

## 'Criminals'<sup>1</sup> Performing for Change: Budhan Theatre's fight against injustice and police atrocity

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### **ABSTRACT**

This article is about the Budhan Theatre, located in Ahmedabad, Gujarat, India and known for using Street Theatre as a medium to bring about social change. Budhan's street theatre is a new kind of theatre which brings individuals from the stigmatized community to the stage and aims to raise consciousness and demand social acceptance for them in the process. The article examines Budhan Theatre as a movement that brings about socio-political change in India and discusses its performances and their implications in light of performance studies. The discussion presented here is based on my observations, interviews with members of Budhan theatre, and print media coverage. I have been connected to Budhan theatre for the past five years through conducting this research, facilitating some of the children's workshops, talking to Chhara community members, and observing the group and their activities closely. The strategy of Budhan Theatre, which underlies each of its plays, is to highlight social problems by expressing people's situations. The ideology and propaganda behind the performances are quite similar to those of other indigenous theatres in the world: to make the audience feel culpable about the plight of the oppressed by presenting their victimhood. The theatre company performs these plays throughout India and supports and fights for other denotified and nomadic tribes who are facing similar problems.

<sup>1</sup> This incorrect label of 'Criminals' was first given under colonial rule, but is preserved by Indian society today.

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## THEATRE OF RESISTANCE IN INDIA

Resistance against colonial power and the subversion of the notion of a superior culture led socially and economically marginalized communities to produce their own culture in colonial India. This hegemonic condition also challenged the middle class and led them to develop their own discourse and forms of resistance under colonial rule. According to G. P. Deshpande, the bourgeois forms of representations during the colonial period were accompanied by a strong new national identity, which moved the middle class to produce theatre in its own language and forms (Deshpande, 2000, pp. xi-xii). These hegemonic conditions were, however, not new for the socially marginalised and nomadic communities of India, who produced arts and theatre in their own style and language. As Lata Singh notes in the introduction to the book, *Theatre in Colonial India: Play-House of Power*:

Popular culture is one of the important sites of contestation. It is one of the principle sites where hierarchies are established and contested. Colonial elites made an attempt to marginalize popular forms in their quest for reform and respectability. However, despite their attempts to marginalize popular theatre, popular culture was anything but marginalized to social and cultural processes. Popular practices are neither just traditions of resistance nor just forms on which bourgeois forms are superimposed. The popular culture is appropriated by modernity and it, in turn, appropriates modernity (Singh, 2009, p. 3).

The study of popular forms of theatre and their socio-political implications in India is significant because of the material conditions of literacy and the country's working class culture. According to Singh, in India printed and official materials only reach the educated elite class of people; ideas and problems of minority communities and subaltern voices remain largely unheard and invisible in printed, written, and official narratives. For this reason, oral cultures and popular arts are quite significant in India as means of retrieving these subaltern voices (Singh, 2009, p. 5).

Popular culture and theatres in India are most commonly studied in the context of leftist or nationalist movements. Leftist and nationalist theatre groups have a history of resistance against casteism, capitalism, socio-economic, and political power structures during colonisation and after independence. Unlike leftist theatre, the theatre of resistance from socially marginalised communities like denotified and the nomadic tribes (the DNTs)<sup>2</sup> has rarely been recognised or noticed in independent India. Budhan Theatre (hereafter, Budhan) is a non-profit, non-commercial, and voluntary organisation representing the theatre made by DNTs. Budhan has its connection to the colonial era, particularly in terms of the colonizers painting the

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<sup>2</sup> The British labelled DNTs them 'criminals' because they pursued a nomadic way of life. Nomadic tribes used to trade and transport important commodities such as salt and honey between the coasts and the inland forests. The British used the networks of these tribes to guide their armies through unknown regions during colonial times in India. However, the fact that these tribes were different and did not follow the caste system made the colonizers uncomfortable with their way of living. The British could not understand these mysterious wanderers, and became concerned that they carried intelligence which could not be controlled (by the British) directly (Barge, 2013, p.8). After the Revolt of 1857, these tribes were seen as potential enemies and, in 1871, an Act was passed for "The Notification of Criminal Tribes" (Barge, 2013, p. 8). "Hundreds of tribes that traditionally collected food from the forest became criminals with the stroke of a pen. When they could not be forcibly settled, they were sometimes shot on sight. Those who were settled were subjected to a pass system to control their movements and were rehabilitated through rigorous labour" (Budhan Theatre <http://www.budhantheatre.org/#!theatre/cw8r>).

nomadic tribes as criminals. Budhan uses theatre as a medium of resistance against police atrocities and other acts of social injustice that attack DNTs in India.

Budhan's theatre is a new kind of theatre that brings people from stigmatized communities to the stage and aims to raise consciousness of their plight while demanding social acceptance. Budhan tries to reclaim the subaltern voices of DNTs and present them to the world through the medium of popular theatre forms such as street theatre, musical theatre, and oral cultural performances. Before we discuss the significance of the group and its theatre, it is necessary to know the history behind the emergence and existence of the theatre group.

This article is a condensed version of larger research study on the socio-political implications of street theatre in India. It attempts to highlight the significance of Budhan Theatre as a community theatre group and its larger implications for society and India as a nation-state. I have been connected to Budhan theatre for the past five years through conducting this research, facilitating some of the children's workshops, talking to Chhara community members, and observing the group and their activities closely. The discussion presented here is based on my observations, interviews with members of Budhan theatre, and print media coverage. The paper explores major performances and activities of the Budhan theatre against the backdrop of performance studies.

### **THE EMERGENCE AND DEVELOPMENT OF BUDHAN THEATRE**

The Chhara community is included among the communities that were listed as 'criminal tribes' in 1871 by the British Government under the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA). The CTA was amended three times. The Chhara community was confined to a colony named Chharanagar in 1931, after the third amendment of the CTA (Bajrange, 2013). Five years after India's independence from British colonial rule, on August 31, 1952, the Criminal Tribes Act was removed from Indian legislation and the Chhara, as well as other tribes, were released from the settlement. But many of these tribal populations stayed living on the same settlement land, having no other land, resources, or skills to survive. The government enforced the Habitual Offenders Act (HOA) after independence, under the influence of which the police had authority to investigate suspects' supposedly criminal tendencies (Rao, 2013, p. 6). Police forces around the country used these laws to subject De-notified and Nomadic Tribes to a constant barrage of attacks and surveillance, and tribal members became the subjects of regular humiliation, beatings, and other atrocities by police forces (Jain, Faleiro and Risam, 2008, p. 6). Put simply, "The Criminal Tribes Act was reborn under the name of HOA" in independent India, and police atrocity and social discrimination remained the same (Barge, 2013, p. 18).

The Chharas are settled on the northern outskirts of the megacity of Ahmadabad in Gujarat (the state located on the West coast of India) and speak the *Bhamta* language; they count the Sansi and Bajania tribes as their linguistic cousins. There is a very strong prejudice against the Chharas in surrounding areas, such that when any casual visitors speak or want to visit the Chharanagar, they are advised not to go

inside the community by the transport providers and *autorikshaw* taxi drivers. Consequently, nobody except for social workers, students, or activists would visit Chharanagar. Due to their history of nomadism and forced sedentarization, social stigmas have developed about the Chharas that place them at a considerable disadvantage in competing for jobs and education. They have become scapegoats for the police, who manipulate the Chharas for illegal purposes, such as brewing country liquor under threat of police conscription. Although the youth in Chharanagar find it very difficult to acquire and retain employment, the Chharas are highly motivated to excel at education.<sup>3</sup>

On August 31, 1998, Budhan was founded by Dr. G. N. Devy, a literary critic, linguist, and tribal activist based in Baroda (Gujarat, India) and run by Chharanagar community members Dakxin Bajrange Chhara and Roxy Gagdekar Chhara. The name 'Budhan' was chosen in honour of the work done by the writer-activist Mahashweta Devi who fought for justice for Budhan Sabar (who belonged to one of the DNTs in Bengal). The theatre group also runs a small library to support Chhara children in their studies. The founders of the Chharanagar library were Smt. Mahashweta Devi and Dr. G. N. Devy. The theatre group fights for social justice and acceptance on behalf of denotified and nomadic tribes all over India. "The establishment of the library and theatre were the early steps for our resistance and development. We are struggling hard to remove that stigma from the community through the medium of theatre. I know, it's not easy; it will take many years to be totally accepted by mainstream society, but I am confident and hopeful about our efforts", notes Dakxin (D. Bajrange, personal interview, January 24, 2012). Since 1998, Budhan has performed street plays to raise awareness about the condition of these tribes. Its goal is to demonstrate that Chharas (and other DNTs) are not "born criminals"; rather, they are humans with real emotions, capacities, and aspirations as members of a larger Indian society.

### **INCREASING AWARENESS OF INJUSTICE AND ATROCITY THROUGH THE MEDIUM OF THEATRE**

Budhan's strategy is to express social injustice and police atrocity through each of its plays. The ideology and design behind the performances is to make the audience feel culpable or embarrassed about injustices against the Chharas through presentation of their victimhood in the performance. The theatre group performs its plays throughout India and supports and fights for other denotified and nomadic tribes that are facing similar problems. They also produce stage performances such as *An Accidental Death of an Anarchist* by Dario Fo, *Balcony* by Jene Jenet, *Bhoma* by Badal Sirkar, and *Charandas Chor* by Habib Tanwir. However, they adapt these plays and make them suitable to represent their own sufferings.

Budhan's theatre is creative, experiential, and an inherent art (they refer to themselves as born actors), which they use to resist injustice. As Dakxin says,

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<sup>3</sup> This information is based on my own experience of numerous visits to Chharanagar and observations and communications with Chharanagar residents between 2010 and 2015.

I am not a theoretician, my theatre is experiential, but the theatre not only gave us a changed identity, it also provided dignity. Even other artists from Gujarat have started looking up to us as one of them. In fact our children couldn't get into college for higher education earlier but today they do because they are considered good actors! (Bajrange, 2008, p. 31)

Budhan's plays also increase awareness about issues like female infanticide, corruption, communal extremism, and an ineffective education system. However, their major task is to resist and rebel against the injustices made against them to encourage socio-political acceptance. They fight for communities which are not given any power except the right to vote, which is a minor concession in today's corrupt structure. Even after 68 years of independence, the majority of DNTs do not have ration card,<sup>4</sup> and are not included in the electoral and BPL list (Barge, 2013, p. 11).<sup>5</sup> Budhan's approach is a "rights-based approach," which means, theoretically, that the act of participation in theatrical performance can be empowering (Sen, 1999, p. 33).

### COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT THROUGH THEATRE

The group focuses on four major activities: resistance through theatre, community sensitization, the development of a library, and theatre training. The Chhara community, being socially, politically, and economically distanced from mainstream society, faces many challenges such as illiteracy (though not in very high number), community hygiene, unemployment, gender inequality, illegal brewing of liquor (as a consequence of unemployment and lack of resources), and stealing or criminal activity (although to a lesser extent). Budhan sponsors scholarships for the education of young girls. It also runs an informal community school with the support of the Denotified Rights Action Group (DNT-RAG),<sup>6</sup> and receives support from Bhasha Research<sup>7</sup> for research and publication on issues related to the DNTs of India. Budhan occasionally performs plays for community development within Chharanagar. The group has campaigned against female infanticide, child marriage, liquor addiction, and women's oppression through theatre. Their efforts at community development have been recorded in *Please Don't Beat me Sir!* a documentary by P. Kerim Friedmen and Sashwati Talukdar. This documentary is a proof of Budhan's rigorous efforts towards community development. Ankur, one of Budhan's members, talks about the change in community practices:

Some years ago, in our community, it was a custom that the most beautiful girl marries the best thief of the community. Those who weren't robbers had to wait a

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<sup>4</sup> A ration card is a card provided by the government of India to low-income families to receive groceries at subsidised prices from government approved grocery shops. The card is also approved and accepted nationally and internationally as proof of identity for Indian citizens.

<sup>5</sup> The BPL list is a list of people living below poverty line.

<sup>6</sup> The DNT Rights Action Group (DNT-RAG) was formed by Mahashweta Devi, Dr. G. N. Devy, and Laxman Gaikwad, the signers of the petition to investigate the custodial death of Budhan Sabar, a tribal member of Kheira Sabar community (one of the DNTs) of the West Bengal. (Budhan was brutally murdered under police custody).

<sup>7</sup> Dr. G. N. Devy formed a voluntary organization named the Bhasha Research and Publication Trust in April 1996 for the documentation of tribal languages and literature, conversation and promotion of tribal arts, education, research and training, socio-economic empowerment, and healthcare for the tribal communities of India. Bhasha Research and Publication Trust has established its centre in a remote tribal village named Tejgath, which falls into the Eastern belt of Gujarat (located 90 kilometres away from the Vadodara city). The Bhasha centre promotes computer education, art training, non-traditional education, and 'publication for social change' among youth and the members of the tribal communities. For more details, please visit: <http://www.bhasharesearch.org>

long time to get a girl, but now, it has changed. Today, the best girl marries the most educated bachelor of the community. (A. Garange, personal communication, January 23, 2012)

However, some of the families in the community are still rigid regarding issues such as the education of young girls, child marriage, and women's liberation. But, there are some who have fought against this rigidity and criticism from the community to educate their children in hopes of directing them towards a brighter future.

The Chharanagar library is established in only one room in which they have hundreds of books on radical literature, art, history, and language. These books are donated by a number of people and institutions. They have the daily Gujarati newspaper and computers in their library. The school/college students and children from Chharanagar gather at the library on a daily basis for their study and theatre training. The Chhara youth learn from each other and are committed towards sensitizing the community to the idea that 'Chharas are not born criminals, they are born performers'.<sup>8</sup>



**Figure 1:** a photograph at Budhan Theatre library - children being trained for theatre making (photo courtesy: Budhan Theatre Library)

The members of the Budhan Theatre include students and children. Those who are not studying and older group members are busy earning a living, either in the form of a job or through self-employment.

Budhan also runs two professional certificate courses on Mass Communication and Performance Studies, which are affiliated with Indira Gandhi Open University. The library significantly serves as a socio-cultural space wherein the children of the community learn to raise their voice through the medium of arts.

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<sup>8</sup> Personal observation during fieldwork in which I visited the group and the library for six months on a regular basis and then, occasionally thereafter. I actually observed and witness Budhan members doing this.

## MAJOR PERFORMANCES AND AFTERMATHS

Budhan's play creation process is democratic. Members come together and decide what issue should be highlighted after conducting community surveys within the Chhara and other DNT or marginalized communities. After deciding on a theme and issues to be addressed, members prepare a plot and decide roles. Then, the play goes to the floor. Actors create dialogues according to their roles and develop the play into a script scene by scene. This draft script then undergoes a series of revisions and editing before the final script is prepared. Actors often improvise during the performance of the plays, changing the dialogues and making them more effective according to the spectators. Budhan's performance and its effects changes according to the space and setting. For instance, the play becomes more tragic and reflects intense police atrocity when they perform it in front of the police station (with the intention of making police feel guilty and/or ashamed of what they do to the DNTs, and most of these police performances are interrupted as the performers are forced to leave or banned from the space). However, the same play emphasizes the innocence (as non-criminal) of the victimized member of the DNT community when they perform it in front of the mainstream spectatorship of India.<sup>9</sup>



Budhan Bolta Hai, directed by Dakxin Bajrange Chhara, Budhan Theatre, 28-03-2008 (Atish Indrekar Chhara, Jeetendra Indrekar Chhara, Nakul Ghasi Chhara, Yagnesh Indrekar Chhara) © Praveen Indrekar Chhara.

**Figure 2:** street performance of Budhan Bolta Hai (photo courtesy: Budhan Theatre Library)

Moreover, Budhan prepares separate plays for each of the social problems they seek to address, and avoids irking spectators with tired, monotonous, or repetitive performances. They work with few resources, using limited props and performing short plays on street corners. However, the actors also perform these street plays on

<sup>9</sup> By mainstream spectatorship, I mean the section of society of those who are socially, politically, and economically more privileged than the DNTs of India. This particular section of Indian society actually discriminates against DNTs and still looks at them through colonial lenses that portray them as communities of 'criminals'.

more formal stages upon request or invitation. “In each play we try to express a social problem and highlight our situation”, says D. Bajrange (personal interview, January 24, 2012). This explains the choice of plays such as *Budhan Bolta Hai* (“Budhan Speaks”,<sup>10</sup> also known as “Budhan”), *Pinya Hari Kale ki Maut* (“Pinya Hari Kale’s Death”, based on the Budhan Sabar and Kale murder case), and *Encounter*.

*Encounter* (2001) is a performance by Budhan Theatre that reflects police atrocity and showcases a victimized theatre member from one of the DNTs located in the Maharashtra region. The performance highlights a real incident of a fake encounter with the Maharashtra police. The member of one of the DNTs was forcibly taken out from his home and killed by the police even without forging any crime against him on paper. The encounter is recorded on paper for the crime done by some other person who bribed the police to not record the crime against him. The play points towards the tendency of police to label any DNT person as criminal and commit unspeakable violence towards the DNT community.

Another of Budhan’s efforts is *Bhoma* by Badal Sircar. Sircar’s original script contrasted urban and rural life in India and focused on the urban middle class. The protagonist, a poor villager, symbolizes struggling and oppressed people. But Budhan modified the script to instead show how the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation bulldozed a settlement, resulting in the death of two children. Using a common chorus – *Bulldozer bhai bulldozer, corporation bulldozer* (“Bulldozer brother, bulldozer, Corporation bulldozer”) – the play speaks to common fears within the community. In one of the scenes, a woman from the Kabutara community refuses to recognize her husband’s dead body and perform his last rites, fearing that her family would be linked to the incident and innocent family members would be arrested and beaten. The play struck the audience deeply, as it was not a fictional play; rather, it was based on the lived, traumatic experience of the people of Chharanagar (Bajrange, 2010, pp. 100-102).

*Ulgutan* is another play that represents the problems of the Adivasi community (one of the DNTs in India) fighting against the occupation of forest land by the government of India. These communities have been inhabitants of the forest for generations, having no other place to stay and survive. The forests are a source of livelihood that has been taken away by the Forestry Department; the play presents their revolution against the government acts of occupation. *Ulgutan* also gives an overview of the communities’ anti-British fight for land during the colonial period and intends to inspire the communities to resist against socio-political injustice in today’s India as well.

Unlike the plays representing the problems of DNTs, *Kahani Meri Tumhari* (“Story of Mine and Yours”) presents the stories of struggle from members of the Chhara community against social injustice and police atrocity. The play shows the actual sufferings and victimization of the community in a manner that brings tears to the eyes of spectators.<sup>11</sup> The play is a sequence of several real incidents that happened to

<sup>10</sup> All the translations are done by me unless otherwise indicated.

<sup>11</sup> Personal observation.

the fathers and forefathers of the Chhara members of Budhan. As Kalpana, one of Budhan's members, states, "This is our story and it makes us cry in real every time we perform. Some of them are the real experiences expressed by the elders of the community and some of them is experienced by myself" (K. Gagdekar, personal interview, January 23, 2012). Indeed, *Kahani Meri Tumhari* is an archive of the history of stigma, discrimination, and injustice perpetrated against the *Chhara* community.

### **BUDHAN PERFORMANCES AGAINST GENDER INEQUALITY AND COMMUNAL INTOLERANCE**

Budhan also performs plays that do not only articulate the problems of DNTs; rather, they express general problems in Indian society. Two such plays are *Choli ke Pichhe Kya* ("What's behind the Blouse") and *Mazhab Hamein Sikhata Aapas Mein Bair Rakhna* ("The Religion Foments Vengeance amongst Each Other"). The play *Choli ke Pichhe Kya Hai* ("What's behind the Blouse") presents the problem of female oppression under class, caste, and gender hierarchies. The play is about the commodification<sup>12</sup> of the female body within the oppressive socio-economic power structure and caste hierarchy; it is an adaptation of Mahashweta Devi's short story "Breast Giver".<sup>13</sup> The title of the play is a reference to the famous song 'choli ke piche kya hai' from the Hindi movie *Khalnayak* (1993), which is was intended as an erotic performance by the well-known actress Madhuri Dixit.<sup>14</sup> However, since the story is about the commodification of the female body, the reference to the song moves away from its erotic meaning and towards the demonstration of a dehumanized and diseased body. In the play, a lower class but higher caste woman breastfeeds a number of children from a feudal lord family in order to earn money; for her breastfeeding job, she has to become pregnant each year in order to continuously produce milk. This narrative allows the play to explore economic hierarchy in a particular social arena where the feudal woman dominates a poor woman while both women are dominated by patriarchal agents. The objectification of a particular woman's body for the purpose of sexual pleasure and the commodification of her body for the utility of feeding children are the two major aspects through which the story and the adapted play create a discourse of the gendered subaltern. Male desire for the beautiful body of a woman as a tool for sexual pleasure and the commodification of that same body at the exchange value of minimum objects of livelihood such as cloths and food create a tragic picture.

The lack of female actors in the group (the group had young actresses as seen in **Figure 1** (above) but lacked mature female actresses for such a serious role) resulted in the use of female impersonators in the play; this turned out to be one of the most effective aspects of the performance. The play received several reactions, as Dakxin indicates. The first reaction was from students and teachers at the Girls' College Rajkot who said that the play had given voice to their feelings (D. Bajrange, personal

<sup>12</sup> I borrowed this term from the tradition of Marxist feminist criticism. For further details, see Luce Irigaray 'Commodities among Themselves', in *This Sex Which is not One*, tr. Catherine Porter. Ithaca, 1985, pp. 192-7.

<sup>13</sup> I have read the translated version of the story "Breast Giver" by Gayatri Spivak published in *Subaltern Studies V - Writings of south Asian History and Society*, edited by R. Guha. New Delhi: O.U.P. 2010, pp. 252-76.

<sup>14</sup> The video of this song can be viewed at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nHU3M3LSolY>

interview, January 24, 2012). On the other hand, the stage design was challenged as a result of the photographs of deities and Bollywood actresses used on the stage during the Hyderabad performance: “you cannot put the picture of an actress with that of goddesses because we cannot look at the goddess the way we look at the actresses, the goddesses are pure” (D. Bajrange, personal interview, January 24, 2012). This highlights the mentality of the society towards women that is being challenged through such performances by Budhan.

When communal riots rocked Ahmedabad in 2002, the group produced a play entitled *Mazhab Hamein Sikhata Aapas Mein Bair Rakhna* (“The Religion that Foments Vengeance amongst Each Other”), emphasizing values of tolerance and respect (Bajrange, 2010, pp. 92-96). The play opens with the actors trying to rehearse a patriotic poem, *mazahab nahin sikhata aapas mein bair rakhna* (“Religion does not teach us to seek vengeance against one another”). The scene suggests a play within the play, and the actors’ debate with each other to bring out the truth onstage. Tushar, one of the characters, suggests a change to the poem’s words, revealing the truth as it is. The other characters do not agree with him because of the dangers of telling the truth onstage. Tushar convinces them all by saying that theatre is the medium of art which should be used to state reality with courage. He parodies the poem and presents it differently, with satire. The form of this debate and discussion serve as a representation of the reality of those from lower classes and castes, highlighting their victimization in reference to the actual circumstances of the riots. Budhan intends to make the audience speechless with descriptions of victims and the brutality of politicians and leaders.

Each scene of the play presents an identical picture of the incidents that reportedly happened during the riots. The scenes contain the killing of the people and violent attacks (including rape) on women, which might have inspired the spectators to practice violent activities during the riots. The significant use of the names of the characters in *Mazahab* makes the play realistic, as it helps spectators to identify and recall the real incidents that they might have heard about or read in newspapers or watched on television. For example, in the incident wherein a Muslim woman becomes the victim of the Hindu mob, it points at the Kausar Banu case of the post-Godhra riots which was reported extensively in the media.<sup>15</sup> This scene in the play is very similar to a real-life occurrence during the riots where a Muslim woman was raped and killed, a fact witnessed by another woman named Zareena: “Deposing before the retired Justices G.T. Nanavati and K.G. Shah, Zareena Sheikh, a resident of Hussain Nagar slums, claimed she had witnessed the killing of Kausar Banu on February 28, 2002” (*The Indian Express*, December 12, 2003). The nation, ‘here and now’ as portrayed in *Mazahab*, includes voices of the poor and marginalized people who are mostly shown as Muslims or non-Muslim ‘lower caste’ Hindu. These voices are unheard and/or brutally silenced by the roar of the fanatical, mostly Hindu,

<sup>15</sup> One of the Naroda Patiya cases was being investigated by the Supreme Court-appointed Special Investigation Team (SIT) headed by former CBI director R K Raghavan. It is said that the Hindu mob slit open a pregnant woman Kausar Banu’s abdomen with a sword, taken out her foetus and thrown it into fire after she was gang raped. The court concluded that a person called Bajarangi along with the Hindu mob killed Kausar Banu, but the crime of removing the foetus and burning it was not proved against the accused. For a detailed report, visit: <http://www.gujaratriots.com/index.php/2010/05/myth-16-a-pregnant-womans-womb-was-ripped-open/>

hegemonic voice. The “problematic” ideas of friendship and co-living among the communities is shown as dismantled in the play.

The platform used by Budhan to articulate the truth about these communal riots became a site for the manifestation of fundamentalist politics, instead of gaining recognition for its secular message. Vishva Hindu Parisad (Hindu extremist group, VHP hereafter) members stopped the performance in the middle of a run-through, threatening to harm the actors if they continued performing the play. Several factors led to a ban of performing this piece. One of the reasons is the ‘space’ which was used; the place where Budhan initially tried to perform the play was very near to the “Naroda Patiya” area, the most affected area where many innocent people were killed by a fanatic mob in the communal riots of 2002 (*The Indian Express*, December 12, 2003). The second reason is that the ‘platform’ which was used against the fundamentalists was constructed within a ‘space’ that is politically charged with right-wing ideals.<sup>16</sup>

Although the performance of *Mazhab* was not officially banned by the government; it was controlled by the ruling party through its “extreme face” VHP (Deshpande S. quoted in Ghosh, 2012, p. 138). Budhan’s performers tend to make their performance as realistic and influential as they can, which might have created emotional aftermaths for the spectators in the dangerous time of riots. In this case, it can be noted that the group engaged in self-censorship as it did not want to risk the lives of its members. Budhan Theatre’s performances draw a clear picture of how the group has reacted differently against state perceptions of the ‘marginal’, creating a unique narrative. The performances can be depicted as theatrical statements layering three major socio-political factors: the state, state atrocities, and marginalized voices.

## FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY AND CREATIVE INITIATIVES

Unlike some theatre groups in India, Budhan does not receive money in the form of post-show collections from spectators. Rather, it often receives donations from foreign visitors or researchers and from Bhasha Research (Budhan’s parent organisation). The documentary film, *Please Don't Beat Me Sir!* has become a funding source for Budhan as the researchers aim to contribute a portion of the proceeds from this documentary film to Budhan.<sup>17</sup> The sustainability of any performative art (by a non-commercial/community theatre group) always involves a continuous struggle against hegemonic cultural forms which mark it as part of ‘political economy’ (Bhattacharya, 1998, p. 22). In the capitalist world, the performance is produced as a commodity:

A performance has to be produced, that is, it requires a certain deployment of labour power. This means that there is a political economy of performance, a history of its evolution through the contradiction between the ownership of the means of

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<sup>16</sup> The ruling government of Gujarat state during the riots was right-wing: the BJP (Bhartiya Janta Party). BJP is known for its goal of making India a Hindu state. The government had two other agencies working for it, i.e., VHP (Vishva Hindu Parishad) and RSS (Rashtriya Swayam Sevak Sangh). These are known as the muscle power and the mind power of the BJP, respectively.

<sup>17</sup> My observation and interview. For more details: <http://pleasedontbeatmesir.fournineandahalf.com/>

production and the pattern of dissemination of the product. (Bhattacharya, 1998, pp. 22)

Political theatre or the *agitprop* theatre<sup>18</sup> are inspired by a spirit of resistance and oriented towards transformation in a society. This resistance in street performances represents the “oppressed majority” or the marginal minority that is oriented towards transformation in socio-political situations (Ghosh, 2012, p. 272). This transformation works at the level of consciousness and aims at providing an alternative point of view to the oppressed majority and helps the marginal to become autonomous.

Budhan has significantly raised the muted voices of the DNTs and strategically established itself as a creative hub within the highly commercialized environment of the megacity - Ahmedabad. Budhan also organized the Ahmedabad Theatre Festival during February 24-26<sup>th</sup>, 2012 with support from the Ford Foundation and Bhasha Research. It is important to note Budhan’s connection to the Ford Foundation (FF hereafter) due to the recent controversy over FF’s funding activities in India. The government of India clamped down on the operations of the Ford Foundation in India in July 2015, freezing subsequent funding coming to India. The prime minister of India called the social activists and groups who received funding from the NGOs “the five star activists” and blamed the NGOs for bringing foreign funding with an intention to hamper industrial projects on social and environmental grounds (*The Times of India*, July 14, 2015).<sup>19</sup> Budhan received funds from FF through Bhasha Research who was the principal applicant according to the FF grants database 2011.<sup>20</sup> The theatre group has never received any grant or funding directly from the government for its art and performance projects, and is at potential risk of further political discriminations due to the history of receiving funding from an organisation that the government accuses of being ‘anti-national’. According to Roxy, one of Budhan’s members:

We have never received any financial support from the government of India and we do not expect it (as we know that the government will not give us any). We have tried to apply for the grants for our theatre performances in the past (though not for the festival grant) but were declined each time with a reason that we are not commercial theatre production company. (R. Gagdekar, personal interview, July 17, 2015)<sup>21</sup>

Aatish, Budhan’s emerging leader also shares similar feelings and says, “We would receive the grants and funding if we forget the politics and speak for the government! (which is never going to happen)” (A. Indrekar, personal interview, July 13, 2015).

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<sup>18</sup> *Agitprop* theatre signifies the theatrical performance employed as means of political education and or agitation. The term is a combination of two words: ‘agitation’ and ‘propaganda’ and was derived from the name of the Department of Agitation and Propaganda established in 1920 by the Soviet Communist Party of Russia.

<sup>19</sup> For more details, see <http://www.firstpost.com/blogs/life-blogs/ford-foundation-freezes-funding-to-india-as-modi-govt-clamps-down-on-ngos-2342146.html>

<sup>20</sup> Please visit <http://www.fordfoundation.org/work/our-grants/grants-database/grants-all?originatingoffices=%26OriginatingOfficelds%3D5&page=1&minyear=2011&maxyear=2011>

<sup>21</sup> For further explanation, please see the criteria for grants allocation on India’s Ministry of Culture website: <http://www.indiaculture.nic.in/performing-arts-grants-scheme>

However, Budhan's members are committed to keep their theatre movement strong with its broader principle of resisting against the injustice done to the DNTs.

Budhan's initiative of organising a theatre festival has significant implications within local and broader/national socio-political and theatrical spaces. More than 7,000 people participated in the festival and celebrated the theatre performances in seven different languages of India. The members of Budhan admit an artistic and cultural need for organising theatre festivals in Ahmedabad, as no other group had organised such a grand festival with such a number of shows with cultural and linguistic diversity. Roxy says, "It was us, Budhan theatre, who initiated the tradition of organising a theatre festival which is now followed by some local organisers; however, these are highly commercial performances and festivals" (R. Gagdekar, personal interview, July 17, 2015).



**Figure 3:** poster of Ahmedabad Arts Festival with sponsor details (Ford Foundation) (photo courtesy: Budhan Theatre Library)

Kalpana, another member of Budhan theatre, was invited to be part of the performance produced by a highly celebrated mainstream arts production company – Darpana Academy –run by celebrated artist Mallika Sarabhai. Kalpana, an excellent actress, achieved grand success and acceptance within the community of mainstream artists through this performance. She not only performed at this local venue, but recently went on to perform the show in the USA. She says, "It was ATF that provided us with good contacts with main stream artists who watched and appreciated our arts. It is because of Budhan's training, I have become a good actress and everyone in Ahmedabad and outside the city knows me today" (K. Gagdekar, personal interview, July 17, 2015). Kalpana was selected as one of the nominees for the best stage actress awards for the annual Gujarati theatre awards 2015.



**Figure 4:** poster of Black Comedy Theatre Festival (photo courtesy: Budhan Theatre Library)

The "Black Comedy Theatre Festival" was organized by Budhan Theatre during May 11-12, 2012, specifically intended to create space for the performers from the DNTs. People from eighteen different DNTs participated in this festival, held at Gujarat Sahitya Parishad, Ahmedabad. One of the important outcomes of this festival is that many DNT activists connected with each other and formed a committee for lobbying the state government for the rights of DNTs. Budhan is one of the theatre groups included in the Strategic Management in Arts of Theatre (SMART), an initiative promoted by India Theatre Forum, Junoon (based in Mumbai), and India Foundation for the Arts (IFA). This initiative is aimed at including theatre groups from across India through a roadmap in order to make them more sustainable, effective, and financially viable (Datta, S. "A Strategic Plan for Theatre" *The Hindu*, February 2, 2015).

## AWARDS, ACCOLADES AND MEDIA PRESENCE

Budhan Theatre has attracted significant attention from national newspapers like *The Times of India* and *The Hindu*, local newspapers like *The Gujarat Samachar*, *DNA*, and *Divya Bhaskar*, and magazines like *Tahelka*. *New Delhi Television (NDTV)* produced and broadcasted a special feature on Budhan in 2007. Moreover, the activities of Budhan Theatre and Bhasha Research received attention from international radio channels like *BBC* and *Voice of America* and TV channels such as *Zee TV*, *VNM*, *TV Eye*, and *Star Plus* (Gajjar, S. 1999). Budhan has talented artists who are well established within mainstream socio-political and artistic space today. For instance, two of Budhan's members were trained at the National School of Drama (NSD). Alok (one of them) is working in the Bollywood film industry. Another, Roxy, is a very good actor and a successful journalist. Roxy received the Gujarat Media Club 2014 annual award for his journalism work about illegal

mining. A third artist already mentioned, Kalpana, received the annual CII (Confederation of Indian Industry) award for her accomplishments as an actress.<sup>22</sup> Still other members of Budhan have received scholarships and fellowships for their theatre work.<sup>23</sup>

Dakxin has many accolades to his name including awards for documentary filmmaking and a fellowship to undertake a project at the University of Leeds in the United Kingdom. He received the Mahatma Gandhi Bi-yearly National Award for Creative Writing in Hindi from the Commission of Human Rights, for his autobiography and collection of plays *Budhan Bolta Hai* in August 2014. Dakxin's film *Sundarana*<sup>24</sup> was selected for screening at the 2015 Taiwan International Ethnographic Film Festival<sup>25</sup> held from 2-6 October 2015. Furthermore, Dakxin recently completed shooting a Hindi movie *Dhusar* starring actors Anjali Patil, Zeeshan Mohammed, and Seema Biswas alongside around sixty to seventy actors from Ahmedabad city. The title *Dhusar* is an Urdu word which means 'not everything in life is always black and white'. Dakxin says, "the movie spreads the message of non-violence and is planned to be released in April/May 2016" (Bhatt, V. November 25, 2015). Apart from its cast of Bollywood actors, the film has received contributions from well-known writer-lyricist Piyush Mishra who wrote some of the songs of the film, which increases its chance of falling into the category of mainstream cinema (Bhatt, V. November 25, 2015).



**Figure 5:** a newspaper article on Bajrange's movie, published in Ahmedabad Mirror, October 26, 2015

<sup>22</sup> For details about the award:

<http://www.cii.in/ResourceDetails.aspx?enc=/hq9EoG4AUGxPM5EAS8z+UBiH2885o/Lp3djkZb8RpQ9oOj+CBx1F+A08n511M5fHW3lipk564H66fGhjmMEoQ==>

<sup>23</sup> For details visit: <http://www.budhantheatre.org/#!awards/cwad>

<sup>24</sup> This is a movie on the issues of migration, marriage, and social change among the Patidar community of Sundarana village, located in Gujarat, India.

<sup>25</sup> The movie screening schedule at the festival is available at <http://www.tieff.sinica.edu.tw/ch/2015/sundarana.html>

Budhan established a new space called 'Museum of Hope' with support from Chharanagar community in August 2015. The Museum is established to preserve the traditional arts and culture of Chhara community. A Film Festival was hosted at Chharanagar library (between November 2015 and February 2016) under the leadership of their member, Kushal Batunge. During the festival, Kushal screened different movies on a fortnightly basis and the screenings were open for all. Apart from this, Budhan has been organising numerous workshops and training programs on a regular basis for the development of Chhara youth and has constantly contributed towards community development and social change in India.

Budhan's theatre movement is a relatively new phenomenon in the Indian theatrical scene and their use of Street Theatre (as a form) further marginalizes them from highly commercialized mainstream theatre practices. However, Budhan has gained strength in persevering against all social, political, and financial challenges as a result of the deep faith and determination of its members. As expressed by Sravasti Datta in an article titled "A Strategic Plan for Theatre" in *The Hindu* dated February 2, 2015, "Passion alone sustains theatre practitioners in India. Despite lack of government funding and inadequate infrastructure, there is plenty of theatre happening all around us, in big cities and small towns, alike" (Datta, S. February 2, 2015).

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