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## *Paradhis of India – A Tribe of Hereditary Criminals*

Nabanita Dutt

33-year-old Mayla Kale was laying out a simple dinner of leavened bread and lentil soup for her kids when the police kicked in the door to her slum accommodation near a local Bombay station. Lakhi, her contract labourer husband, was lying on a string cot in a drunken stupor, having just consumed his daily quota of arrack. The empty booze bottle rolling about on the floor broke to bits under the boots of four tough-looking constables, as they rushed inside the smoke-filled hut and dragged a semi-conscious Lakhi into a van waiting outside. The policemen piled in after him and the vehicle sped off into the night.

The entire operation took no more than five minutes. No explanations were offered for the rude interruption, and none were necessary. A robbery and murder had taken place in the city last week, and the modus operandi had clearly identified the crime as a Paradhi tribe job. Tension, consequently, had been palpable in this slum neighbourhood of Paradhi tribal people for the last few days. Even the children playing ball among the railway tracks were aware that a police van would inevitably come and some of their fathers would go to jail.

The fact that the police had conclusive evidence against Paradhis this time, meant that none were picked up on grounds of suspicion and less women missed their husbands that night.

The Paradhis heaved a collective sigh of relief after the van had disappeared from view, and life in the area slipped gradually back to normal. Mayla Kale cleared up the debris from the encounter and put her children to bed. She would visit the police station next morning and ask after her husband. Nothing of course, would come of it. Mayla also knew this, but didn't seem overly perturbed by her circumstances.

It is the lot of the Paradhi women to fend for themselves and find food to feed the family after their husbands have gone into legal custody. For this 'criminal tribe' of western India, existence is a vicious circle of crime and punishment.

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Can an entire community be declared "lazy and shiftless" and blacklisted as people with "criminal antecedents" and a "criminal bent of mind"? Does science offer any theory that throws some light on the assumption that every child born into such a community has murderous proclivities and is

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predisposed towards crime?

More than a hundred years ago, the British rulers of India certainly thought so. In 1871, a Criminal Tribes Act was passed whereby 150-odd Indian tribes were declared criminal. The Chantichor tribe, for example, was pronounced "feckless and unstable". The Harni tribe had a "gift for hambugging the world". The Ramoshi tribe was a bunch of "petty thieves, redeemed only by their readiness to produce ladies of flimsiest virtue at the shortest notice". And the Paradhis were "raiders and pathological killers".

T.V. Stephens, a British official said in defense of the Act: "People from time immemorial have been pursuing defined job positions. Weaving, carpentry and such were hereditary jobs. So there must be hereditary criminals also, who pursue their forefather's profession."

In accordance to the homegrown science of 'curocriminology', the criminals were identified and segregated. The job at hand then, was to cure them of this propensity. The British government set up reformatory settlements towards this end, where the tribesmen were shackled, caned and flogged and made to work in plantations, mills and quarries for 20 hours a day.

After India gained Independence, the Criminal Tribes Act was declared odious and repealed in the natural course of things. The 150 tribes labeled 'criminals' were 'denotified'. The majority of them amalgamated with mainstream society and lost their 'criminal' tag somewhere among the pages of history.

For a small number, however, the image persevered, sharpening in focus and fleshing out with passage of time under layers of fact and fiction, until today, when they top the Most Wanted lists posted in every police station and their very mention send law-abiding Indians into paroxysms of terror. And leading this motley band of dangerous outlaws is the infamous Paradhi criminal tribe of western India.

Villagers who have observed them at close quarters swear that the Black Powers are on their side. Law enforcers in Paradhi-prone areas attest to a blood thirst that's almost religion, a compulsion to murder if only for the mean pleasure of relieving poor country folk of their pocket of loose change.

Stealth is key to a Paradhi existence, and for centuries, the tribe has sustained their violent lifestyle of loot and murder on the strength of it. Nobody knows when a floating population of Paradhis enters city limits in the guise of contract labourers and nobody's aware of their departure either, as they melt silently back into the countryside, leaving a string of deaths and robbery in their wake.

They grow no roots that are difficult to pull up -- no houses, no bank accounts, no dealings at all, in fact, with the outside world -- and they're forever on the move. Thus, with no documents to support their identity, there is no paper trail to fall back on, and they often have no real names either, which makes the job of tracking them that much more difficult.

Police files show up names like Rifleya, Pistol-ya, Police-ya ('ya' is a common suffix to nicknames in the area), even Europeanya and British-ya. Obviously, their stock-in-trade is paramount in interpersonal relationships as well, and the police and firearm-related nomenclatures reveal the extent of anonymity the tribe consciously cultivates.

A frustrating lack of information and a history of ugly skirmishes have left its mark on the police force as well. "They are extremely cruel and hardcore criminals, stoic even in the face of third-degree treatment," said a police officer stationed in Pune city. "It's impossible to break them into revealing anything, even under extreme torture." The cop cited an incident in the Solapur district where a Paradhi gang killed Constable Bharat Thakre and drank his blood, as a case in point. "Their ability to simply vanish from a scene of crime is awe-inspiring and almost supernatural, lending credence to the locally-held belief that they have chameleon powers through black magic." Any clue or information— a photograph, a name, vague directions as to their whereabouts— as a result, is carefully filed away in the hope that the lead may prove useful some day during investigations of a future Paradhi strike.

What little is known about the tribe and their modus operandi has been gleaned from the testimony of villagers who claim to have encountered Paradhis, and policemen, all of which may or may not be accurate.

Bronze-skinned and light eyed with classic bone structure Paradhi men and women are said to have a striking gypsy appearance. A curiously light-footed gait gives the impression of a group gliding in unison when watched from a distance. Loud, abnormally shrill voices herald their approach wherever they go and the hum of acrimony and bad blood, say some, surround the tribe like a miasma as they are forever quarreling amongst each other.

At an age when children are still learning alphabets Paradhi boys are mastering the nitty gritty of their criminal trade. Training under the guidance of elders, Paradhi kids heighten their animal instincts until they can catch the slightest movement in the periphery of their vision and literally sniff out danger in the air. Relentless contour exercising render their bodies as supple as ropes, so they can twist themselves through the smallest window and climb up the twiggiest tree. Incorporating animal and natural sounds like a dog's bark, a cow's moo, automobiles backfiring and the crunch of tyres on gravel, they learn a unique working language fashioned to soothe sleeping targets back into deep slumber and communicate with one another during a heist.

The Paradhis almost never use firearms. The passage of time has not seen any modern additions to their arsenal, and they still use heavy stones and iron rods to bludgeon unsuspecting victims to death. Gofang – a bag containing small pebbles tied to a string– is another handy contraption in their expert hands, releasing the little pellets at a speed faster than bullets with 100 per cent accuracy. (There's no way an eyewitness can determine which direction the pellets had come from, and such an attack is impossible to prove in court.)

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Moving in troupes of ten to 25 people, they scour the countryside for small profits, waylaying lone cyclists, raiding granaries and stealing cattle. When no major heists are being planned in the cities or the Paradhis are hiding from the police, they have some typical con games going to make petty money on the side. Dileep D'Souza, a writer who has lived and worked with the tribe for many years, mentions the "biscuit sting" as a particular favourite.

Paradhi members slip into crowded buses and trains, and find a place next to a prosperous-looking passenger. Chewing on arrowroot biscuits, they spit out quite convincing turd-like shapes which land near the feet of the passenger. To the embarrassed amazement of the hapless victim, they then raise an enormous fuss, claiming that he is messing up the compartment. The confusion that follows affords ample opportunity for the Paradhis to make off with the victim's purse and other small belongings and clear out of the place in a grand display of outrage. The gag sounds terribly silly in an urban context, but the Paradhis apparently get very lucrative results from it in the rural areas. Their funny bone is also tickled to the extent that a segment of them call themselves Biscuit.

Had the Paradhis restricted their operations among such simple village folks, they may well have escaped the media glare that is focused on their activities from time to time. The search for the big booty, however, attracted the criminals to the cities, and frequent incidents of larceny and brutal murders brought the city's legal machinery down heavily on them. The take-no-prisoners position from which the police dealt with the tribesmen led to random raids whereby innocent people were picked up and tortured on mere grounds of suspicion.

Social activists fighting their corner find the general populace quite unresponsive to the Paradhis' plight. Their criminal reputation is so firmly rooted, that even the media rarely report a wrongful custody death when the victim involved is known to be a Paradhi.

"The manner in which an entire nation is ready to write off a section of its population as murderers is a shocking phenomenon of 21st century India," said Mona Sen, who has recently joined the battle against this blind bias. "Over 4,000 cases are filed against Paradhi criminals in Bombay city alone every year, but how many are proved? My suspicion is that a fraction of that number. But that does not stop the police from harassing Paradhi migrant labourers coming into the city in search of honest work and rounding them up every time there's a murder in the neighbourhood."

Like rabid dogs, they can be hunted down with impunity by ordinary people whenever such an opportunity presents itself, and the police, claim social activists, obligingly look the other way. The atrocities committed against Limbu Bhosle, a Paradhi tribal, is a startling example of eye-for-an-eye retribution that his family had to pay for the crimes alleged against the whole Paradhi community.

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Limbu had stolen two pomegranates for his pregnant wife from the orchard of a local landlord— an incident of petty thievery that cost him his life. The landlord let loose a crazed mob which surrounded Limbu and smashed his head — Paradhi-style— with a large stone. "Limbu's brains fell out. They crushed his head the way we crush onions to eat," said his wife after the incident. The next attack against the family involved potatoes. Limbu's nephew was accused of stealing potatoes from a farmer's field and his thumb was sliced off with a sword. The little boy's parents and sister were wounded by the vicious attackers, for good measure, and four adjoining Paradhi houses were burnt down as well. The local police station refused to register a case against the landlord and his men for 10 days.

Two sides of the same coin— each weighing heavily down on the other. A people who has historically proved their affinity towards crime, from one perspective, and still to mend their wicked ways."A blatant case of giving a dog a bad name and hanging him," as Mona Sen puts it, from the other. A dog, albeit, who has occasionally raided the chicken coup and dug up the neighbour's backyard. No more than what your own dog has done sometimes, and no less than what he too is capable of.