

# Acting Like a Thief



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*Acting Like a Thief* is a short film about a Chhara tribal theater group in Ahmedabad, India. The documentary reveals how the Budhan Theatre has transformed the lives of adults and children within the community. Chhara tribals were notified as “natural” criminals by the British in 1871 and imprisoned in a labor camp in Ahmedabad. After Indian independence, they were de-notified, but the stigma of being a “born criminal” follows them to this day.

### **DEFYING LABELS, DEFINING THEMSELVES** by Tarun Jain

The Budhan Theatre Group has become the nexus for a movement to change attitudes towards denotified tribes both within Ahmedabad’s Chharanagar community and outside it.

September 2004 - Chharanagar is an urban settlement in Ahmedabad, dating back to the 19th century. Back then, the British decided to solve their law and order problems and consolidate their hold over the

Indian countryside by enacting the Criminal Tribes Act in 1871. This and subsequent Acts gave colonial administrators sweeping powers to declare certain “tribes, gangs, or classes” as addicted to the systematic commission of non-bailable offences. Once a tribe became ‘notified’ as criminal, all its members were required to register with the local magistrate. Anyone failing to register would be charged with a crime under the Indian Penal Code. Further, the Act forcibly moved the notified tribes to permanent reformatory settlements - like Chharanagar - that acted as virtual prisons for the tribes, and sources of cheap labor to fuel the booming cities of the colonial era.

In an enlightened moment soon after Independence, India’s new administrators repealed the Criminal Tribes Act on August 30, 1952 and liberated - i.e. ‘de-notified’ - the tribal communities. Thus many such de-notified communities now celebrate August 30th as their second Independence Day.

But unfortunately, the government concurrently enacted a series of Habitual Offenders Acts. These Acts asked police authorities to investigate a suspect's criminal tendencies and whether his occupation is conducive to settled way of life. Police forces around the country used these laws liberally to persecute the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes (DNTs). Tribals were regularly subject to public humiliation, beatings and custodial deaths.

This official validation of behaviour towards DNTs mirrored and reinforced the prejudices of the public at large - the criminal label was enough to close the doors to regular employment, and DNT communities remained socially and economically far behind most other Indian communities.

In the late 1990s, the government moved to abolish the Habitual Offenders Acts. The judiciary reviewed the custodial death cases of Budhan Sabar in West Bengal and Pinya Hari Kale in Maharashtra. In landmark judgments, the judges found the police guilty, punished responsible police officers, and awarded compensation to survivors. What was the impact of these landmark decisions? Shouldn't this have been the turning point in the lives of DNTs, providing them with the same equality and respect from society that we take for granted? Did the decisions change the attitude of police and the administration? Has social change occurred in these communities and is the change visible?

The Chharas are a denotified tribe settled by the British on the northern outskirts of Ahmedabad. They speak Bhamta and count the Sansi and Bajania tribes in northern India as their linguistic cousins. So strong is prejudice against the Chharas that when the eminent writers and tribal activists Mahasweta Devi and G. N. Devy from the De-notified and

Nomadic Tribes Rights Action Group (DNT-RAG) wanted to visit Chharanagar in 1998, no one would take them inside. When they eventually did enter, they found a group of young men and women producing plays on DNT issues and related social reform. Along with this group, DNT-RAG set up a library with revolutionary and cultural literature.

From this collaboration emerged the script of Budhan, based on the in-custody murder of Budhan Sabar in Purulia in West Bengal. A group of young Chhara men and women performed the play to electric effect at the first national conference of DNT-RAG. Last year, the performers crystallised their efforts as the Budhan Theatre Group.

The theatre group has become the nexus for a movement to change attitudes both within Chharanagar and outside it. The group is led by Dakshin Bajrange and Roxy Gagdekar, two determined and very articulate young men from within the Chhara community. All 15 members of the group participate in three major activities – library maintenance, community sensitization and theatre performance. The one room library in Chharanagar has about 500 books and documents on literature, art,



history and sociology. Daily Gujarati newspapers and a computer are also available. School and college students from Chharanagar regularly use the library as a place to meet, study and tutor one another. Recently, the students have also assigned tasks among themselves to increase sensitivity among the community. For instance, one 16 year old coordinates meetings between Chhara parents and municipal school teachers accustomed to thinking of them as criminals.

Chharas are not born criminals, they are born performers. This is the thesis with which Dakshin directs the theatre group. He explains how bands of Chharas would wordlessly assign roles and develop a plan to distract a merchant in the marketplace and relieve him of his bag. But such talent and energy should be channeled for positive purposes, not to continue the cycle of crime and prejudice. “In each play we try to express a social problem and highlight our situation”, says Dakshin. This explains the choice of plays such as *Budhan*, *Pinya Hari Kale* (based on the Kale murder case) and *Encounter*. When communal riots rocked Ahmedabad in 2002, the group produced a play called *Mazhab Nahi Sikhata Aapas Me Bair Rakhna*, to emphasize the values of tolerance and respect.

The group’s latest effort, *Bhoma* by Badal Sircar, was unveiled in Baroda at Bhasha Publication and Research Centre on August 14. Sircar’s original script contrasted urban and rural life in India and focused on the indifference to rural poverty of the urban middle class. The title character, a poor villager, symbolized all struggling human beings, especially those who are oppressed. But the Budhan group modified the script.



In the Chhara version, a settlement of Sansis is bulldozed by the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation, resulting in the death of two children. There is a common refrain throughout the play - Bulldozer bhai bulldozer, corporation bulldozer. The play speaks plainly about other common fears of the community; in one episode, a woman from the Kabutara community refused to recognize her husband’s dead body and perform the last rites for fear that her community would be linked to the incident, and innocent family members would be arrested and beaten. The play struck the audience in their guts. It was not an imaginary perception of suffering, it is based on the lived, traumatic experience of the people of Chharanagar.

Events later that evening brought us much closer to that experience. As the play ended, Dakshin announced that in Maninagar in Ahmedabad, the Sansis, a DNT community of rope-makers and mapsellers, had been attacked by people from an adjacent neighborhood. Though three young people were hurt, the police refused to file an FIR. G N Devy responded immediately, promising to visit the police station the next morning. Om Damani, with whom I was traveling, was moved enough to decide that we would go to Chharanagar

that same night and pursue the matter. We left for Ahmedabad with twelve others from the theatre group.

In the jeep along the way, Om engaged the younger Chharas about their aspirations. Remarkably, quite a few aspired to become police officers. They also recounted how Budhan Theater had changed their lives. One said that six years earlier, when he was in class eight, he could barely speak a complete sentence. Today he felt confident discussing social issues with anybody. Others made similar remarks about the confidence that the theater has brought to their lives. They recounted the progress of their friends. Dakshin's brother Uttar took up Electronics Engineering at MS University in Baroda. Another group alumnus, Alok Chhara, has enrolled at the National School of Drama in Delhi. Everyone said that despite their difficulties, they would not leave the theater. And they would continue to take pride in their identity as Chharas.

Close to midnight, we reached Maninagar and held an impromptu meeting with the community. The incident had begun with some men harassing two Sansi girls. The Sansis do not have proper houses, and are therefore easy targets for the scorn of people passing by. Confrontation following the harassment led to a fight, and a young man's collarbone was smashed with a sword. The next night, stones were thrown from the top of a bridge overlooking Maninagar, and some residents who slept out in the open were hurt. The police, however, demanded that the Sansis produce the offenders themselves before they would file the FIR. Roxy, who works for Gujarat Samachar, called the station to determine the facts but was brushed off.

During our meeting in Maninagar, we learned that community elders were not too enthusiastic about filing the FIR. They did not want to escalate the confrontation with a stronger adversary, especially since there seemed to be some chance of reconciliation. Moreover, they speculated that some people from other side too were hit on the head during the fight, so they would have reason to file an FIR as well. If that happened, they would in all probability be brought in for questioning or even arrested by an already unsympathetic police force. They thought the matter could be better resolved by reaching an agreement. Dakshin and Roxy reiterated that filing an FIR might dissuade future attacks, but left the decision to the Sansis. Though we brainstormed the situation late into the night, they did not pursue the matter any further.

The contrasting conversations that night keep playing in my head. The people of Maninagar and most other DNTs accept the injustices that pervade their lives. The young men and women from Budhan theatre do not. They speak out through theatre, but also stand first in the daily fights for self-respect.

When DNTs denied opportunity for education and employment turn to petty theft and illicit brewing to sustain themselves, instead of passing judgment on them we should reflect on the values and sensibilities of the rest of the society. Our experience with the theatre group showed us how hard it is to break the vicious cycle of prejudice and crime. And yet, 15 young men and women thrive in the cocoon of Budhan Theatre and beyond it. They recognize the importance of constructive work and demonstrate positive leadership that shatters the stereotype of a "criminal". By defining themselves before society labels them, they are truly liberated.

**STEALING A CHANCE IN LIFE**

Sonia Faleiro

Tehelka, November 26, 2005

“No jobs, no respect. The shadow of a police lock-up ever-present. That is the harsh reality of the Chhara tribals. Dubbed criminals by the British, treated as thieves by independent India. Sonia Faleiro traveled to Ahmedabad to track how the Budhan Theatre Group, started by two men of the community, has changed the profile of an entire people.”

“I’m not in favour of stealing. We have problems, okay. We don’t get jobs, we get arrested, and people call us thieves. But I’ve avoided stealing. Why can’t others?” asks photographer and Chhara community member Pravin Indrekar. He jovially slaps his brother-in-law on the back, “He is into stealing. Daily he goes out to support himself.” The portly young man blushes. “No, no. I don’t steal,” he objects vigorously.

The Chhara community is a denotified and nomadic tribe (DNT) of approximately 15,000 people inhabiting an urban village on the outskirts of Ahmedabad. They are infamous for having made petty thievery (pursued by an estimated 20 per cent of the community) and the production of home brewed liquor (an estimated 60 per cent) their primary sources of income. The police visit every day. Every month, the same set of mothers and fathers are thrust into a van and thrown into jail. When a Chhara is identified in town — even if he is merely enjoying the annual rath yatra from a street corner — he is, more often than not, arrested without explanation. The back seat of the police van is a place every adult Chhara is acquainted with.

The community’s children accept this police presence in their lives with equanimity. Says 13-year-old Haresh Macherekar, “Our parents

make a lot of alcohol, but if they didn’t we would starve. When they return from jail they warn me, ‘when you grow up don’t become like us, otherwise the police will beat you as well.’” His parents needn’t worry. Macherekar is an avid student involved in the Budhan Theatre Group — steered by filmmaker Dakshin Bajrange and journalist Roxy Gagdekar, two Chharas using what they believe is an inherent gift their people possess, to change the lives of their community’s youth. Explains Bajrange, “We abhor violence; our thefts never involve murder. We draw the victim into conversation, captivate him so he never realises when his bag has been snatched from his hand. Such talent can be used for bad, or, as we do in Budhan, for good, in theatre.”

The Budhan Theatre Group was created in 1998. For several years previously, a group of educated Chharas scripted and performed plays locally to address institutional harassment. It was in 1998 however, that activists Mahasweta Devi and GN Devy of the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes Rights Action Group (dnt-rag) visited Chharanagar, and encouraged the crystallisation of a formal group for therapy and rehabilitation. “The primary objective of Budhan Theatre is to sensitise Chhara children against illegal activities,” says Gagdekar.



“We also assure them that should their parents give up crime, but are still harassed by the police, we will help them get legal aid.”

Budhan has been taken up on this offer only once. On May 11, 2003, Bajrange was falsely accused of assaulting Prahlad Chhara in Chharanagar. At the time, however, Bajrange was in Gandhinagar. During his 15 days in jail, he understood the motivation for his arrest. “Bahut natak kar rahe ho police ke khilaaf?” spat a policeman. (We hear you’re performing many plays against the police?) “Yahan per natak mat karna, nahin to yahan per marega tu.” (Don’t do any plays about jail, or you will die in jail.) “My father is a habitual offender,” says Bajrange. “But I had never experienced jail before. It changed my life.” It was only after Devy and Mahasweta Devi released a statement to the press, decrying his false imprisonment that he was released.

Bajrange’s arrest is an example of the daily harassment DNTs have faced since 1871, when the British “notified” 191 tribes as “criminal” and passed the Criminal Tribes Act. These so-called criminal tribes were actually non-tax paying communities of singers, acrobats, musicians, and cattle grazers, amongst others, whose nomadic lifestyle was a constant source of suspicion for the British. Thereafter, they were confined to newly created ghettos, and put to work as cheap labour for industries. Infants were separated from their mothers, because the British insisted that their “criminal” strain should not be passed on. Thus the British sowed the seeds of unfounded prejudice, which continues to date. According to Devy, “Even the Meenas, who were coin makers, were notified as criminals, because the State wanted to convert coin production into a state venture. These tribes were stigmatised by the State and consequently by the people who received education from it — the middle class.”



In August 31, 1952, when the government “denotified” these tribes, it did so without implementing a rehabilitation programme of education and livelihood support. In 1959, the Habitual Offenders Act, which is essentially the Criminal Tribes Act reworded, ignited this latent stigma, allowing the police a long leash with which to terrorise seven crore people. “My grandfather was a thief; that is obvious,” says Gagdekar. “But my father was an advocate and I am a journalist. We have a right to live with dignity.”

Chharanagar is a neighbourhood of fading homes prettified with murals and bright blue walls, resting in the shadow of green, leafy trees. Children play marbles on the street, dodging cyclists; a young man sells homemade papad opposite the rail tracks. Parallel to the neighbourhood, where now stands the Naroda Beggars Home, is where the British settled the Chharas along with families from several other tribes, and where they remained until 1952. Alcohol fumes stand heavy in the air, as does the stench of a failing sanitation system. There is a stillness to Chharanagar, epitomised by the knots of men, women and children gathered silently in their verandas; stillness born of expectancy that things will change.

Every young Chhara has received primary education; many are graduates in economics, sociology, and psychology. Few, however, have employment to match their qualifications. Divyakant Indrekar acquired a First Class, Bachelor of Arts, History and a First Class, Sanskrit, Sanskrit Pramukh Parishad. Despite this, he has only been offered jobs on a temporary basis. Embittered by constantly having to search for work, he now refuses to leave Chharanagar, supporting his wife and two children by giving tuitions in Maths, Science and English to Chhara youth. “Because of our reputation, no one wants to employ us permanently,” he sighs.

There are other signs that Chharanagar’s present is curdled by its past. Not one Chhara has received a loan from a bank. This includes Gagdekar, who is a feature writer with the Gujarat Samachar newspaper. Four private and nationalised banks have rejected his application for a personal loan. “Chharanagar is a negative area,” he shrugs. Mohan Tamaichi, who is currently unemployed, points out another poignant gash in the community. “Koi policeman nahin, doctor nahin, engineer nahin, koi director nahin. Kuch nahin. Sirf advocate.” (We don’t have a single policeman, engineer or director. Only advocates.) There are 120 Chhara advocates working in Chharanagar. Of all the professions only a lawyer can start his career with minimal expenditure and independence.

While the young generation may join this legion of lawyers, their parents and grandparents, many of whom are illiterate, are entangled in a cycle of crime and punishment. Nirmalaben S. Ghamande is a thief, prone to snatching unattended clothes and mobile phones from shops. While this invariably leads to arrest, it also put her in debt. Gagdekar explains, “If five people go to steal, they incur

considerable expenses. They hire a car. They stay the night in a hotel where they also eat; they roam around. If they earned an income, this wouldn’t be a problem, but since they don’t, they immediately enter into debt which, over a period of time, varies from Rs 1-5 lakh. If they want to leave the group, they must pay their team members their share of the debt. To do that, they steal again.”

Down the road from Gagdekar, lives a family that brews gur ki desi daru (country liquor made of jaggery) — illegal but much in demand in the dry state of Gujarat — to survive. According to Gagdekar, the Chharas in British India began brewing liquor for personal consumption. He says, “When we were settled in residential areas after Independence, the police told us ‘give up stealing’ and make money brewing liquor instead.”

In the courtyard is a metal tank floating with mahua flowers, two tin drums in which alcohol is fermented with jaggery and water, and a box of glass bottles awaiting filling. A one-litre bottle of alcohol is sold for Rs 30. Consumers come to Chharanagar, and each family sells up to 15 bottles a day. But the financial output sometimes exceeds the input. Up to five po-





licemen visit a bootlegger's home every week to collect a bribe of Rs 100 each. A family of bootleggers, which has been forced to withdraw its children from school due to financial constraint, might have to pay the police Rs 2,000 a month. Several times a week, officials from the Social Welfare Department, Gujarat, also drop by to make arrests. Each bootlegger, according to Bajrange, has about 20-100 cases registered against him. "We are very obedient criminals," smiles Bajrange. "We always do what the police tells us. Except stop making liquor."

The more enterprising Chharas have begun small-scale industries in their homes. Karunaben Menekar procures chunks of meat from the wholesale market, which her family cuts and packages at home to sell locally. Kanoori owns a handcart, which she plies, selling snacks. Initially she worked on the main road, which demarcated Chharanagar from the prosperous Sindhi community opposite. Soon, she tired of the constant police harassment. "Koi Chhara bahar nahin khada ho sakta." (No Chhara is allowed to sell goods outside of Chharanagar). Bajrange points out, "If we could end unemployment, all our problems will automatically be solved. Otherwise a young man who is unemployed, and needs to feed his

family, will look around and see what is easiest. He will join a group of thieves, or decide to brew some liquor."

This is where the Budhan Theatre Group has made a difference. It is dedicated to breaking this destructive cycle, by moulding self-esteem and encouraging ambition. Since 1998, the actors have performed over 15 plays for free, in Chharanagar as well as Vadodara, Bhopal and Delhi to audiences comprising dnts, academicians, and activists. Travel and interaction with other dnts, affords them experiences their parents could not have dreamt of. Young Macherekar says, "Theatre join karne ke pehle, jab aap jaise badhe log aate the, to mein unse baat karne se darta tha. Magar abhi, mujhe dar nahin hai." (Before I joined Budhan, I didn't have the confidence to speak to big people like you. Now I do.) When there isn't a festival or a seminar to attend, they head for the village rangmanch — a water tank cemented over especially for this purpose — and delight their family and friends with their talent.

The plays are original, with the exception of Badal Sircar's *Bhoma*, which was given a local flavour. The themes elaborate on the atrocities committed on the dnts by the police. For example, their first production, *Budhan*, scripted by Bajrange, is a dramatisation of the custodial death of Budhan Sabar of the dnt Sabars of West Bengal; *Encounter* and *Pinya* Hari Kale are based on the custodial deaths of Rajendra Powar and Kale respectively. The group also addresses other social issues. *Mazhab Nahi Sikhata Aapas Me Bair Rakhna* draws from the violence in Ahmedabad in 2002. The group's new production, which premiered in Tejghar on November 12 at a festival of writers from tribal and dnt communities organised by dnt-rag, is a collage of their plays, called *Arre, Yeh Kaun Log Hai?*

On November 14, Budhan Theatre celebrated the second anniversary of its library, a small room on the bustling main road of Chharanagar, maintained by NGO Sneh Prayas. Here, 150-200 Chhara youth congregate daily, to study, read from 500 books, documents and newspapers, or learn Microsoft Excel and PowerPoint on two computers. It is also here that they discuss future plays, and where they are inculcated with pride for their community. When asked their names, they will append Chhara instead of their family surname.

With the help of Bajrange and Gagdekar, whose ambition for their community is boundless, Chharanagar's youth are gradually becoming familiar with success. Nirmalaben S. Ghamande's son Vivek is the second Chhara to receive admission at the National School of Drama (NSD) in Delhi. Roxy's brother, Alok Gagdekar, is the first, and also the first resident of Ahmedabad in 15 years to enter NSD. Machrekar has been chosen by Sneha Prayas, an NGO specialising in child development, to visit Japan next year. And Tushar R. Kodekar is taking the nsd exam a second time, committed to try until he succeeds. Sushil Chhara another member of Budhan, used to sell liquor to support his family, after his brother was killed in gang violence. He gave it up after being employed by Nokia as a compere for their road shows. He earns Rs 10,000 a month and is delighted with his new status as a poster boy for Chhara youth.

Filmmakers Shashwati Talukdar and P. Kerim Friedman are working on a feature-length project, tentatively titled Hooch and Hamlet in Chharanagar. Talukdar says, "Many children have found a second home in the Theatre, which takes this opportunity to teach them basic life-skills and wants to transform the community. Their optimism is contagious."

At dusk, the young members of Budhan Theatre gather on the terrace of Bajrange's house to practice Arre, Yeh Kaun Log Hai? The script vividly describes the atrocities committed on the dnsts. But in the shining faces of these determined actors and actresses, there is only hope. Bajrange says, "We want a Chharanagar where words like thief and alcohol have no place. Where children don't know what these words mean. We are hungry for a platform, nothing else." Like true survivors they have made their own."

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### THE MYTH OF NEW INDIA

Pankaj Mishra

The New York Times

July 6, 2006

INDIA is a roaring capitalist success story." So says the latest issue of Foreign Affairs; and last week many leading business executives and politicians in India celebrated as Lakshmi Mittal, the fifth richest man in the world, finally succeeded in his hostile takeover of the Luxembourgian steel company Arcelor. India's leading business newspaper, The Economic Times, summed up the general euphoria over the event in its regular feature, "The Global Indian Takeover": "For India, it is a harbinger of things to come — economic superstardom."

This sounds persuasive as long as you don't know that Mr. Mittal, who lives in Britain, announced his first investment in India only last year. He is as much an Indian success story as Sergey Brin, the Russian-born co-founder of Google, is proof of Russia's imminent economic superstardom.

In recent weeks, India seemed an unlikely capitalist success story as communist parties

decisively won elections to state legislatures, and the stock market, which had enjoyed record growth in the last two years, fell nearly 20 percent in two weeks, wiping out some \$2.4 billion in investor wealth in just four days. This week India's prime minister, Manmohan Singh, made it clear that only a small minority of Indians will enjoy "Western standards of living and high consumption."

There is, however, no denying many Indians their conviction that the 21st century will be the Indian Century just as the 20th was American. The exuberant self-confidence of a tiny Indian elite now increasingly infects the news media and foreign policy establishment in the United States.

Encouraged by a powerful lobby of rich Indian-Americans who seek to expand their political influence within both their home and adopted countries, President Bush recently agreed to assist India's nuclear program, even at the risk of undermining his efforts to check the nuclear ambitions of Iran. As if on cue, special reports and covers hailing the rise of India in *Time*, *Foreign Affairs* and *The Economist* have appeared in the last month.

It was not so long ago that India appeared in the American press as a poor, backward and often violent nation, saddled with an inefficient bureaucracy and, though officially non-aligned, friendly to the Soviet Union. Suddenly the country seems to be not only a "roaring capitalist success story" but also, according to *Foreign Affairs*, an "emerging strategic partner of the United States." To what extent is this wishful thinking rather than an accurate estimate of India's strengths?

Looking for new friends and partners in a rapidly changing world, the Bush administration clearly hopes that India, a fellow democ-



racy, will be a reliable counterweight against China as well as Iran. But trade and cooperation between India and China is growing; and, though grateful for American generosity on the nuclear issue, India is too dependent on Iran for oil (it is also exploring developing a gas pipeline to Iran) to wholeheartedly support the United States in its efforts to prevent the Islamic Republic from acquiring a nuclear weapon. The world, more interdependent now than during the cold war, may no longer be divided up into strategic blocs and alliances.

Nevertheless, there are much better reasons to expect that India will in fact vindicate the twin American ideals of free markets and democracy that neither Latin America nor post-communist countries — nor, indeed, Iraq — have fulfilled.

Since the early 1990's, when the Indian economy was liberalized, India has emerged as the world leader in information technology and business outsourcing, with an average growth of about 6 percent a year. Growing foreign investment and easy credit have fueled a consumer revolution in urban areas. With their Starbucks-style coffee bars, Blackberry-wielding young professionals, and shopping malls selling luxury brand names, large parts of

Indian cities strive to resemble Manhattan. Indian business tycoons are increasingly trying to control marquee names like Taittinger Champagne and the Carlyle Hotel in New York. “India Everywhere” was the slogan of the Indian business leaders at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, this year.

But the increasingly common, business-centric view of India suppresses more facts than it reveals. Recent accounts of the alleged rise of India barely mention the fact that the country’s \$728 per capita gross domestic product is just slightly higher than that of sub-Saharan Africa and that, as the 2005 United Nations Human Development Report puts it, even if it sustains its current high growth rates, India will not catch up with high-income countries until 2106.

Nor is India rising very fast on the report’s Human Development index, where it ranks 127, just two rungs above Myanmar and more than 70 below Cuba and Mexico. Despite a recent reduction in poverty levels, nearly 380 million Indians still live on less than a dollar a day.

Malnutrition affects half of all children in India, and there is little sign that they are being helped by the country’s market reforms, which have focused on creating private wealth rather than expanding access to health care and education. Despite the country’s growing economy, 2.5 million Indian children die annually, accounting for one out of every five child deaths worldwide; and facilities for primary education have collapsed in large parts of the country (the official literacy rate of 61 percent includes many who can barely write their names). In the countryside, where 70 percent of India’s population lives, the government has reported that about 100,000 farmers committed suicide between 1993 and 2003.

Feeding on the resentment of those left behind by the urban-oriented economic growth, communist insurgencies (unrelated to India’s parliamentary communist parties) have erupted in some of the most populous and poorest parts of north and central India. The Indian government no longer effectively controls many of the districts where communists battle landlords and police, imposing a harsh form of justice on a largely hapless rural population.

The potential for conflict — among castes as well as classes — also grows in urban areas, where India’s cruel social and economic disparities are as evident as its new prosperity. The main reason for this is that India’s economic growth has been largely jobless. Only 1.3 million out of a working population of 400 million are employed in the information technology and business processing industries that make up the so-called new economy.

No labor-intensive manufacturing boom of the kind that powered the economic growth of almost every developed and developing country in the world has yet occurred in India. Unlike China, India still imports more than it exports. This means that as 70 million more people enter the work force in the next five years, most of them without the skills required for the new economy, unemployment and inequality could provoke even more social instability than they have already.

For decades now, India’s underprivileged have used elections to register their protests against joblessness, inequality and corruption. In the 2004 general elections, they voted out a central government that claimed that India was “shining,” bewildering not only most foreign journalists but also those in India who had predicted an easy victory for the ruling coalition.

Among the politicians whom voters rejected was Chandrababu Naidu, the technocratic chief minister of one of India's poorest states, whose forward-sounding policies, like providing Internet access to villages, prompted Time magazine to declare him "South Asian of The Year" and a "beacon of hope."

But the anti-India insurgency in Kashmir, which has claimed some 80,000 lives in the last decade and a half, and the strength of violent communist militants across India, hint that regular elections may not be enough to contain the frustration and rage of millions of have-nots, or to shield them from the temptations of religious and ideological extremism. Many serious problems confront India. They are unlikely to be solved as long as the wealthy, both inside and outside the country, choose to believe their own complacent myths.

Pankaj Mishra is the author of "Temptations of the West: How to Be Modern in India, Pakistan, Tibet and Beyond."

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### INDIAN STREET THEATRE

Roopika Risam, 2006

Indian street theater is a form of activist theater that is emblematic of the anti-imperialist movements of the 20th century and has a long tradition of socially-conscious performances. From the Indian People's Theatre Association (or IPTA), which formed around the Quit India Movement of the 1940s to the more than 15,000 socially-conscious theater groups in India today, street theater in India is not so much about drama but about struggle and critical ways to think about contemporary problems. According to Safdar Hashmi, a celebrated Indian theater director and practitioner of street theater, street theater is "basically a militant political theatre of protest. Its function is to agitate the people and to motivate them behind fighting organizations."

Indian theater—including street theater—has been influenced by genres imported by the British and by Indian folk theater traditions, which use audience participation and draw on *rasa*, an Indian aesthetic, for influence. One of Indian street theater's theoretical predecessors is German director and playwright Bertolt Brecht, who created a theory of "epic theatre." In his 1948 text "A Short Organum for the Theatre," Brecht criticizes the way contemporary proscenium theater turns human beings into



“a cowed, credulous, hypnotized mass” that is incapable of social action or thought and tries to live vicariously through events witnessed onstage. Brecht wondered, “How much longer are our souls, leaving our mere bodies under the cover of the darkness to plunge into those dreamlike figures up on the stage, there to take part in the crescendos and climaxes which normal life denies us?” The work of Indian street theater takes up Brecht’s concerns and tries to challenge the idea that art is necessarily an escape from reality; instead, street theater uses art to compel action. During the 1970s and 1980s, Bengali dramatist Badal Sircar promoted the virtues of “Third Theatre,” which drew on Indian folk drama—or First Theatre—and the Western proscenium theater—or Second Theatre. Sircar advocated “a flexible, portable free theatre...a theatre of change.” Like Sircar, who helped propel Indian theater away from proscenium theatre, the Budhan Theatre uses its independence from proscenium theater to take its messages to sites where they are most needed.

### **BUDHAN: A PLAY BY DENOTIFIED CHHARAS**

Denotified tribals are often tortured and killed in police custody. Budhan, who belonged to the Sabar community in the Purulia district of West Bengal, was killed in February 1998. When the Kheria Sabar Welfare Samiti and their leader, the noted Bangla writer Mahasveta Devi, arranged a post-mortem, it became clear that Budhan had died of a severe beating (rather than suicide) in police custody. The Samiti filed a case in the Calcutta High Court, and Mahasveta Devi went to Baroda to deliver the annual Verrier Elwin lecture at the Bhasha Research Centre. As a result of her speech on denotified tribals at this momentous time, she, Laxman Gaikwad and I founded the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes Rights Action Group

and began a long journey through many states to meet DNTs in person. To keep our colleagues informed of developments, I started a journal called Budhan.

In May of that year, we visited Chharanagar, Ahmedabad, a ghetto of Chhara DNTs, and there set up a library of revolutionary and cultural literature. A group of young men and women associated themselves with the center and started to write and produce short plays relating to social reform. In July the Calcutta High Court decided the Budhan Sabar murder case, and I printed the text of the verdict in Budhan. Our theatre group read the text and resolved to produce a play at our first national conference, which was ultimately attended by more than a thousand delegates including such scholars as Romila Thapar and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak.

The play made a profound impact on the audience, and the group subsequently performed it at major venues in New Delhi, Bhopal, Baroda, Pune and Bombay. Each time they did so, they modified parts of the script, so while the play was written by Dakshim Bajrange (and translated by Sonal Baxi), it can truly be said to come straight from the oral tradition of tribal theatre. It is not an imaginary perception of suffering; it is based on the lived, traumatic experience of being branded a criminal. G.N. Devy

Budhan: A Play by Denotified Chharas

Characters

Budhan

Shyamali

Judge

Inspector Ashok Roy

Assist Superintendent of Police

Constable 1 (Shivlal)

Constable 2

Constable 3

Villager 1  
 Villager 2  
 Villager 3  
 Ashish  
 Shopkeeper  
 Guard  
 Sridhar  
 Kanji, a Prisoner

### Scene I

Narrator: Namaskar! Before we begin the play, let us glance at our history. Of the total population of a thousand million people in India, about sixty million belong to denotified communities. For reasons unknown to anybody, we are singled out for bearing a burden. We are the DNTs or Adivasis, the people belonging to ancient times. We have witnessed the changes taking place on earth for millennia. We live amidst nature. We are born in the womb of nature, and we die in the lap of nature. Or we are killed. We once owned the jungles, but today we have to fight for our rights in the same forests. For centuries the DNTs have been killed. Earlier, when a DNT passed through a village, his body was cut into pieces.

A few tribals pass through the rear part of the stage, carrying wood. A few persons hiding in the forest attack them. Their terrifying, pain-stricken calls for help fill the stage. The tribals are butchered. All characters stand still.

Narrator: In 1979, the people of the Lodha community were tormented and drowned.

The tribals are tied to the imaginary trees while villagers 1, 2 and 3 speak to them.

Villager 1: Submerge their heads in water.

Villager 2: Force their heads in water till they stop breathing.

Villager 3: Torment them to death. The heads of these tribals are plunged into water. They die in agony. All characters assume their original positions.

Narrator: Nobody knows just how many people from denotified communities are killed so brutally. Most of us are unaware of the atrocities being perpetrated on them. Rights are being snatched from the very people who rightfully own this country. We present to you the story of one such community, the Sabars. This is the story of Budhan Sabar, a young man belonging to the Sabar community who was killed by a police atrocity. We want change! We want a revolution!

Each character shouts for revolution, and then all stand in a single file.

Chorus: There has already been one revolution, and another is yet to take place. That was a revolution brought about by Bapuji. This revolution will be of the DNTs.

Shyamali: What you are about to witness is not the end but a beginning.

Budhan: This is Akarbaid, a small village in West Bengal. The law views the Sabar community living here as a community of thieves.

Narrator: In this small village, Budhan was living a quiet life with his wife Shyamali and their son.

Inspector Ashok Roy: But on 10th February 1998, Budhan died. It was the day when the eyes of police officer Ashok Roy, who was used to taking the law in his own hands, fell on Budhan.

Constable 1: A horrifying act that will force you to ask: are we really free after half a cen-

tury of Independence? Even after more than fifty years, the British stigma of criminality of birth continues to stick to the DNTs.

Constable 2: This is an attempt to present the police atrocity that Budhan Sabar had to face.

## Scene II

The actors stand to take the form of a paan shop. Budhan walks across the street with his wife Shyamali. The shop owner calls him.

Shopkeeper (To Budhan): O Budhan! Do buy a paan.

Budhan (looks at the shopkeeper and asks his wife): Shyamali, would you like a paan?

Shyamali gives her assent, shyly trying to hide her face behind the pallu of her sari. Budhan walks across to the paan shop.

Budhan: Give me two Banarasi paans.

Shopkeeper: I will fix them in a moment. (A few moments later, after applying katha to the paan) O Budhanwa, where are you going?

Budhan: Oh! It's a long way. You know my matriarchal uncle? He is not well. We are going to meet him.

Shopkeeper: Do remember me to him. Here, take your paan.

Budhan: And here is your money.

Just as Budhan is paying the shopkeeper, a police officer takes hold of his hand. He has been moving around in the market looking for a Sabar whom he could hold responsible for all of his pending theft cases.



Inspector Ashok Roy (Catching hold of Budhan's collar): Aye you, what's your name?

Budhan (Frightened): Budhan Sabar! Sahib.

Inspector Ashok Roy: I see, a Sabar! Come to the police station with me.

Budhan: But Sir, what is my crime?

Inspector Ashok Roy: You bloody rascal, your greatest crime is that you dared to question the law.

The officer pulls Budhan by the shoulder and throws him down on the pavement.

Budhan: Sir! What are you doing? I...I was...

Inspector Ashok Roy: Come to the police station without any arguments or I shall parade you naked through the market. (Kicks Budhan) Come with me!

Budhan: Please don't beat me, Sir.

Hearing Budhan's pleas, Shyamali rushes to his rescue.



Shyamali: Budhan...What happened, Budhan?  
Budhan...Sir, why are you beating him...Sir?  
What has my Budhan done, Sir?

Inspector Ashok Roy: You...who are you?

Shyamali: Sir...me? I...I am Shyamali. His wife.

Inspector Ashok Roy: Oh, his wife! Bitch, the wife of a thief. Go away. (He pushes Shyamali and she falls to the ground. To the constable:) Drag him through the market to the police station.

Shyamali: (Shouts) Budhan!

All characters stand motionless for a few moments.

### Scene III

Shyamali: Shyamali is a simple, innocent woman.

Budhan: Budhan was not even told of his crime before he was arrested.

Shyamali: It is the code of law that the accused be told of his crime before being arrested.

Constable 1: Budhan's crime lay in the fact that he belong to the Sabar community, which is believed to be a community of thieves.

Inspector Ashok Roy: But Officer Roy? He always used to keep the law at the edge of his rifle. Killing Sabars was just an enjoyable game for Officer Roy.

Constable 2: Great! What a large-hearted man he is!

The actors assume the form of a police station.

### Scene IV

Inspector Ashok Roy (To the constable): Take him away.

Constable 2 (Standing outside the police station): Salaam, Sir.

Inspector Ashok Roy: Salaam.

The constable locks Budhan in a lock-up. Officer Roy places his revolver on the table, and, after giving some instructions, goes towards the lock-up where Budhan is kept.

Inspector Ashok Roy (To Budhan): Tell me... where have you hidden the stolen goods?

Budhan (Frightened): Sir...I have not stolen anything.

Inspector Ashok Roy: You son of a bitch – I am very much aware that you have not committed any theft. But in the past ten days, seventeen thefts have taken place in this area. How many? Did you hear? Seventeen. I have to prepare the reports of these thefts. Don't you understand?

Budhan: But Sir, I make baskets and sell them to the cooperative...

Inspector Ashok Roy (Interrupting): I don't care what you do. You have to confess to this crime. After all, why else has the law given us this? (Showing him the baton) Come, plead guilty.

Officer Roy hits Budhan. Budhan cries out in pain. Officer Roy begins to beat him brutally. Meanwhile, Shyamali arrives at the police station, searching for Budhan.

Shyamali (Trying to enter the police station): Budhan... Budhan...

Constable 2 (Stops Shyamali): Aye, woman, where are you going?

Shyamali (Pleadingly): Sir, Sir, I want to meet my husband, Sir.

Constable 2: Your husband? Who is he?

Shyamali: He...whom the officer brought in a short while ago.

Constable 2: Oh...him? He's a bloody Sabar. A thief.

Shyamali: No, Sir. Please don't say so...he is not a thief...Sir. He has not committed any theft. He makes baskets and sells them to the cooperative. He did not commit any theft.

Constable 2: Whether he has or he has not committed any theft will be decided by the police. Understand?

Shyamali: But Sir, he is everything for me, my husband. Let me meet him.

Constable 2: If you wish to meet your husband then do so in court, not here. Get out of here.

The constable pushes Shyamali, who screams for Budhan.

Shyamali: Budhan... Budhan!

Her screams are heard by Officer Roy, who is beating Budhan.

Inspector Ashok Roy: Who is it? Who is shouting?

He comes out. Shyamali falls at his feet.

Shyamali: Sir, Sir, let my husband go. Sir, he has not done anything wrong.

Inspector Ashok Roy (Looking at Shyamali): You? You have come here too?

Shyamali (Pleadingly): Sir, I beg you to leave my husband. Please, Sir.

Inspector Ashok Roy (Kicks Shyamali): Leave the police station or you, too, shall be in for it.

Shyamali (Angrily): Kill me. Kill me, too. But please let Budhan go. (Spreads her pallu in front of Officer Roy) I beg you for the life of my husband.

Inspector Ashok Roy: This is a police station, not a temple where alms are given. Get lost.

Officer Roy goes to the imaginary inside room. Shyamali continues to plead.

Shyamali: Sir... Sir. Leave him, Sir. (A constable prevents him from going inside) Budhan, Budhan!

(Shyamali, Constable 1 and Constable 3 address the audience together)

Chorus: The police are thirsty for the blood of the Sabars. Who will make them understand that we, too, are Indians?

### Scene V

The Barabazaar police station

Constable 2: Date: 11th February 1998.

Officer Roy arrives at the police station in the morning.

Constable 2 (Standing at the gate): Good morning, Sir.

Inspector Ashok Roy: Good Morning.

Inside the station.

Constable 1: Good morning, Sir.

Inspector Ashok Roy: Good Morning. (To the constable) Has he confessed?

Constable 1: No, Sir.

Inspector Ashok Roy: Hmm. (Ponders for a while, then says to the constable): Follow me.

Constable 3: Sir...should I record yesterday's date as the day of Budhan Sabar's arrest?

Inspector Ashok Roy: When will you understand? Do you want to become an inspector or not? Our job is to turn facts into fiction and fiction into facts, yesterday into today and today into yesterday. After all, for what other purpose are these official papers and records? Show today's date as the day of Budhan Sabar's arrest. And take special care that the serial number is not a regular one. Is that clear?

The constable nods obediently. Officer Roy and Constable 1 go to the lockup where Bud-

han is gasping like a fish out of water.

Inspector Ashok Roy: (To Constable 1): Wake him up.

The constable kicks Budhan. Budhan is in agony on being awakened. He asks for water.

Budhan: Water...water. Someone...please give me water. (His throat is parched; he finds it difficult to speak.) My...my throat is dry. Please give me some water.

A faint smile appears on Ashok Roy's face as he sees Budhan's agony.

Inspector Ashok Roy: You feel thirsty? You want to drink water? (To the constable) Shivalal, bring a bottle of liquor and pour it down his bloody throat.

Budhan: (Scared by the mention of liquor.) Sir, Sir, I don't drink. Please have mercy on me.

Inspector Ashok Roy: Great! You are a Sabar and you don't drink!

Shivlal brings a bottle of alcohol and gives it to Ashok Roy.



Inspector Ashok Roy: Open your mouth. (To the constable) Block his nose.

Budhan: No...Sir...no.

Ashok Roy pours the liquid down Budhan's throat. Not used to drinking alcohol, Budhan begins to cough violently.

Inspector Ashok Roy: Now, not only you but your father will have to accept that you committed the theft.

Once again they beat the half-conscious Budhan with their fists, legs and stick. Budhan cries out in pain. His pain stricken cries are heard by Shyamali, who is sitting outside the station, hungry and thirsty. She is terrified. Once again she runs towards the station but the constable stops her.

Constable 2 (Looking at her sternly): Aye, woman...you are still here?

Shyamali (Angrily): I shall not go without meeting my Budhan.

Constable 2: You will go or else...(Threatens her with his staff)

Shyamali (Defies him): Kill me. Kill me along with Budhan. Anyway, what shall I do without him?

Constable 2: If you wish to die, then drown yourself in the village well. But get out of here. He pushes Shyamali. Shyamali stops the passerby and entreats them to save her husband. On the other side of the stage, Ashok Roy and Constable 1 are beating Budhan brutally.

Shyamali: Someone help my husband! These people will kill him. Please help me! Budhan is innocent. He has done no wrong. (Stops an imaginary man on the street) Please help

me! Those people will kill Budhan. (Budhan's heart-rendering scream is heard from inside the police station). See...see how mercilessly they're torturing my Budhan? Brother, please help me. We were just eating paan! Is it a crime to eat paan? Budhan...Budhan!

### Scene VI

The actors take the form of a police station.

Constable 2: For three days, from 10th February to 12th February, Budhan was kept in prison without food or water.

Constable 3: Budhan was charged with larceny without a remand order. What kind of law is this?

Shyamali: On 13th February, Sridhar Sabar, another Sabar youth, is brought to the Barabazaar police station.

### Scene VII

The Barabazaar police station. A constable shoves Sridhar Sabar into the prison cell. In the opposite cell, Ashok Roy walks around Budhan who is lying in a semi-conscious and delirious state, repeatedly begging for his life.

Constable 2 (Pulling Sridhar by the collar): Go inside. A bloody Sabar who steals. (Locks Sridhar in cell.)

Sridhar: Sir...Please let me go, Sir...

Constable 2: Shut up. (Locks the door of the lock-up.)

Budhan: (In a broken voice): Sir, please leave me. I will die, Sir.

Inspector Ashok Roy: It seems that these Sabars are very hard to crack. It seems he will not give in so easily. We will have to use third degree on him. (To the guard) Make arrange-

ments for giving him electric shocks.

Constable 1: But Sir...he might die.

Inspector Ashok Roy (Looking stern): You do as you are told. It's an order.

The guard begins to carry out Officer Roy's instructions. He makes Budhan sit on his knees and ties his hands behind him. He ties the electric belt on to Budhan's head and turns on the machine. Budhan begins to tremble. His eyes roll. Saliva drips from his mouth. He is given three electric shocks. Sridhar looks on from the other cell. His eyes fill with tears. He wants to help Budhan, but he is powerless.

### Scene VIII

Constable 2: The court has ordered that Budhan be taken into remand from 13th February to 16th February.

Sridhar: The legal system, which is both blind and deaf, did not take into account that Budhan had already been taken into remand.

Constable 1: The deputy commissioner and the superintendent of police searched Budhan's home, but they failed to find anything but poverty.

Inspector Ashok Roy: On the 13th February, the court released Sridhar Sabar on bail and he was taken to the Purulia jail.

Constable 3: Budhan is shifted to the Purulia jail after sunset, which is against the set procedures.

### Scene IX

The actors take the form of Purulia jail. The assistant superintendent takes attendance. Sridhar is also present among the prisoners.

Assistant Superintendent: Sridhar.

Sridhar: Yes, Sir.

The superintendent marks his presence.

Assistant Superintendent: Hmm...Kanji.

Kanji: Yes, sir.

The superintendent marks his presence in the register. Meanwhile a guard slowly and gently brings Budhan to the place where the roll call is taking place. He has been brutally beaten and is unable to walk.

Guard (To the superintendent): Sir, he is a Sabar. He was brought here yesterday evening from the Barabazaar police station.

On hearing the name Sabar, the superintendent's face fills with hatred.

Assistant Superintendent: Hmm...search him.

The guard searches Budhan but finds nothing.

Guard: There is nothing, Sir.

Assistant Superintendent: Okay. Make him sit there and continue with your work.

Guard: But Sir, it seems he has been severely beaten and injured. He is unable even to walk steadily, and has not been medically examined yet.

Assistant Superintendent (Showing indifference): Yes. Okay. Help him to sit, and then you may go.

The guard helps Budhan into a sitting position and goes away.

Assistant Superintendent (To Budhan): Aye, you. What is your name? (There is no answer. Budhan is unable to speak. The superintendent is furious at not receiving a reply. He raises his voice.) I said, what is your name? (There is still no response from Budhan. The superintendent is now fuming with anger. He goes near Budhan and shakes him.) You bastard! Can't you listen? I am asking you something. What is your name?

Budhan stirs as if disturbed from sleep. He is in a state of trauma, unable to understand what is happening to him. Frightened, he replies with great difficulty.

Budhan: B...u...dhan...Budhan Sabar...

Assistant Superintendent: Hmm...Budhan... Budhan Sabar...(Marks Budhan's presence in the attendance register.) What is your wife's name? (There is again no response from Budhan. The superintendent raises his voice.) What is your wife's name?

Budhan (Scared): Shyamali.

Assistant Superintendent: Any children?

Budhan: Budhan.

Assistant Superintendent: (Notes something in the register.) Hmm...Okay. Sridhar, you be the sentry for Gate Number 1 after serving lunch.

Sridhar: Yes, Sir. (He goes away)

Assistant Superintendent: Kanji, you clean the toilets.

Kanji: Yes, Sir.

He, too, goes away. Sridhar and Kanji get busy with their work at the rear of the stage.

Assistant Superintendent: (To Budhan) And you...Budhan Sabar...You will sweep the entire prison. Understood?

After giving orders, the superintendent walks off on his daily round of inspection. Budhan is badly injured. He gets up with great difficulty and takes the broom in his hand, but because of the severe pain in his body, he is unable to move. He sits on one side of the stage. On seeing him sit down, the guard shouts at him.

Guard: Aye...what are you doing? Why aren't you working?

The superintendent arrives.

Assistant Superintendent: What's happening?

Guard: Sir...he is not working.

Assistant Superintendent: These bloody Sabars...they are scoundrels. They will never do an honest day's work; they live by thieving alone. (Catches hold of Budhan and pushes his face on the floor) Thrash him so that he gives up being a parasite. (The guard and the superintendent beat Budhan mercilessly. His bones are broken. He can no longer even moan, but the guard and superintendent continue to beat him like an animal.)

(After they finish with Budhan) Lock the rascal in a dark cell where not even a single ray of light can enter. Let him yearn for light. Only then will this Sabar realize the value of hard work.

The guard calls the other prisoners working at the rear of the stage, and together they dump the halfconscious Budhan in a dark cell.

### Scene X

Budhan lies unconscious for some time. Sridhar enters the cell to give milk to Budhan. The

cell is pitchdark, so Sridhar has difficulty finding Budhan. He calls out his name.

Sridhar: B...udhan...Budh...an. It's so dark here – I can't even see. (Places his hand over his eyes)

Budhan...oh Budhan...please make some sound. Where are you?

Sridhar slowly makes his way forward in the dark. Budhan is lying semiconscious in a corner of a cell. Sridhar's feet come in contact with Budhan. Suddenly, Budhan wakes up, as if from a deep and painful sleep, and screams as if someone has inflicted fresh injury on his wounds.

Budhan (As Sridhar touches him): Don't hit me. Please don't hurt me. I have not done anything. Sir, I am innocent. Please don't beat me. I have not committed any theft...Oh! I have not committed any theft...ah! (Budhan writhes in pain as if someone is beating him mercilessly. Sridhar tries to soothe him.)

Sridhar: Budhan... Budhan... Budhan...I am Sridhar, your friend. (Holding Budhan) You don't recognize me. Look at me. I am Sridhar.

On hearing Sridhar's name, Budhan quiets down. He slowly tries to gain control of himself. He narrows his eyes and looks at Sridhar, then takes Sridhar's face in his hands. Once he's sure it is Sridhar besides him, Budhan begins to cry uncontrollably.

Budhan: Sridhar... Sridhar, please save me, Sridhar. These people beat me mercilessly. Sridhar, I have not done anything. I...I am innocent...I have not stolen anything...You...you know me. I simply make baskets. Sridhar, I beg you, please save me...or...or these people will kill me...Sridhar.

On seeing Budhan break down, Sridhar is deeply moved.

Sridhar (Trying to console Budhan): Budhan... please do not feel scared...Everything will be okay.

Budhan (Sobbing): Sridhar...I am innocent... Believe me...I am innocent.

Sridhar: I know, my friend. You have not done anything wrong. But we belong to the Sabar community. We poor tribals can do nothing to these butchers. But...don't lose heart, my friend (holding Budhan's face in his hands). Nothing will happen to you. I'm here with you, my friend. Nothing will happen to you. (Picking up the glass) Drink this milk. (Budhan refuses to drink the milk.) Please drink it, Budhan. You have not eaten anything in the last few days. (Brings the glass to Budhan's lips. Budhan drinks the milk. As soon as Sridhar moves to leave, Budhan clutches his leg.)

Budhan: Please don't leave me...don't go away, Sridhar. I'm very frightened here. These people will kill me. Sridhar...please don't leave me.

Reluctantly, Sridhar frees himself from Budhan's grip and picks up the glass.

Sridhar: Please don't worry, Budhan. No harm will come to you. Nothing will happen.

Sridhar goes away. After he leaves, the loneliness of the cell once again gets to Budhan.

He is extremely frightened. He begins to feel that, along with his body, his mind and spirit have been deeply wounded. His mind is crowded with terrifying thoughts. He has lost control over his body and mind. He feels as if his children are calling out to him in the dark cell.

A voice in the background: Father...father... bring me a bird from the market.

A voice in the background: And Father, bring sweets for me.

On hearing these voices, which are really inside his mind, Budhan grows very restless. He feels a void all around him. His mind is unsteady. In the backdrop, there is a rhythmic call of “Budhan...Budhan”, which is very frightening. Budhan feels that someone is calling out for him in that dark cell. He looks around hysterically. He is disturbed and feels a tremendous physical pain. Four actors, chanting “Budhan... Budhan” come and surround him. Suddenly, Budhan writhes in pain, feeling that he is being tormented once again. Budhan wants to escape from those who want to seize his body and spirit, but the four actors terrify him by moving around him like evil spirits. They frighten Budhan by chanting like ghosts, and continue to chant with a terrifying intensity.

Chorus:  
Budhan is a thief.  
Accept your crime.  
Beat the scoundrel.  
Give him electric shocks.  
Drive him mad.  
The dark cell.

Their pitch rises and they move around Budhan in a circle.

Chorus:  
Budhan is a thief.  
Accept your crime.  
Beat the scoundrel.  
Give him electric shocks.  
Drive him mad.  
The dark cell.

Their pitch rises and they move around Budhan in a circle, more rapidly now.

Chorus:  
Budhan is a thief.  
Accept your crime.  
Beat the scoundrel.  
Give him electric shocks.  
Drive him mad.  
The dark cell.

Their pitch rises and they move around Budhan in a frenzied circular movement. Suddenly, all become silent. Budhan is unable to bear this attack on his spirit, and thinks he is losing control of his mind. He feels as if the god of death has taken the form of these four people, who are slowly trying to tear out his heart and seize his soul.

Chorus (Reaching out for Budhan’s heart with their hands): Death...death...death.  
Their voice gradually loses its intensity. Budhan can no longer bear the physical torture and the mental agony. After a heart rending shriek, he falls down dead, suddenly free from everything. Everything is quiet – silent. There is total silence. The actors leave the stage.

### Scene XI

Budhan is dead. His body is lying in the police station. The superintendent comes with his colleagues for a medical checkup.

Assistant Superintendent (Entering the dark cell): Today this Sabar will have to be medically checked. (On seeing Budhan lying on the floor) Wake up the bloody man.

One of the prison officers kicks Budhan. There is no reaction. The superintendent tries to make him sit up, but Budhan does not respond. The superintendent tries to feel his breath and check his pulse. He realizes the

body is lifeless and is terrified.

Assistant Superintendent: Oh...my God. He is dead.

All become pale.

Constable 2: Sir. If anyone comes to know about this, we'll be in deep trouble.

Assistant Superintendent: Yes. You're right. But... (Thinks for some time) From which police station was he brought here?

Constable 3: Sir, from the Barabazaar police station.

Assistant Superintendent: Hmm...

After pondering for a while, the superintendent moves to the phone lying in a corner and dials a number. On the other side, Officer Roy is sleeping in the Barabazaar police station. He answers the call.

Inspector Ashok Roy: Hello...Barabazaar police station. May I help you?

Assistant Superintendent: Hello. This is the assistant superintendent of the Purulia jail speaking.

Inspector Ashok Roy: Hmm...yes, Sir.

Assistant Superintendent: May I speak to Inspector Roy?

Inspector Ashok Roy: Speaking.

Assistant Superintendent: Inspector Roy, yesterday, your police station sent an accused to us. Budhan Sabar.

Inspector Ashok Roy: Yes. So?

Assistant Superintendent: For your kind information, he is no more.

On hearing this, Officer Roy suddenly grows alert. He is now somewhat worried.

Inspector Ashok Roy: What are you saying, Sir?

Assistant Superintendent: Yes. He probably died due to excess torture. The torture may have been inflicted in your lock-up or perhaps in our cell. We are both in the same situation, like two sides of a coin. We now have to think how we can wriggle out of this.

Inspector Ashok Roy (Without any worry and totally at ease): What do you suggest I do? What have we always done under such circumstances? ...Suicide...

Assistant Superintendent: Suicide... (Both laugh excitedly. The superintendent puts down the receiver and goes near Budhan's corpse and orders the watchman.) You...go to the market quickly and buy a piece of cloth.

Constable 3 brings the cloth. The others hold Budhan's body vertically while the superintendent ties the cloth around Budhan's neck, thereby making it look like Budhan has strangled himself to death.

Assistant Superintendent: Now nobody can say that his death... bring down his body and hand it to his relatives.

Budhan's body is taken away.

## Scene XII

Budhan's body is lying on the floor. Shyamali comes running. On seeing Budhan lying dead, she loses her senses and faints. She cannot believe her husband is dead.

Shyamali: Budhan... Budhan! What happened, Budhan? Why do you not speak, Budhan? See...open your eyes...I am Shyamali...your Shyamali. Look at me, Budhan...Speak to me, Budhan. Why are you so quiet, Budhan? Why don't you talk to me? Get up, Budhan...you cannot leave me like this...(On seeing Budhan's still body and understanding, Shyamali gives a heart rendering shriek and begins to cry inconsolately) Budhan...Budhan, you cannot go away, leaving me alone. Oh...someone wake my Budhan! Oh...wake him up! Budhan...Budhan...Take me with you! I...Didn't I tell you these people will kill you? Killed you – they've killed you...they have killed my Budhan... Shyamali wails loudly and beats her chest with her hands. She clutches Budhan's body and wails.

Officer Roy and the Assistant Superintendent arrive.

Assistant Superintendent: Aye, woman...your husband strangled himself with a piece of cloth.

Inspector Ashok Roy: Cremate this body immediately before us. And stop this wailing. Prepare for his cremation immediately. Understood?

Officer Roy and the Assistant Superintendent leave the house. On seeing them walk away, Shyamali begins to shout like a wounded tigress.

Shyamali: Cloth! Budhan had no spare piece of cloth with him. Then...oh....you will go to Hell. May your wives become widows and your children be orphaned. (Calling them) You rascals, come back! You have taken my husband away. (She breaks down. She goes back near Budhan's body.) Budhan...these same people have killed you. I will kill them...Budhan.

Shyamali is crying. Ashish, who is a member of the Kheria Sabar Kalyan Samiti, arrives with a message from Mahasveta Devi.

Ashish: Shyamali, Mahasveta Devi says that Budhan's body should not be cremated at any cost. Bury Budhan's body so that nobody comes to know about this. To fool the police, burn Budhan's effigy. Have you understood what I have said? And please do not worry. All of us, the Samiti and the villagers along with Mahasveta Devi, will avenge Budhan's death.

The man goes away. Shyamali gets up slowly to the rhythmic chant of "Budhan...Budhan" in the background. She digs a hole in the floor of her own house and, with a heavy heart, buries Budhan. She then lies down on the ground. On the other side of the stage, there is a public demonstration for justice in the face of Budhan's death.

A group of demonstrators take center stage.

### Scene XIII

Villager 1: Budhan did not commit suicide. He was killed.

Constable 1: Conduct a post-mortem.

Villager 2: The police have killed Budhan.

Villager 3: Budhan was innocent.

Sridhar: We want justice...we want justice.

The demonstrators march in a circle and cry for justice.

All: We want justice.

Villager 1: Let Budhan's death be investigated. We want ...

All: Justice!

Villager 2: Stop the injustice on Sabars. We want...

All: Justice... We want justice, we want justice!

Villager 1: The people's voice has been heard...

Constable 1: Justice has finally awakened...

Villager 2: At last the day has arrived...

Villager 3: The day of justice...

The actors assume the form of a courtroom.

Sridhar: Date: 21st July 1998. The Calcutta High Court.

#### Scene XIV

Judge: Order...order! The Court has heard the appeal of Smt. Mahasveta Devi, Advocate Pradip Roy and Justice D. K. Basu in the Budhan murder case. The postmortem reports and the Central Forensic Science Laboratory's report prove that Budhan Sabar did not commit suicide. He was killed. The court orders all police officers involved in this crime suspended. The court directs the government to pay Rs. 1lakh to the widow of Budhan Sabar as compensation, and hands over the detailed investigation of Budhan Sabar's death to the C.B.I.

After the final judgment, all actors stand still while Budhan's spirit takes the front stage. Budhan addresses the audience.

Budhan: Finally...finally ...tell me, what was my crime? Why was I killed? I was only eating a paan. Is ever eating a paan a crime for us...? My wife is now a widow...My son is now orphaned...What will happen to them now that I'm gone? Was... did my crime lie in the fact that I was a Sabar? A DNT?!

As if along with Budhan, the entire community of DNTs is crying. The actors form a semi-circle.

Shyamali: The same question – every DNT asks this question. Why are they subject to such atrocities?

Villager 1: If a DNT commits a crime, is the punishment death?

Constable 1: No Bhansali was born among the DNTs.

Villager 2: No Harshad Mehta was born among the DNTs.

Villager 3: No DNT is involved in a fodder scam.

Sridhar: No DNT is involved in the Bofors scandal.

Shyamali: Are we second class citizens?

All: Are we second class citizens?

All: We need respect.

We need respect.

We need respect.

We need respect.

They all form a human chain, each actor with a raised hand.

Budhan is reproduced with permission from G.N. Devy.

A Chinese translation of this play can be found online:

[http://zonble.twbbs.org/archives/2005\\_12/824.php](http://zonble.twbbs.org/archives/2005_12/824.php)

#### Frequently Asked Questions

□ How can I get involved?

Please join the “Friends of Budhan Theatre” group on Google:

<http://groups.google.com/group/friends-of-budhan-theatre>

You can follow discussion on the web, or subscribe to get updates via e-mail.

□ Who are the Chhara?

The Chhara are one of India’s indigenous, nomadic peoples (or “denotified tribes”). Originally from Punjab, the Chhara community was placed in a settlement in 1933, under direct control of the Bombay Presidency. Permission for this image granted under the terms of the

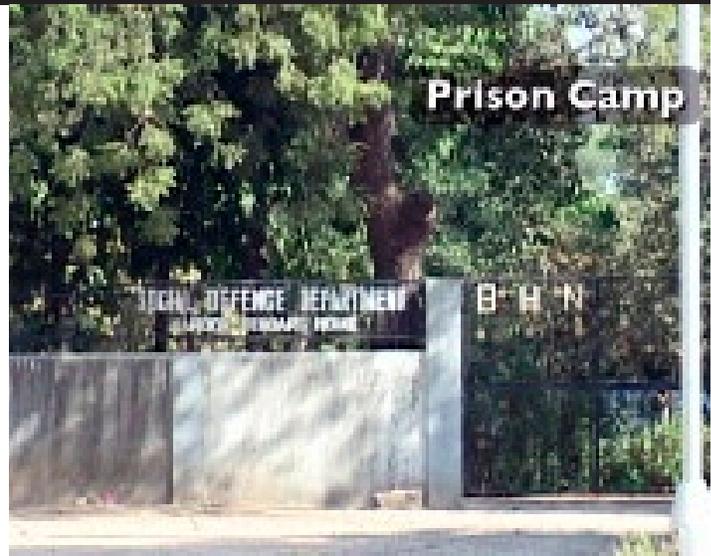
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□ What are adivasis and denotified tribes (DNTs)?

The term adivasi (“original inhabitants” in Sanskrit) refers to India’s indigenous or tribal people. Adivasis make up a significant percentage of India’s minority population. While reliable figures are difficult to obtain from census reporting, adivasis account for approximately 8% of India’s population.

The term denotified tribe (DNT) designates certain groups of adivasis who were “notified” by the British Colonial government as



criminals in 1871. Because many tribes were nomadic, the British were concerned that they were carrying intelligence that the British could not control. Once they were “notified,” the British attempted to sequester tribes in “settlements,” where were tantamount to forced labor camps. These “criminal” tribes were “de-notified” in 1952 but were later classified as “habitual offenders” in 1959. As a result, the stigma of criminality continues to follow them.

□ Where is Chharanagar located?

Chharanagar is located on the outskirts of Ahmedabad in the state of Gujarat. The city of Ahmedabad is a commercial city and is a center of science and technology. Chharanagar was once the location of a settlement, where members of the Chhara community were forced into industrial and agricultural labor as a means of rehabilitation. After the DNTs were released from their settlements, many Chharas chose to remain in the area around the Chhara Settlement, having few other options.

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□ Are DNTs part of the caste system?

DNTs were historically excluded from the system, a hierarchical form of social stratification that has shaped India and, particularly, Hindu society for millennia. It is important to note, however, that the caste system did not always exist as a rigid classification system. Prior to colonization by the British, the caste system was a much more fluid institution. The British used the caste system for their own purposes, consolidating their dominance. Today, some DNTs are designated as “Scheduled Castes” by the government; these are lower castes that receive certain benefits from the Indian government. Others are listed as “Other Backward Classes.”

□ How do people know they are Chharas?

Beyond the historical injustices Denotified Tribes (DNTs) faced during the British Colonial period, Chharas (and other DNTs) continue to suffer from ethnic discrimination. Stigmatized as thieves, it is difficult for them to get legitimate jobs in mainstream society. As a last resort, they turn to criminal activity. It is a vicious circle from which only a few are able to escape.

But how do people know they are Chhara?

They don’t look noticeably different from the rest of the population, and even if they did, they could easily be from a neighboring state. They speaking their own language (Bhantu), but they can speak Gujarati as well as anyone else. The answer, it turns out, couldn’t be simpler: they ask.

As Roxy [Gagdekar, Chhara himself and founding member of Budhan Theatre, as well as a journalist for Gujarat Samachar], put it, the third question when you apply for a job, after “What is your name?” and “Where are you from?”, is “What is your caste?” Technically Chharas are outside of the caste system,

but that doesn’t help. They have to answer the question. Even if there are laws against discrimination on the basis of caste, there don’t seem to be any laws against asking such questions. Roxy says it would be even worse for a Chhara if they lied and were found out.

(Reprinted from <http://savageminds.org/2005/12/17/how-to-spot-a-chhara/>)

□ Why is Gujarat a dry state?

Gujarat is the only Indian state that enforces prohibition, and it has done so since May 1, 1961. Porbandar, in the state of Gujarat was the birthplace of Mohandas Gandhi, commonly known as Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi is famous for advocating non-violent resistance to British rule in India. Additionally, Gandhi led a strict, ascetic life, exemplifying for his followers his belief in strict discipline—including abstinence from alcoholic beverages. Because Gandhi championed prohibition, the state of Gujarat chose to enforce prohibition to honor Gandhi’s principles. Despite its status as a dry state, Gujarat is anything but dry. Liquor is smuggled into Gujarat from neighboring states like Rajasthan and Maharashtra, and bootleggers are very active. Alcohol industry thrives within Gujarat as well; Chharanager is known



for its liquor. While some Chharas brew liquor for a source of income, others do so because they are compelled by the police. The police play a significant role in perpetuating a cycle of illegal activity. Because members of the Chhara community brew liquor, members of the police force are able to extract a hafta (a bribe or payoff) from them; because the police want to receive their hafta, they want members of the Chhara community to continue brewing the liquor.

Radhakrishna, Meena. "Dishonored By History: 'Criminal Tribes' and British Colonial Policy." New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2001.

## Resources and links

### Web Pages

<http://www.hoochandhamlet.com>

<http://www.indiatogether.org/society/adivasis.htm>

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