



Decoding Crime and Punishment in Colonial India: Analysing *Surjatamashi*, *Nibarsaptak*, and *Thugee* or *Thug*

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Received: 11 Dec 2022; Received in revised form: 07 Jan 2023; Accepted: 14 Jan 2023; Available online: 21 Jan 2023

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Crime has been an intrinsic part of human society since its inception and has eventually shaped itself as a social phenomenon. Crime follows punishment even though not in all cases but both are considered to be intertwined with one another closely and the latter happens as a consequence of the former. Crime is a behaviour that is not socially acceptable and despite the viciousness associated with it, crime is a transgression of the social rules as to how humans need to conduct themselves. The advent of the British as a colonial power introduced India to western thoughts, ideals, and scientific and technological advancements. The dwellers of the Western world came with not solely what was desirable but also that which a healthy human society does not find worth welcoming. Criminal propensities of the human disposition in the Western world were perpetuated into Indian society with their arrival.

Kaushik Majumdar's *Surjatamashi* offers a brilliant portrait of how the experiments of the Western world which have a penchant for crimes can find themselves gradually mushrooming in the colony. In the first book of the intended trilogy, Majumdar introduces us to the Western and particularly the British experiments on the possible treatments to cure insanity. Insanity has been a convoluted concept and the question that "How do you define madness?" has haunted humankind forever. Insanity like crimes is itself a contravention, infringing the social norms of human behaviour, and thus the British who had always been so perturbed to make people from even other nations bend to their will, endeavour to 'correct' the madmen who challenge the rules that British society ascribed to its dwellers. This experimental treatment, extends itself to the British colony of India however, the disparity strongly exists as we get to know that in Calcutta, the European

madmen and the Indian madmen are kept in separate custodies where the Europeans are kept in much more lavish conditions as compared to the colonized Indians. The British doctors consider Blood Transfusion as a plausible cure for insanity and thus the Indians who are mad and under their custody, become the objects of experimenting with this treatment which Queen Victoria's government has banned upon. This is unequivocally a crime in itself conducted by the direct subjects of the Queen but the colonized become the victims and lose their lives.

Majumdar, in both *Surjatamashi* and its sequel *Nibarsaptak*, chronicles an idiosyncratic phenomenon that was neither very common nor very acceptable in the colonial times- the British and the Indians cooperating in executing crimes as well as in its investigation thereby abrogating the superficial superior-inferior dichotomy of the West and the East, instances of which are also exemplified in this detective series. According to Edward Said's Postcolonial Theory, the Western world has considered the East as the 'other', the inferior. The East has been the mythical unknown, the home to savage and barbaric beings and the West has believed it to be their obligation to disseminate the light of civilization and make them 'proper' humans. Thus, the dichotomy has always existed and was profoundly witnessed in the colonial era in India. *Surjatamashi* and *Nibarsaptak* however, even though could not completely free themselves from this binary yet strive to infringe it and are triumphant in their portrayal of characters collaborating in executing barbaric crimes and concomitantly in investigating those.

One of the most alluring aspects of this detective series is its ability to bring together two immortal characters of literature- Priyonath Mukhopadhyay and Sherlock

Holmes- both separated by their identities and their positions in the colonial period as a colonized and a colonizer respectively. What we have to understand is that Priyonath operates under the police force in British Calcutta, answerable to the colonial government. Holmes on the other hand is himself British and despite arriving in India according to Majumdar's novels, doesn't much change his attitude towards authorities which is one of perhaps reluctance. Such a comportment which is not very arduous for Holmes to maintain even in a foreign country by virtue of his race and identity as a British is a preposterous idea to Priyonath. Holmes despite operating under the governmental authority can be a free bird, and make the authorities grant his wishes whereas, Priyonath has to do what his authorities ask him. Holmes's position as a British private detective working temporarily for the English government is highly incongruous with Priyonath's doubly-marginalized position- as a servant to the British government and as an Indian, a subject to the British government. Thus, power relations are expected to unfurl and operate however, Majumdar brilliantly nullifies such a conception. Firstly, we know Holmes as an impeccable detective according to the works of Arthur Conan Doyle- he misses nothing and he knows everything. Perspectives are really important when we write something or put forward an argument. For example, Feminists have argued that history has been documented by males with a male perspective and thus has conveniently ostracized women from being an integral part of it with them being silenced and lost and even if they appear, they appear as good or bad women according to patriarchal conventions. The colonized perspective we must understand is colossally important here. Perhaps knowingly or unknowingly, Majumdar has rescinded the notion of portraying Holmes as unassailable. Instead, Holmes here is more vulnerable and depended on his companions much more than he has ever been on Watson. The fundamental step that Majumdar has followed in doing this is modifying Holmes's identity by changing his name- he is no longer the impeccable and inviolable Sherlock Holmes of England but instead Sigerson Mohles, a British in India under the protection of the government of Britain. Majumdar, by making Sigerson unceasingly dependent on Priyonath and Tarinicharan, a private detective in Colonial Calcutta who crosses paths with these two perhaps desires to portray that regardless of the British insistence on their superior wit and knowledge, the reality is that the Indians are not less intelligent and perspicacious as detectives. Tarini resolves convolutions on his own and Sigerson time and again harps on the idea that without these two, he would have been able to do nothing and he cherishes Tarini by applauding his astuteness and sharp discernment ability. Sigerson never leaves them behind and they

chaperon him even inside those boundaries, crossing which were not permissible for the Indians in the colonial period and even takes them back with him when he returns to India to resolve the intricacies which conclusively proves that their hitherto investigation was partly successful. Majumdar who is an Indian and shares a colonial history perhaps has been keen to uphold the potentials of his countrymen as equal to those of the English that had been so vehemently dismissed by the British.

The crimes that are chronicled in *Surjatamashi* are best defined as barbaric, barbarity as the West has always believed an aspect of the Eastern disposition. The crimes are brutal and so is the history about where it came from. The British belief in the viciousness and savagery of the East perhaps enabled them to find a way to camouflage their criminal activities- murdering the victims in such a way that ostensibly it appears to be the activity of the Chinese whereby the Chinese symbols associated with destruction and death are carved on the body of the murdered. Since the Chinese are from the East, therefore, in the eyes of the West, such viciousness is not very outlandish to their demeanour and activities. It thereby becomes highly significant when we observe how the Westerners inculcate the Easterners for a crime owing to the prejudice nurtured by them and because they enjoy a position of power and implement a distinguishing way of giving a shape to the murdered body of Paul Keith Lansdown as was done by the Chinese community of murderers, that becomes convincing because the West has always attempted to institute that barbarity is singular to Eastern character.

The differences amalgamate not in matters of investigation but in committing the crimes as well. The criminals as they appear through the course of both books, harmonize together thereby circumscribing the differences and collaborating to ensure their success. With our advancement in the second book, we encounter more of this diversity in terms of blacks, Anglo-Indians, and even sex workers and eunuchs organizing themselves under a single shelter and executing their ascribed responsibilities. Blacks and Anglo-Indians were both exploited by the White English and instances of those are very vividly portrayed by Majumdar- for example, the belligerent treatment of the Anglo-Indian students and particularly the black Lakshman's treatment in school by the 'pure' white English students and teachers alike. What is even more remarkable in Majumdar's narrative is that his criminals are not singular in their expression of their aversion against the authority instead, they come to represent the larger exploited group to which they belong and thus, their actions are criminalistic but concurrently and perhaps ironically struggling and heroic as well. The East-phobia of the West, the derision of the Indians by the British sharply contradicts the

inclusiveness of the Free Mason Society which as Majumdar portrays, does not discriminate based on anything despite being a European organization and regardless of the criminal propensity that a group of members of it have, the comradeship that it upholds is exemplary.

Majumdar has evaded the larger intricacies of the freedom movements in India in that contemporary time and this association of the white and the black, the east and the west, the British and the Indians and the Anglo Indians in the dimension of crime and its investigation do not get stymied by colonial pride or colonized nationalistic sentiments. We are yet to reach to conclusion in the final book of the series that is yet to be published but the strong hints at the involvement of even the British officials in a sinister manoeuvre against the British government headed by Queen Victoria and Priyonath and Tarini's tireless efforts to render it unsuccessful in complaisance with the government somehow invert the roles that were expected from the British and Indians at that time- the latter battling against British supremacy and the former battling to strengthen the power of the English Crown. Priyonath as a character also is a representative of those Indians who were most loyal to British rule despite the nationalistic movements led by his fellow countrymen against the authority he was so faithfully serving. Even Banerjee also argues concerning one of Priyonath's other cases regarding someone named Shyamacharan that "While Priyanath's allegiance to his British employers prevailed over his indigenous caste affinity to Shyamacharan... (2050)". Despite evading the complexities of the nationalistic fervour and British pride, Majumdar does offer subtle subversions- first by making Holmes who has appeared undaunted to be dependent on two natives when in the eyes of the British society, Holmes is more than enough alone and the natives cannot even comprehend what he can let alone assisting him in investigation and secondly by portraying the British, the self-proclaimed reformers of the Barbaric Eastern dwellers, the harbinger of civilization as capable of committing barbaric crimes which don't commensurate with the British portrayal of their selves as a civilized race thereby emphasizing that barbarity has no relations with East or West or British or Indian. Instead, it is an attribute of the human disposition and can surface in any human's behaviour.

What is also important is the brilliant way in which Majumdar weaves a criminal plot in Victorian Colonial Calcutta with crimes in contemporary Calcutta which is like a continuation after a period of quiescence. The turmoil, the murders, and the crimes altogether are strongly reminiscent and an extension of the predecessors where knowledge of the past becomes invincible in solving the present

intricacies both for the criminals and the investigators. The association is even strengthened by the fact that Turbosu, the private investigator in modern Kolkata in independent India is a descendant of the private investigator Tarinicharan Ray who chaperoned Sigerson Mohles and Priyonath Mukhopadhyay in investigating the first part of the crimes and Inspector Amitabha Mukherjee is a descendant of Priyonath Mukhopadhyay. Mukherjee is a derivation from Mukhopadhyay and this difference between the two as used by both these characters perhaps accentuates their differences- Priyonath resided in Calcutta in Colonial India working for the British Government and Amitabha resides in Kolkata in independent India working for the Indian Government. The similarities between the ancestors and the successors in terms of the professions and the criminal intricacies of which they become part strongly suggest an idea- the independence of India never meant complete freedom from the British culture which is so deeply embedded in the Indian system that we cannot ever declare ourselves to be 'liberated' from the British in terms of ideology, beliefs, and practices. The influence of British culture has been so profound that even today speaking in English becomes a mark of one's elitism and unuttered superiority. Indians perhaps could never abandon the notion that the British had endeavoured to inculcate throughout their regime- the superiority of their culture, language, and beliefs over everything that can be categorized as 'Indian'. Thus, the continuity perhaps exemplifies the subjectivity of the Indians to the British still in terms of ideology and beliefs.

Whereas, Majumdar has focused more on the cooperation of the two races, Sripantha in his *Thugee* or *Thug*, has vividly portrayed the differences whereby the Thugs as an indigenous force in India, practically expose the helplessness of the British lion to punish them even if they get a hold of them. The thugs were a group with their language, beliefs, rituals, and practices- distinct from other diverse groups in India. The inability of the British to comprehend the ideology and practices of the Thugs or their ways and beliefs made them almost a supernatural force who arrives, do what they want, and vanish in thin air. They are like surreptitious beings who are ostensibly ordinary but camouflage cold-blooded murderers within. The Thugs were a force of India, a symbol of resistance against British rule, however, unlike those forces who resisted the British regime as freedom strugglers. According to Shankar, "A commonly used word, thug means...a 'cutthroat, ruffian, rough.' It is a word with common associations of criminality, violence, and loutishness...The discourse on Thugs, like the discourse on sati with which its origins are roughly contemporaneous, played a key role in defining the shape of British power in colonial India" (98). It can be

emphatically stated that both Sati and the Thugs were two eldritch aspects of colonized India in the eyes of the British and it was their duty to offer a correction that would eventually ensure the British proclamation as a race with superior, civilized understanding. The notion of 'civilization' is perplexing and varies with geographies and cultures yet the British insistence on their superiority veiled such a notion. Today, it is true that both Sati and the activities of the Thugs appear to us to be barbaric crimes inflicted upon women and innocent people but to the British perhaps, they were projects which they had to complete firstly because these were incongruous to what they have known in England and hence uncivilized and secondly, that would establish their supremacy as a colonial power.

According to Wagner, "It is often claimed that the British coined the term 'thug', which is derived from the Hindi verb 'thag' meaning to cheat, trick or deceive. This makes the literal translation of 'thug' a cheat, deceiver, con man or pickpocket, and the argument is that the British use of the word is altogether incompatible with its indigenous connotations" (943). However, a number of sources from pre-colonial India refers to 'thags' in the sense of common cheats as well as more violent robbers. In Kabir's and Surdas's late Medieval devotional poetry, 'thag' was used to demonstrate "the allegorical deceit and robbery of mankind by God" (Wagner 943). Therefore, the identity of the 'thugs' that has come down to us ever since the colonial period had been perhaps a colonial fabrication and this identity is not just a name but a reference to their ways and functions. Edward Said in his *Orientalism* has argued that the 'Orient' was created or what he calls 'Orientalized', was a "hegemonic process that robbed it of its true identity, voice, and indigenous culture. This imagined reality was substituted with pictures, perceptions, and perspectives derived from what I like to call the 'Western gaze' or a hegemonic Eurocentric perspective" (Burney 26). The humongous source of information about the thugs that we get are from the writings of William Henry Sleeman, the ultimate champion of suppressing the Thugs in India and all his eulogies regarding India and its greatness as Sripantha narrates in *Thug* that according to Sleeman, "There is no reason to look at India as a nation of murderers...In terms of developed agriculture system, industrial organisation or technical potential or educational developmental system...India is no less than Europe", etc.(97) may sound very egalitarian but his identity as a colonizer and his duty towards the British government make him sound like a sophomoric endeavouring to establish British magnanimity to even appreciate its colony. We have already discussed how perspective becomes excessively important in terms of what we say or write and since most of our information regarding the thugs and their ways and capture rest on

Sleeman's accounts, the accounts of a foreigner who happened to be a Western colonial master of the Indian people writing about a community of the colonized country, the information perhaps seems irresolute- how far what Sleeman documented is true, how far was he as successful as he claims in his records are the questions that can arise. The Western gaze thus is there when the community in question is Eastern and the inferior 'Other' in accordance with this gaze. Gayatri Spivak in her essay "The Politics of Translation" has argued that the experiences of a woman in India are thoroughly incongruous with that of a Western woman and when it comes to translating an Eastern woman's work from her native language it is important for Western feminists to look at her not through a Western lens but through a perspective that befits the woman's experiences which are distinct and has to be estimated accordingly. She has to be understood as she is and not by considering that just because she is a woman the feminist notions that are appropriate for a Western woman will be so for her. Similarly, here Sleeman's accounts are by a Western man with a Western gaze and thus questionable. Sleeman has defined the identity of the thugs as the colonial masters have always attempted to define India's identity in a way that complied with their desires and notions thereby repealing the differences that makeup India. The colonial definition of the thugs as we have discussed revokes the other connotations that have been there but again neglected by the colonial masters like they have neglected so many indigenous traits of this country and attempted to reshape them or suppress or sabotage them because they did not conform to their notions and a principal instance of this being the categorization of the unmarried and highly skilled female artists and the Devadasis as sex workers because they defied the Victorian notion of the Ideal woman, the Angel of the house. The British, therefore, redefined even the identity of the criminals in their colony however, their definition of the thug somehow conform to their deceptive disposition as traders turned masters of India. Mimicry in colonial and post-colonial literature can be observed when the citizens of a colonized country or society imitate the language, dress, politics, or cultural attitude of the colonizers and it is seen as an opportunistic pattern of behaviour where one imitates those in power since one aspires to obtain that power oneself. However, while imitating or copying, it is unequivocal that it will lead to the suppression of that person's cultural identity, and mimicry is frequently acknowledged as 'shameful'. The thugs were indeed performing a mimicry, impersonating their colonial masters when they implemented deception to inveigle people and then ruthlessly looted and finally murdered them. The British who came as traders too cajoled the Indians and over two hundred years plundered the country

and left behind the painful and traumatic memories of bigotry, violence, and finally partition.

According to Wagner, “Perhaps the most distinctive aspect of thuggee is its supposed religious character as a form of Kali-worship, which sets it apart from ‘ordinary’ economically motivated banditry... Yet nobody would suggest that they were religious fanatics who robbed and plundered as a means of worship to the Goddess” (953). Wagner also informs us that ‘Kali’ is mentioned by Sleeman in his documents while the informers or the thugs themselves refer to their deity as Bhavani or Devi. Once more the colonial master fails to comprehend the difference between the significance of Kali and Bhavani even though both of them are Hindu Goddesses. Wagner further accounts that “It is the later Orientalist fascination of Kali as a bloodthirsty and barbarous deity to whom human sacrifice was made that has turned her into the ‘cannibal goddess’ of the thugs” (953-54). It is important to understand that the thugs did not kill the people to offer them as sacrifices to the Devi and we get to know from Sripantha’s *Thuggee* that according to a legend, Bhavani offered the handkerchief back to the thugs after their victory against Raktabeej and instructed them to use it as a weapon to destroy those who are indifferent to Dharma, are the off springs of the enemy clan and to keep the world purified. It is important to understand that Dharma here doesn’t mean simply a religion but its meaning is far deeper and complex involving righteousness and other grand ideas of Hindu philosophy and Devi’s instruction was to ward off evil, to destruct the enemies of the human race but that idea somehow got corrupted and metamorphosed into the thug philosophy of plundering and murdering innocent people. Secondly, this Orientalist view of Kali is unequivocally false and without any knowledge regarding the birth and the significance of Kali in Hindu mythology as much as it was Sleeman’s lack of knowledge about the notions of Hinduism and its practices and modes of worship which enabled him to very conveniently acknowledge whom the thugs refer to as Bhavani or Devi as Kali. This inability to perceive the quintessential heterogeneity in different aspects of India and its religions was informed by the Western hegemonic notion to look at everything as how they desire to conceive it which led to an extirpation of India’s rich diversity in so many dimensions. The British had always attempted to utilize the Hindu-Muslim binary to their advantage and to implement the Divide and Rule so that a unified India can never stand up against them. The Thugs nullify such a manoeuvre by conglomerating humans from both religious groups under a single ideology without any trace of rancour or aversion and thereby subverting the British perception that the Hindus and the Muslims can never be unified. The Thugs could do what civilized, educated and non-criminal Indians could

never do, not even during India’s independence struggle- accept the differences, embrace one another and stand against the British as a unified force. Devi or Bhavani becomes the unifying force and all the differences are eradicated and what is left behind is unconditional devotion to their profession and a sense of brotherhood among each other. The thugs are ruthless cold-blooded murderers but their sense of loyalty to their fellow group members is unmistakable. When asked about sharing the money that they snatched from some unfortunate travellers, Bukut Jamadar declares that the money got equally shared among everyone and that, “...even those who were absent received their share... We are not traitors” (Sripantha 19)- so were the proud words of Bukut Jamadar. Such a statement offers a stark contrast to the activities of the colonial masters as well as the colonized Indians. This very disability of the Indians to stand as a unified force and repeal perfidiousness became a major appurtenant of the British to rule the country for so many years and mushroom its power. Religious riots over Hindu Gods and Goddesses and Muslim Allah are a common scenario in contemporary India and no one used this difference between these two religious sects better than the British for their expediency. It is ironic however that this same Goddess who is the religious deity of the idolatrous Hindus unifies both the Hindus and the Muslims. The sense of unity among the thugs is so strong that even when questioned about their Devi by the British officer, one of the Muslim thugs, answers quite innocuously, “Maa Bhavani-Kali” (Sripantha 79), and when questioned back if anyone in their holy religious scriptures named Bhavani and on hearing a no, the officer again questions, “Then why do you worship Her?” (Sripantha 79), once again the thug without any trace of incertitude straightway answers, “What do you say? She is our Devi?” (Sripantha 79). Even to some modern educated Indians perhaps this bamboozling as to how simply this Muslim man accepts a Hindu Goddess as his own Almighty.

Sripantha has portrayed the thugs as humans too who cared for their families, loved them, and even got exploited by the Kings-Zamindars and by even some lower classes of the society for their advantages- “These people say they do for the sake of God... But more than religion, their interests lie in what the thugs have to offer them as a share from their gains” (115). Wagner argues, “When the approvers promulgated thuggee as a religious practice in worship of Devi, they were legitimizing their actions and practices, which conferred a higher moral and social status to the thugs, setting them aside from ‘ordinary’ criminals” (954). The thugs, as Wagner further argues, “By ascribing their capture and imprisonment to the displeasure of Devi, the approvers disclaimed the responsibility for their own fate...” (954), is further bolstered by Sripantha’s account

when he narrates how the thugs accepted Sleeman's argument that without Devi's wish, he would not have got hold of any of them or hang them to death. They appear to be some modern-day conspirators who in the name of religion, galvanize the people with the same belief to indulge in religious bigotry whose success and defeat both depend on the will of someone else with more power and authority. This notion of the Devi in this position is somehow replaced by Sleeman in Devi's authority for all those who decide to work for Sleeman after their capture and this includes even the fierce Firengea who once asseverated intrinsically that he felt, "Walking to Sleeman and question him that by which authority, he being a foreigner devoid him of pursuing his professional demands? Why are you hanging the thugs? (Sripantha 125) submits himself to Sleeman like once he had submitted to Bhavani. The thugs who once followed what they believed to be instructed and commanded by Devi Bhavani now listen to the commands of Sleeman who has perhaps replaced the Devi as their authority. The British apprehended themselves to be the absolute masters of the Indians, their religion to be superior to all else, and even endeavoured to change many Hindu and Muslim Indians to Christians. Thus, Sleeman replacing Devi Bhavani metaphorically suggests the God-like authority the British believed themselves to hold in their colonies and illustrates the colonization of the thugs' minds and beings by a foreign human power by making them no longer execute what they believed the Almighty Goddess Devi Bhavani had ordered them to do. In fact, at the end of Sripantha's *Thugee*, when Sleeman emphatically declares before his daughter after his brief encounter with a man he believed to be a thugi that he was Hindustan's last thugi, he almost sounds like God and reminiscences the thug's account of Devi Bhavani commanding their ancestors to weapon to destroy those who are indifferent to Dharma, are the offsprings of the enemy clan and to keep the world purified. A female Goddess dictating over the actions of all these men sounds essentially matriarchal and the replacement by Sleeman, a male as the authority, echoes the substitution of many matriarchal societies of pre-colonial India by the advent of the British rule since societies and families headed by women were outlandish to limited British conscience.

Surjatamashi introduces us to the initial state of what has developed into modern times as Fingerprint technology which is used by detectives and the police to investigate innumerable cases. However, when reading these books together, we question that could this be implemented by the British to punish the Thugs who were so difficult to even trace, let alone catch them and record their fingerprints for future reference. Sleeman's ways of catching the thugs also did not include recording

fingerprints in any way instead he was dependent on 'Ramsee', the language of the thugs, and their accounts of their deeds which appear in the eyes of modern law perhaps inadequate. Thus, despite being a subversion in the form of the doubt as to whether a western technology shall benefit the British masters to punish the Thugs for the terrible crimes they do without any remorse or regret there remains the question as to whether such scant evidence would have sufficed to imprison the thugs let alone hang them had the criminals in question been a British and not an Indian over whom the British already believed that they have power? The answer is perhaps not as in both *Surjatamashi* as well *Nibarsaptak*, restricted evidence did not help as the criminals in question include the British as well. Thus, where *Surjatamashi* and *Nibarsaptak* highlight how the British-Indian dichotomy can be annulled by making them inclusive in the same processes, *Thugee* or *Thug*, illuminates how these Indians shamed the British system of law thereby emphasizing that the dichotomy is present in some way or the other and that the British claim to be invincible is dubious within the larger field of crime and punishment. However, it is also important to observe that *Surjatamashi* and *Nibarsaptak* as well as *Thugee* or *Thug* harmonize at one point- India which is diverse not just based on religion but on class as well as other differences. The criminals in *Surjatamashi* and *Nibarsaptak* do not differentiate among their comrades- their association includes Anglo-Indians, Indians, Eunuchs, Sex-workers and the Thugs do not only consider each other as the sons of Goddess Bhavani regardless of their religions, but they also did not even distinguish among their victims as, for them, rich, poor, Hindu, Muslim, men, women and everyone fall under a single category which is their prey. Thus, when on one hand the Colonial period endeavoured to rigorously implement the divide and rule policy, and even in modern India when discrimination is a daily occurrence based on diverse notions, these criminals transcend the boundaries of negativity and discrimination when it appears to be perhaps so tiresome to do so for 'educated' and 'civilized' human society.

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