

Extract from Thug by Mike Dash

Prologue

The Road to Lucknadow

'Bote hona – To fall into the snares of Thugs'

The sentries on the old fort saw it first: a dark cloud something like a dust devil, spinning madly on the last ridge south of the village of Chupara. It was visible from nearly a mile away, spiralling up over the crest of the hill and bulging outwards like a rising loaf of bread. The cloud billowed and surged, swallowing the road up as it came, and it was only as it descended to the valley floor that the guards made out the cause of the disturbance.

The dust was thrown up by a group of travellers, picking their slow way along the unmade track that ran towards the fort. They were led by a middle-aged Muslim man, bearded and turbaned and riding a horse. Next came a young girl and a woman carrying a new-born baby, both mounted on ponies led by grooms. Five more servants brought up the rear, grouped around a bullock pulling a cart load of possessions.

It was an early evening in February 1823 – late in the cold season by Indian reckoning, more than three months after the end of the monsoon and only a few weeks before the onset of the next hot weather. Chupara was at its most pleasant at this time of year. The monsoon humidity had ebbed; the sun was tolerable, even in the heat of the day; and the rains had turned the country green, ripening crops in the fields, filling streams and replenishing the little man-made reservoirs, called tanks, that dotted the

whole country. It was the best time to be on the roads. Next month it would be hotter, and the temperature would continue to rise until the land was brown and burnt, nothing moved under the noon-day sun, and those who had to travel did so only after dark.

The little party had been on the move all day, and by the time the travellers passed under the walls of Chupara's fort the sun had almost set. They halted nearby, close to the river that ran through the village, and before long a small tent had been pitched and the servants were busy preparing the evening meal. The grooms led their horses down to the river bank, where they washed away the grime of the day's travel; the woman disappeared into the tent with her children; and the bearded man – her husband – settled himself down on a length of carpet that had been unrolled on the grass close by.

The man's name was Bunda Ali, and he was a *moonshee* – a teacher of languages – from the little town of Jhalna, 380 miles to the south-west. He had worked there, off and on, for about five years, while his children grew around him. Now, though, his eldest child was 10, and old enough to take the husband the *moonshee* had found for her in Hindustan. The family was going north to celebrate the wedding.

It was a considerable journey. They had already been on the road a month, and still had more than a hundred miles or more to go before they reached their destination. But this was only to be expected, for most roads in the central provinces were little more than tracks and even the highway from Jhalna to the holy city of Benares – an important route that was crowded with pilgrims for much of the year – was unpaved and rutted by bullock carts.

The Jhalna road wound first east, then north, for 700 miles. Along the way it passed through the territory of the Rajah of Nagpore. Much of the Nagpore countryside was nothing more than barren waste, unfit for human habitation, and even when the road emerged into richer country north of the city, there were still places where it narrowed to become a mere path threading its way through thick jungle that closed in on every side. This was one of the most dangerous parts of the whole journey. The jungle concealed a variety of animals – wolves, jackals, snakes, boar, and a large number of tigers – that on occasion attacked passers-by. It also offered protection to gangs of dacoits, robbers who preyed on the local peasantry and sometimes killed those who resisted them. Travellers who escaped these threats unmolested might still be robbed in the night, by thieves from local villages who crept through camps and into tents so silently that they were very hard to catch*.

Bunda Ali knew something of the risks he faced, but he had never been given to exaggerating danger. In Jhalna – where he had worked as *moonshee* for a regiment of cavalry, drilling native languages into each fresh draft of British officers – he had sometimes been called on to interrogate men picked up near the cantonment on suspicion of assault or robbery. He would put questions to the prisoners in their own language and translate their replies for his superiors, and he sometimes found the

* ‘There were most expert thieves in former days,’ the British diarist Harriet Tytler recalled in the middle of the century. ‘They were closely shaved and oiled all over, so that if caught they could slip out of your grasp like eels.’ These men were capable of stealing a woman’s clothes from her body without being detected, which they did by creeping into the tent at night and tickling their sleeping victim’s ear with a feather so that she moved from side to side while they loosened her night-dress. On one occasion, when Tytler was on the road with a Mrs Beckett, her companion ‘awoke feeling very cold, and found to her horror that she had no covering over her; not even her night garments were left.’

allegations levelled against his countrymen implausible. On one occasion, early in 1819, a group of 18 well-dressed men had been brought before him accused of strangling a bullock driver. Bunda Ali had questioned them carefully, noting that they had walked to Jhalna all the way from northern India, a matter of 300 miles, apparently in search of work. He had taken down the men's statements, checking them carefully, and – finding no discrepancies – recommended their release. 'Moonshee Bunda Ali,' one of the prisoners recalled, 'urged the improbability of so large a body of robbers coming so far to murder one poor bullock driver. This argument had weight, [and] we were let go.'

The *moonshee*, then, was not inclined to overstate the dangers of the road. But his salary, 360 rupees a year, was lavish at a time when many Indians lived on wages of 5 rupees a month or less, and since he was so obviously wealthy – few Indians travelled with a retinue – even he preferred to be cautious. His party would, he knew, make a fine target for dacoits; hidden among the baggage was more than 200 rupees' worth of jewels and cash, five years' savings, hoarded to pay for his daughter's wedding and provide her dowry.

The safest thing would be to join a larger party. Men walking the Jhalna road often banded together for mutual protection; bandits rarely attacked large groups, and new companions could help to pass the long days of drudgery. So Bunda Ali was pleased to be approached, as dusk drew in, by two men who wandered over from another camp site some way off. They belonged to a substantial party, about a hundred strong, and when they discovered that the *moonshee* was making for the Nerbudda river they announced that they were going the same way, and invited the whole family to join

them. The river was still three days' march off, and they would be glad of the company of an educated man along the way.

Any concerns that Ali had were swiftly swept away. His new acquaintances belonged to a group so large it would be safe from all attack. They were polite, indeed deferential, and seemed likely to be interesting companions. And they were evidently trustworthy. The first, a man named Dhunnee Khan, proved to be a policeman who had come to Chupara on government business. The other, Essuree, was an officer of the magistrate's court at Etawah, in Hindustan. Both men wore badges of office to emphasise their official standing.

The two parties broke camp early the next morning and left the village in company. They were heading for the little town of Lucknadow, about 20 miles further up the road. It was a full day's journey – a walk of 12 or 15 miles would have been more usual. But the road from Chupara was good, and the terrain unchallenging. The track ran almost directly north, deviating only a little so as to run around the rolling hills and ridges of the Lucknadow plateau rather than across them. The soil here was black and stony and unsuited to agriculture, but the jungles to the south had given way to a forest fringe and there were only two rivers to be forded along the way. Bunda Ali rode between Essuree and Dhunnee Khan, and found the men to be fine company. By the time the group reached Lucknadow, late in the afternoon, he would have been glad to ride with them all the way to Hindustan.

They made camp in a shaded bamboo grove on the outskirts of the village and a quarter of a mile from a small stream. A short while later, a detachment of soldiers

came up from the south and pitched their tents only a hundred yards away. They were an advance party of Native Infantry, led by British officers and sent ahead to prepare for a convoy of magazine stores that would reach Lucknadowan next day. The two camps were so close that the men in one could easily have called to those in the other, and there was nothing between them but a few bamboos and a pair of horses that Essuree had tethered there. The sound of voices drifting over from the army camp added to Bunda Ali's sense of security, and by eight o'clock, when the sun began to set, he was thoroughly content.

The *moonshee* had settled himself outside his tent as usual when he was joined by several of his new companions. Two of them had brought a sitar, and they began to wail a jangling tune. Another pair of Dhunnee's men, Bhawanee Jemadar and Sheikh Bazeed, came up, Bhawanee sitting down to Ali's right and Sheikh Bazeed to his left, by the tent. Others followed, until more than two dozen members of the police party had gathered to listen to the music. A second group of men wandered down towards the stream, where the grooms were standing with their horses, and the slight figure of Essuree could just be made out among the bamboo shadows at the edge of the grove, standing alone in the gathering darkness. It was late in the evening now, and the soldiers' camp receded slowly from view as the night drew in. The *moonshee*'s world had contracted to the little circle of family and friends gathered around his camp-fire. He could feel the flames' warmth on his face.

It was shortly after nine o'clock that Bunda Ali began to sense something was wrong. Dhunnee Khan's men could not be bandits, he was sure; dacoits were invariably direct in their attacks. But they were crowding in a little close, and he became

uncomfortably aware that his own servants were nowhere near him. He reached down for the sword he had laid at his feet, but it was gone – two of his companions had picked it up and were loudly admiring its workmanship. Seriously alarmed now, Ali stumbled to his feet, shouting for his men, and as he did, a voice called out ‘*tumbakoo lao*’ – ‘Bring tobacco’ – and there was a huge commotion over by the bamboos. Essuree had loosed the horses, and the night air was suddenly full of noise and chaos. In the next instant the *moonshee* felt Bhawanee Jemadar behind him, and something soft and twisted slipped over his head. He tried to turn, but another of Dhunnee’s men seized his hands and held them tight, while a third kicked his legs from under him and brought him crashing to the ground. A length of cloth tightened around Ali’s neck and bit into his throat as Bhawanee crouched over him, one knee pressed into his back. The jemadar’s hands were crossed behind the moonshee’s head, and now he jerked them hard apart, brutally throttling his victim. Bunda Ali’s body twitched convulsively, once, twice, and then fell still.

Down by the stream, the moonhsee’s grooms glanced up to find themselves surrounded. One went down quickly under the combined assault of three more men, but his friend, reacting swiftly, ducked under his horse’s belly and made for the water, screaming murder in a voice that could scarcely be heard above the din made by the escaping horses. Two more of Dhunnee’s men went after him, catching the man on the riverbank and strangling him there. The same scene was played out five more times around the camp as Ali’s other servants were cut down with the same detached efficiency.

The commotion brought the moonshee's wife to the flap of her tent, carrying her baby. When she saw what was happening, she made a despairing attempt to run, but Sheikh Bazeed was waiting for her and he threw his own cloth noose around her neck and pulled it tight. A second pair of hands reached out for the baby, and two more figures pushed past into the tent as the mother gasped and died. These men found Bunda Ali's other daughter, the ten-year-old bride-to-be, lying on her makeshift bed, and together they squeezed the life from her as she tried to rise. Eight men, a woman and a child had died in less time than it took to say a prayer. And the soldiers a hundred yards away, whose presence had given the moonshee comfort, had been so distracted by stampeding horses that they had noticed nothing untoward.

Quietly, in the darkness, Dhunnee's men crouched over the bodies of the fallen men, searching them for valuables. Essuree himself hunted through the moonshee's clothing, removing a few coins and a valuable watch. Then he and his comrades took the corpses, broke their joints, and used knives to slice through the sinews in their legs and arms. The mutilated remains were dragged through the long grass to two deep pits by the river, which had been dug there earlier that day. The killers forced the bodies into the makeshift graves, twisting limbs and crushing them together until they were tightly packed. As they did so, they made long, jagged incisions in the belly of each corpse so that, as it decomposed, gas would not build up inside them, bloating the cadavers and displacing earth until the grave pits were revealed.

A man named Gubbil Khan stood holding Bunda Ali's baby, scooped up from her dead mother's arms. 'She is mine,' one member of the party heard him say. 'I will take her, bring her up and marry her to my son.' But this his comrades would not

allow. 'A child from parents of such exalted rank would be recognised and lead to our discovery,' one argued. So Gubbil threw the child, alive, into the grave pit, and the black earth of the bamboo grove was shovelled over her and carefully pressed down until there was no sign of any disturbed soil. Later that night the assassins packed up Bunda Ali's tent and the rest of his possessions. When they left the grove an hour before dawn, there was no sign that the dead man and his family had ever been there.

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