to the cops willingly. What he was doing was dishonest in itself, therefore bribery seemed natural. He has since stopped thieving and now runs a legitimate business and does not understand why he has to continue paying bribes. He explains that the police recommended that he go back to thieving so he can pay LARGER bribes. They are not being ironic.

The filmmakers do try to give a balanced perspective and arrange an interview with the local police, but, according to them, the police never show up. In a surprising twist, the theater group performs at a police academy. In yet another scene the group meets and discusses dealing with Chhara thievery head on. It is not that they are in denial of their past or tradition of petty crime; it is that they want to share a different perspective. The bigger picture if you will.



Shashwati Talukdar



Kerim Friedman

What was so striking is that the elders of the Chhara, who have only known this sort of shadow existence, have utterly internalized the notion that they are nothing but born thieves. If there is a problem they entreat the younger member to go bootleg or steal. As one elder states, "All four grandsons are useless. None of them steal."

My favourite part, which is both funny and sad, is when the elders sit around reminiscing about the days when they "could run [from the cops] so fast only a car could catch them." Or the women remembering leaping from trees and running, holding bottles of bootleg liquor. It is hard to imagine these women, now so wizened, being nubile, but the defiant spark in them, the knowledge that they could outsmart or outrun the law, is still very much apparent. "Those were the days," one of them sighs. It is sobering to be sure to think that whatever almost an entire people were told they were, they eventually became.

After I watched this I started thinking about the damaging influence of being inculcated to have only limiting beliefs about oneself. There are tentacles to indoctrination, so insidious and far reaching, it spans decades and generations and paralyzes entire groups of people. The breadth and depth of the damage caused these people is staggering if one stops to ponder it.

Starting in 1871, the Chhara were herded into settlements, interment camps, where life was brutal and they were at the mercy of the whims of the police and British authorities. In 1947, amidst the chaotic days following Indian independence, they were forgotten, until 1952, when then Prime Minister Nehru granted them their freedom. Years of living in settlements and on the margins of mainstream society left them wholly unprepared for assimilation. In a country that is structured by its ancient caste system, the Chhara belong to no Hindu caste, though they are descended—according to legend, from Rajput warriors. As one of the Chhara points out, no one in mainstream society will give them jobs. Also it is plain there is most likely very little positive, social interaction with others outside the tribe and politically they are not represented in a meaningful way.

The brutality and corruption of the police, both under the Raj and now, are a constant refrain throughout the film.

Interestingly, in the US presently, it is legal in certain states for police to randomly search and seize people's properties or frisk them without probable cause. I hear, more and more, how the cops in the US are not to be trusted, that they are tazor happy and brutal and that the US is rapidly becoming a police state. I see the parallels of what happened to the Chhara and what has historically happened to the African American and Native American populations in the US—the latter being the ones who are still being "held" if you will in settlements.

Until I saw "Please Don't Beat Me, Sir", I would not have known about the Chhara. Indeed, I doubt most of India knows about them. I am grateful to filmmakers such as Talukdar and Friedman for bringing their story to light. It is not all doom and gloom as the Budhan Theatre Group highlighted here, are working to end this cycle of marginalization and doing it the best way they know how, education through creative expression. There is hope, as ever.

**Please Don't Beat Me, Sir (Four Nine and Half Pictures, 2011) directed by Kerim Friedman and produced by Shashwati Talukdar

It can be purchased and downloaded for viewing on Vimeo.