No Caste Outcasts

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The British during the Raj had a penchant for taxonimizing—that is putting things in their proper classification, with their proper labels. It kept things neat and orderly. There is still evidence of the British presence throughout the region of South Asia in the form of architecture, the Indian civil service and a vague obsequiousness when a brown person encounters a white one, but also in the stringent penal system that was part and parcel of maintaining colonial control. Penal code 420 is the one for fraud or con artists (my mother uses it to describe men she thinks are a bit dodgy, as in, "he is such a 420, don't date him Sharbari). Some legacies left behind by the Raj had long lasting effects that have proven challenging and at times devastating to generations of Indians.

But what does one do when a people defy category? During the Raj the British in a frenzy of taxonomy, named 198 tribes as "criminals". The nomadic Chhara tribe was one of them. Filmmakers Shashwati Talukdar and Kerim Friedman's compelling narrative documentary "Please Don't Beat Me Sir" is their story.

The Chhara are a marginalized people—institutionally so. Many illegally brew liquor in their homes and sell it to support themselves, thus, their lives are inextricably linked with the local police, meaning besides being shaken down and harassed and watched, they also must hand over a share of their profits to the local constables. This could easily be America, circa 1920, during the time of Prohibition.

After 1947 the newly independent Indian government did not overturn all laws passed by the British, but merely adjusted them, and have demoted the Chhara's "criminal tribe" status to "habitual offenders". This does not materially alter the way they are viewed by mainstream society or the law. Some Chhara have responded by forming The Budhan Theatre, and performing protest theatre on the street—to anyone willing to listen—skits that show what their lives in the shadows are like. They powerfully act out scenes of police corruption. They allude to rape, re-enact brutal police beatings, and illustrate how a constable can murder an unarmed Chhara in cold blood and pass it off as "a police encounter". In performing these plays, the group is recounting their history and their present. These Chhara argue that they are not criminals but artists-performers at heart.



Ultimately, the Chhara are a versatile people, and adapt to their environment, pragmatically adjusting to the multi-nefarious web of police and government corruption in any given place. Often they become an integral part of it.

The Budhan Theater group refuses to be silent—even though they risk a great deal to be this vocal. The notion that an antique law from nearly two centuries ago could condemn an entire group of people to a fate and a reputation that cannot be altered is chilling.

Are there habitual offenders among the Chhara? Absolutely. Moreover, it does stem from the culture they and their government have wrought. One character, Jagdish Bhai explains calmly that he used to be a thief and so paid bribes