. Suleimani Hodali feels that the idea of Thuggee Cult is anti-colonial: “The label itself has been appropriated. We’re trying to reclaim the word from its anti-colonial history.”[xxiii] Tupac Shakur coined the word Thug Life. It is usually mistaken for criminal. Thug Life is the opposite of someone having all he needs to succeed. Thug life is when you do not have anything but you overcome all impediments to reach your goal and yet succeed.[xxiv] Thug is a word that has been appropriated into rap music and hip-hop culture. There are also various You-tube videos called Thug Life that are very popular. They are about attitudes of defiance of the establishment.[xxv]

A genre of fiction that is today trying to break into popular literature is being referred to as Thug Lit. Wahida Clark, an

African-American author known for her popular Thug series novels began her writing career while serving time in prison. She has been hailed the “Queen of Thug Love Fiction” and has gone into publishing urban literature by launching Wahida Clark Presents Publishing.[xxvi] In the Web Series Thug Notes: A Street-Smart Guide to Classic Literature, Sparky Sweets breaks down classics in literature in a comical way.[xxvii] Thug Kitchen started their wildly popular website to inspire people to eat vegetables and adopt a healthier lifestyle. Thug Kitchen lives in the real world and does away with pretentious hype. Their first cookbook Thug Kitchen is an invitation to everyone who “wants to do better to elevate their kitchen game.”[xxviii] These are several examples of the re-appropriation of the Thuggee idiom by various entities in the domain of popular culture today.

Gender issues also find treatment in films like *The Deceivers*. While the primary focus of *The Deceivers* is Thuggee, one cannot overlook the sub-plot of Sati in it. Merchant had always been welcomed to shoot in various locations in India. Thus, he was unable to understand how he had to meet with official opposition during the filming of *The Deceivers*. He was being accused of misrepresenting Indian culture for two things – Thuggee and Sati. Merchant contends that Thuggee is an already documented part of Indian culture. He states that neither Sleeman and his exploits, nor Sati (one of the film’s sub-plots) was an invention. He also adds that *Masters’ The Deceivers* had been in circulation for some thirty years by then and had never caused any stir (Merchant, 1988, p. 43).

Sati has always been a very contentious issue in several parts of India. It was not uncommon for widows to be denied support by their husbands’ families, and they were often seen as burdensome dependents. This callous ‘pragmatism’ was disguised as an imperative of culture and custom. The act of Sati was thus seen as a woman’s greatest rectitude. Sati (also spelt suttee in colonial times) comes from the custom where a widow immolated herself on her husband’s funeral pyre and thus became deified. The woman became a goddess (Sati mata) as her honour was preserved by her ritual self-sacrifice. In the regions where the practice was prevalent, Sati, both in actuality and as potential recourse, marked women’s position in society.

Even today, in large swathes of India where traditional patriarchy prevails, the birth of a daughter is seen as much less desirable than that of a son. A daughter needs to be given a dowry at the time of her marriage thereby making her an economic liability. Married or not, those Indian women who have the misfortune to be born in such excessively patriarchal holdouts have very few rights. Anupama Roy in *Gendered Citizenship: Historical and Conceptual Explorations* (2005) believes that women struggle on multiple fronts pursuing both national emancipation and social revolution to end their “social, economic, legal and political subordination as women” (2005, p. 77). The occasional recurrence of Sati in present day India is thus a subset of deeply entrenched patriarchy in those regions where it occurs. Even when Indian law regards Sati as a criminal act, (Sati was outlawed in 1929, with credit being given mostly to William Bentinck) many Indian women are helplessly bound by tradition and are unable to change anything. Women’s economic freedom and right to property is at stake in such situations.

Sati was glorified in an infamous incident that took place in Deorala, Rajasthan in 1987 which soon became national and international news. There were horrific reports of how tradition and culture had forced a young bride Roop Kanwar to take her own life by jumping into the funeral pyre and becoming a ‘Sati’. The reaction in India to this was ambivalent. Local police failed to stop the Sati. The Indian press called the act of Sati “a pagan sacrifice” and “a barbaric incident which blackened India's image in the world.”[xxix] There were pro and anti-Sati protests in Rajasthan. In its most primordial form, Sati is but one more form of crime against women that is “outright cruelty masquerading as religion.”[xxx]

Ironically, The Merchant Ivory Productions team was assaulted and equipment destroyed during the shooting of *The Deceivers* as there were newspaper reports accusing the film of glorifying the institution of Sati. Merchant concedes that Sati was not the central part of their film, unlike the case with a film like *The Far Pavilions*, but only a sub-plot (1988, p 46). Sunaina Mishra issued a writ petition against Merchant Ivory Productions in the High Court of Jaipur with charges that the film depicted a wrong picture of

“Hindu culture, religion and mythology. The goddess of Kali, which is a symbol and goddess of power and worshipped throughout the country by millions, has been projected as “Demon God” as is evident from the extracts taken from the story . . .” (Merchant, 1988, p 48). Mishra accused the filmmakers of making a film that “depicts immoral acts, violence, vulgarity and does not (sic) show Indians (men and women) as being of good character” (Merchant, 1988, p 48). The court dismissed the petition as there was no evidence of “distorted depiction of the Hindu religion or culture” (Merchant, 1988, p 49). *The Deceivers* does not portray Sati in the orthodox sense but only as a suicide as the widow does not have the head of her dead husband on her lap. In fact, there is no corpse. Merchant Ivory Productions ensured that the Sati scene in the film was shot with subtlety. All the uproar and fuss caused by the film ended up diverting attention from the far more pertinent issue in Rajasthan at that time. Merchant felt that the government, which wanted to promote anti-Sati social work in Rajasthan, should have gone out to the villages and created awareness, telling the people not to capitulate to this “barbaric custom in the twentieth century” (1988, p. 94).

In *The Deceivers*, Gopal’s wife (played by Neena Gupta) is seen sitting on the bank of the river waiting to become Sati. Gopal has gone on a long journey for over a year and has not returned. She has dreamt the same dream thrice and hence believes that he is dead. She has dreamt of her husband in a dark place with strangulation marks on his neck. She must leave her earthly frame to go to him. When Savage tries to stop her she says that it is not his custom to deny a widow’s love. Since there is no corpse involved, the woman would have to decide if she wants to become a Sati. Savage’s wife, Sarah, is aghast and deems it a barbaric practice. Savage is aware that he has no authority to intervene and if he tries to stop it there would be a riot. The British woman here is relatively empowered as she belongs to the dominant race, while the “native” woman becomes located as a victim in the colonizer’s gaze, waiting to be saved from the cruel traditional practice as the “moral imperatives of imperialism” were to have it (Roy, 2005, p. 49). The film ends with the widow going up in flames even in the absence of her husband’s corpse. This conforms to the late 19th century “constructions of Indian womanhood and underlying complicity

with Indian men by stressing their own difference from the Western women" (Roy, 2005, p. 227).

In *The Deceivers*, Gopal's wife has no clue that her husband is a Thug as he has sworn to uphold the secrecy of the cult. The film does not take any ethical or moral stand here. While it does portray Sati as morally problematic, it hesitates to question its legitimacy as part of popular devotion. It portrays Sati as an act specifically chosen by Gopal's wife. Sleeman observes that the widows and children of Thugs were looked after by their families as it was a matter of pride to respect the widow who chose to honour the memory of her deceased husband (1839, p. 115). However, Sleeman's admiration for this element of social welfare amongst the natives does not dilute the colonial view that the practices of Sati and Thuggee are manifestations of the backwardness of Indian society in the 19th century.

The Deceivers, despite its subtleties, can thus be viewed as one more instance of the patronizing colonial discourse typified in phrases such as 'White Man's Burden,' wherein the British empire is presented as primarily engaged in bringing progress and civilization to non-western societies benighted by superstition. The film thus fails to present the complexity and diversity of 19th century social life in India. While it can't be denied that Thuggee and Sati were prevalent in some parts of the subcontinent, they were virtually unheard of across a much larger geographical area and among numerous other demographic segments. By conveying, perhaps unintentionally, the impression that all of India was plagued by these practices, films like *The Deceivers*, despite their 'art house' provenance, are not appreciably better than mainstream Hollywood productions that merrily milk stereotypes of India for commercial success at the box office.

Studies of attempts at cross-cultural representation, as instanced by films like *The Deceivers*, are, however, very valuable in the humanities classrooms in our colleges in India. They illustrate the politics of representation and can be used to probe important aspects of colonialism and imperialism. Discussion and analysis centred on them thus serve to enhance the ongoing task of decolonising the mind.

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