



Film and Video

Lene Pederson, editor

Please Don't Beat Me, Sir! by Shashwati Talukdar and P. Kerim Friedman. (2011, Four Nine and a Half Pictures, 75 min., only available on DVD from info@fournineandahalf.com)

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Please Don't Beat Me, Sir! by Shashwati Talukdar and P. Kerim Friedman (2011, Four Nine and a Half Pictures, 75 min.) is a documentary film about the Budhan Theater group in Chharanagar, Ahmedabad, western India, home of the Chhara people, one of 198 non-caste groups designated by the British colonial regime as "criminal tribes." After Indian independence, the groups were "denotified" by the national government, but many state governments adopted the colonial policy and officially declared the groups "habitual offenders." The Budhan Theater group asserts that the Chhara people are "born actors," not born criminals. The group performs plays that sensitize the police and other officials about the plight of the formerly nomadic Chhara people, who only turned to thievery, "brewing," and other unofficial ways of making a living after they were forced into settlement camps by the British colonial regime and left to fend for themselves following Indian independence. Their reputation as "obedient criminals" makes them an easy target for corrupt state officials, and the constant demand for bribes insures that the criminal activity continues. The aim of the Budhan Theater group is to break this vicious cycle. The group's plays, performed both within and beyond the Chhara community, raise awareness and present alternatives by dramatizing police brutality and corruption, ethnic and gender discrimination, and acts of resistance and empowerment. Participation in the group has enabled many of the players themselves to escape the vicious cycle, but through the Budhan Theater they continue to work on behalf of the Chhara community. The film is a result of their col-

laboration with Talukdar, an independent documentary filmmaker and video artist, and Friedman, an assistant professor of anthropology at National Dong Hwa University in Taiwan and co-founder of the blog Savage Minds. Among other prizes, *Please Don't Beat Me, Sir!* won the Jean Rouch Award for collaborative filmmaking from the Society for Visual Anthropology.

The film blurs the line between theatrical performance and everyday life—an everyday life in which the fiction of the Chhara people's ethnic and cultural inferiority is reinforced by state and market institutions. It opens with a play, performed in a public space. The play is followed by a rehearsal, and the rehearsal is followed by the players explaining to the filmmakers the meaning of the play and the historical context of the Budhan Theater and the Chhara people. This pattern continues throughout the film, blurring the line between theater and everyday life without ever completely erasing it. The filmmakers are helped greatly by the knowledge and skill of the players, who serve as something like "key informants" in their role as "insiders" translating for "outsiders." The de facto leader of the group, Roxy, seems at times like an on-camera host, raising and then clarifying important issues. He tells the story of his activist father, who was beaten to death in jail, and takes the filmmakers to his father's grave. He organizes a performance at a police training academy, which concludes with the cadets taking an oath not to assume the Chhara people are criminals and the theater group smiling as they are playfully (and not without irony) taken away in a police wagon. He leads a group discussion of the ethics of creating a play that could expose the activities of thieves—and of making a documentary film about it. But it is another player's wise and straight-talking grandmother who steals the show. She represents the way of life that Roxy and the Budhan Theater are trying to overcome. At one point, she encourages them to "steal or brew" instead of act, but when the filmmakers take her back to the settlement camp to which she and the rest of the Chhara people were confined, she is overcome with a sadness that leaves her silent.

Like Chharanagar, the film is crowded with people and events. There are many other players who deserve mention, like Dakxin, whose imprisonment initiated the project,

and Kalpana, who now has a successful film and television acting career, but it is clear that the filmmakers decided to highlight the Chhara people rather than the success stories of the individuals in the Budhan Theater group. As the filmmakers state (in the press kit), rough cuts were screened in Chharanagar, and community members' comments were incorporated into the film. The last third of the film is dedicated to the theater group's activities beyond the performance of plays, centering on a community library that provides, among other things, an alternative to a pro-Hindu/anti-Muslim youth movement and a way to recruit the next generation of Budhan Theater players. At this point the film begins to slip into a cheerleader role. However, this is very much in keeping with the spirit of the theater group, which, while confronting a history of oppression and violence in its plays, always does so with a steadfast optimism and a determination to change what seems like an intransigent situation. Perhaps the best example of the difficult task they have set for themselves comes near the end of the film when a play inspires a group of teenage girls to continue their education, but they are drawn inexorably into marriage and motherhood as well. In general, the film reveals Chhara life in all of its complexity without simplifying it or being overwhelmed by it.

Please Don't Beat Me, Sir! would be suitable for a range of courses, from introductory to advanced. Although it focuses on a theater group in contemporary urban India, the film should not be limited to a course or unit on India. It offers a personal and emotional case study of colonialism and its legacies in a postcolonial nation-state. It shows institutionalized ethnic and gender discrimination and indigenous, community-based activism. It reveals the power of performance to transform life beyond the theater, and it demonstrates, like the cinema of Jean Rouch, that the most effective ethnographic films are truly collaborative. With a running time of 75 minutes, it could be shown in a single class period, but it is the kind of film that easily elicits discussion, and time should be left for it. □