

Voices of Resistance: Budhan Theatre and the Power of Artistic Protest

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Abstract

In social activism, theatre emerges as a potent tool for protest, offering a platform for marginalized voices to resonate and reverberate against injustice. This abstract delves into the realm of Budhan Theatre, a significant movement tracing the essence of protest theatre. Budhan Theatre transcends conventional boundaries, blending grassroots activism with the transformative power of artistic expression. Budhan Theatre stands as a vibrant platform for marginalized communities, particularly DNTs (Denotified Tribes or ex-criminal tribes), to articulate their sufferings and challenge systemic injustices. Through innovative storytelling techniques and immersive performances, Budhan Theatre transcends traditional boundaries of activism, harnessing the transformative potential of artistic expression to confront entrenched oppression and police atrocities on DNTs. This abstract explores the dynamic interplay between performance and protest within Budhan Theatre, highlighting its role in amplifying marginalized voices and fostering solidarity among diverse audiences. By confronting themes of atrocities on DNTs, caste discrimination, socio-economic inequality, and cultural hegemony, Budhan Theatre not only raises awareness but also inspires collective action and advocacy for justice. This abstract analyses the enduring role of theatre as a medium of dissent and social mobilization, with Budhan Theatre emerging as a hope for resilience and resistance in the struggle for a more equitable society.

Keywords: Activism, Theatre, Protest, Denotified Tribes, Mobilization, Community

Introduction

Founded in 1998 by Prof G N Devy and Mahasweta Devi, Budhan theatre comprises members of the Chhara tribe, one of India's group of Denotified tribes or ex-criminal tribes in Chharanagar of Ahmedabad, Gujarat, stands as a beacon of artistic resistance and social justice in India. The Chharas of Gujarat have long been subjected to police brutality, marginalization, and social exclusion. They are still treated as thieves and if any thievery occurs in the neighbouring area, they are the prime suspects. To contest this colonial stigma of 'Born Criminals', the younger generation has adhered to the theatre. Budhan's theatre style is 'Theatre for Community Development' and 'Theatre for Social Change'. They perform street theatre, Intimate theatre, and other types of experimental theatre to raise their voices against police atrocities and their social marginalization and segregation. Named after Budhan Sabar, a tribal man killed by the police in West Bengal, this theatre group employs performance art to challenge the stereotypes and systemic discrimination faced by their community. Budhan Theatre's work transcends mere performance; it is a powerful medium of

protest, advocacy, and education that seeks to transform society's perceptions and policies regarding DNTs (Denotified Tribes) and other marginalized communities. This paper explores some major plays by the Budhan theatre and its role in resisting oppression, advocating for the rights of DNTs, and fostering social change through the power of artistic protest.

Historical Context of DNTs

The Chhara tribe, labeled as a "criminal tribe" under the British colonial regime's Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, has long been subjected to systemic discrimination and social ostracism. Although the Act was repealed in 1952, the stigma persists, and members of the tribe often find themselves targets of police brutality and social exclusion. In this oppressive context, Budhan Theatre emerged as a form of cultural resistance. Labelling a segment of Indian society as a criminal class stemmed from the British misunderstanding of the complexity of India's castes, sub-castes, and social structures. India, being a melting pot of diverse cultures, religious beliefs, and practices, posed a challenge to British comprehension of this intricate social fabric. This resulted in numerous misconceptions and myths, leading to suspicion and surprise towards many communities. Hereditary professional groups such as bards, acrobats, magicians, and snake charmers appeared unusual to the British. They stereotypically viewed India as a land of snake charmers and royalty, representing two extremes of society. This misperception contributed to the criminalization of numerous communities. The British developed a theory that just as a carpenter's son would inevitably become a carpenter, the descendant of a criminal would also be a criminal. This led to entire communities, including their newborns, being labeled as criminals. These communities were also excluded from the revenue collection system. During the first struggle for Independence in 1857, many of them were suspected of being spies, messengers, and helpers to the freedom fighters and were subsequently placed under surveillance. With the onset of Victorian rule in India from 1858, British officers were instructed to survey these communities and report their findings to the Home Department. The documents stored in the Archives serve as evidence of the systematic data collection on these communities and their criminalization based on caste. Eventually, all of them were included in the list of Criminal Tribes under the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871.

Parallel to the developments leading to the enactment of the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA), another significant contribution came from William Henry Sleeman (1788-1856). During the 1830s, Sleeman was appointed to suppress and disarm the wandering soldiers and those involved in organized gangs who moved freely after the fall of the Imperial Mughal Empire. He began documenting armed clashes and identifying the people involved by their caste and community names. This led to the spread of a theory in England about 'Thugs' (considered natural criminals) roaming Central India. Sleeman's documentation included listing individuals by caste and community. Simultaneously, British anthropologists and scientists were developing a genetic theory to establish that wandering tribes had an animalistic nature. These developments collectively fostered negative impressions of various wandering, tribal, and socio-economically backward communities in India, leading to their inclusion under the CTA. The transition from the East India Company to British government control in 1858 led to the establishment of a disciplined administrative system through various treaties with ruling states. Susan Abraham notes that the extension of the British

Panel system to forest areas doomed the forest dwellers. This resulted in large-scale land loss and the end of their economic independence, forcing many to migrate and some potentially into criminal activities. These lands were either seized by the British or powerful peasants to convert into agricultural fields. Near Bundi in Rajasthan, in the village of Barundhan, memorials of the Kanjar ancestors from Ramnagar village (30 kilometers to the south) can still be found in what are now agricultural fields dominated by the Mali, Gujar, and Sikh communities. The Kanjar community lived there over 150 years ago before being displaced.

As centralization of power began, a comprehensive list of communities deemed a threat to the British establishment was prepared. A decade after the East India Company's departure in 1858, Lord Mayo was appointed the fourth Viceroy in Calcutta in January 1868. Aware of the communities listed by Sleeman as natural criminals, Mayo commissioned the first caste-based census in India, published in 1871. Consequently, on October 12, 1871, the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) was enacted in Punjab, Oudh, and the North-West Province. Just four and a half months later, during a visit to the newly constructed Cellular Jail on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Mayo was killed at age 49 by Sher Ali Ifradi, an Afghan soldier imprisoned there. Ifradi, a convicted sepoy, had been assigned to Mayo's security. (Devy)

The earliest history of the Criminal Tribes is unknown, though records of wandering tribes exist from the Sultanate period. However, examining the CTA list reveals that these tribes were the original inhabitants of the land. Varrier Elwin notes that the Baiga Adivasi are original inhabitants and owners of the country, yet they were included under the CTA. Sher Singh states that the Regulation of 1773 in Punjab first classified criminal tribes. They were categorized separately for the first time in the Census of 1911, with the majority belonging to lower social status Hindu castes.

The Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) was enacted by the Governor General of India on October 12, 1871. This sweeping law indiscriminately applied to everyone, from newborns to elderly members of underprivileged societies, showing no humanity or compassion. Following the East India Company's departure, the British began engaging with the declining Mughal rule. They also signed mutual treaties with Rajput and Maratha rulers, consolidating various powers into the centralized authority known as the British Raj.

The act of criminalization has historical roots, with nomadism always being a concern for established authorities. The notification of many nomadic, itinerant, and some sedentary communities as criminal tribes is a result of British colonial rule in India. After the CTA was enacted, British officers in various jurisdictions began listing many wandering and suspected communities as criminal tribes. These suggestions mostly came from high-ranking officials such as the Inspector General of Police or Deputy Commissioners, who collected information from local officers and informants.

In M. Kennedy's book, "The Criminal Classes in India," these communities are mentioned primarily in terms of their classification by "methods and distinctive characteristics" rather than their "ethnological and historical details." Despite having skilled anthropologists in the 19th century who published the first caste census of India, the cultural history of these communities was never included in police manuals. As a result, British officials lacked a true understanding of these groups. These police manuals continued to be referenced even after Independence, perpetuating the criminal image of these communities.

After the first battles for independence in 1857, many of these communities participated in efforts to overthrow the colonial rulers. Meanwhile, the theory of the existence of Thugs in India was gaining traction in England. Concurrently, scientists were developing criminology based on genetic theories. The British propagated the idea that some communities were inherently criminal, making crime their caste or community occupation. This led to the enactment of the Criminal Tribes Act, which notified many of these communities across different Presidencies, starting from North India. District collectors were given the authority to label communities under their jurisdiction as criminal tribes and were instructed to isolate them into reformatory jails called 'settlements.' By 1952, there were seventy-two settlements across the country, with the Solapur settlement being well-known for forcefully employing the Woddar community in textile mills. This process gradually pushed innocent communities such as coin makers, acrobats, entertainers, long-distance traders, wandering groups, and bards into criminal activities. Fanon noted that this naturally led them into petty crime for survival, reinforcing the idea of hereditary criminal traits. This was one of the colonialists' 'techniques' to dominate the natives and brand them as suspects in their own land.

Under the CTA, more than 190 communities were subjected to its regulations, requiring them to regularly report to local authorities and obtain passes for any member who needed to leave the village. Districts had to keep a register with the thumb impression of every member of these criminal communities. Different categories of imprisonment were established based on the level of crime, and even children were not exempt. The superintendent of the reformatory settlement was made the official guardian of these children, authorized to impose labor if deemed necessary for discipline. The CTA of 1871 was based on three fundamental assumptions:

1. All individuals born into a criminal tribe are destined to become criminals, inheriting their father's profession.
2. They will adopt law-breaking behavior as their profession and persist in committing crimes.
3. Through the continuous practice of crime, they will become hardened criminals.

The restriction of movement for Denotified Tribes (DNT) and Nomadic Tribes (NT) was the main focus of the CTA. This severely impacted nomadic tribes, whose livelihoods depended on their mobility. Settled communities in villages were also unable to move for basic needs, affecting their socio-economic activities. Consequently, during the modernization of the 19th and 20th centuries, as modern means of communication and transportation developed, these communities could not benefit. They missed out on development opportunities, being confined to settlements. The CTA is largely responsible for the backwardness of these communities. In settlement camps, their capabilities and talents were not channeled or explored in socially approved ways.

During the 1920 Congress session, the protests against the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) were brought to the forefront, with the aim of defending human rights and resisting foreign rule. Mahatma Gandhi, who was at the helm of the Congress, also voiced his opposition to the CTA. In 1936, during a gathering in Nellore, Andhra Pradesh, organized by the 'Akhil Bhartiya Adivasi Sewak Sangh,' Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru denounced the CTA as inhumane and barbaric, declaring that the law should be burned. He mentioned:

I am aware of this monstrous provisions of the Criminal Tribe Act which constitute a negation of civil liberty. Wide publicity should be given to it working, and an attempt made to have the Act removed from the Statute Book. No tribe could be classified as

criminal as such and the whole principle is out of consonance with all civilized principles of criminal justice and treatment of offenders.

After India gained independence in 1947, the Indian Federal Government addressed the issue of the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA). A committee in 1949 deemed the law unconstitutional, leading to the formation of the Aiyengar Commission in 1950 to assess the conditions of the communities affected by the CTA. The CTA was eventually repealed on August 31, 1952, after 80 years. However, the Habitual Offenders Act was introduced around the same time, and local governments began implementing it, some even before the CTA's repeal, and continued to do so after 1952.

After the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 was repealed, the communities previously listed under it were reclassified as Habitual Offenders. They also became known as denotified tribes or Vimukta Jatis, indicating their status as ex-criminal tribes. Although the term "criminal" was legally removed from their identity, the social stigma persisted. These communities are still viewed as criminal classes, with prejudice remaining even after seven decades of independence and the denotification of the CTA communities.

The stigma of criminality did not disappear with the de-notification of these communities; it persisted both administratively and socially. Various reports highlight cases of custodial deaths, illegal detention, harassment in police stations, and midnight raids on the homes of DNT and NT communities. Innocent women and children are taken for interrogation if the male heads of families are not found. Youths are denied boarding facilities in cities when seeking higher education and better jobs. The stigma of caste identity continues, leading to the socio-economic and political backwardness of these communities even after 70 years of de-notification and 75 years of India's Independence. If this situation has not improved over seven to eight decades, it is likely to worsen with new state policies that disregard their needs. The data analysis report provides a clearer picture of these issues in real time.

The de-notification process began in 1949 with the formation of the Ayyangar Committee, which aimed to remove the criminal label imposed on these communities by the British and local governments. Following its recommendations, these communities were freed, but the de-notification process, which reclassified them as denotified tribes, still left them with a criminal identity. The Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) was repealed and replaced by the Habitual Offenders Act (HOA), which then applied to these communities. The key difference was that, under the HOA, individual members were registered rather than entire families. The de-notification process began in 1949 with the formation of the Ayyangar Committee, which aimed to remove the criminal label imposed on these communities by the British and local governments. Following its recommendations, these communities were freed, but the de-notification process, which reclassified them as denotified tribes, still left them with a criminal identity. The Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) was repealed and replaced by the Habitual Offenders Act (HOA), which then applied to these communities. The key difference was that, under the HOA, individual members were registered rather than entire families.

The Habitual Offenders Act (HOA) replaced the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) but largely retained its structure and the negative attitudes towards marginalized tribes. The HOA continued to stigmatize these communities, labeling them as habitual offenders and subjecting them to oppression. It empowered the police to investigate without warrants, leading to the wrongful abduction, interrogation, and detention of individuals from denotified

tribes. This has resulted in numerous false arrests and custodial deaths within these communities, perpetuating the stigma of criminality and injustice. The process of denotification essentially labeled these communities as former criminals, leading both the state and society to view them with disdain and negativity. This results in frequent instances of mob lynching, illegal police detentions, and media portrayal of these groups as criminal gangs. Such treatment often drives many innocent individuals into criminal activities. Additionally, poverty and discrimination force women and young girls into prostitution, while humiliation and abuse push many youths to suicide. These issues often go unreported in mainstream media.

Chharas and the Budhan Theatre

Since Budhan Theatre is a community-owned group focused on the development of its members, understanding the Chhara community is crucial. Historically, the Chharas were nomadic entertainers, performing as street singers and dancers. However, the British colonial administration disrupted their way of life. Nomadic communities have always moved from place to place, but this mobility was seen as problematic by the British. In 1871, they enacted the 'Criminal Tribes Act' (CTA), labeling over 200 nomadic tribes, including the Chharas, as criminals. The British forced these tribes into reformatory settlements, where they were exploited as cheap labor for building railways and highways. The Chharas were relocated to the Chharanagar settlement in 1932. Even after India's independence in 1947, the Chharas continued to be stigmatized as 'Born Criminals.' The Constituent Assembly failed to address their plight. Although the Indian Government repealed the CTA in 1952, the former criminal tribes were merely reclassified as 'Denotified Tribes,' and the stigma remained.

The Chhara tribe, historically nomadic and once labeled as a Criminal Tribe under the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA), faces ongoing stigma. They are known by various names in different regions of India and mainly reside in Chharanagar, Ahmedabad, Gujarat. Despite a population of around twenty thousand, with nearly 90% having primary education and many families including graduates, the Chharas struggle with high unemployment due to their historical classification as criminals. This stigma limits their job opportunities, both in the private and government sectors. As a result, many Chhara youths are drawn to the legal profession, which offers them a respectable identity and a path free from discrimination. The community boasts over 170 advocates. Despite this, 60% to 70% of the Chhara population resort to brewing illicit liquor, an illegal activity in Gujarat, a dry state. Around 20% survive through petty crimes due to the lack of job opportunities, regardless of their education level. This stigma contributes to Chharanagar's infamy, making it a place that most non-residents avoid. The area's negative perception reinforces the community's marginalized status.

Against this backdrop, some Chhara youths turned to theatre as a way to challenge the colonial stigma of being 'born criminals,' as well as to confront ongoing police oppression and their marginalization and social exclusion from mainstream society. Even after being denotified, the Chharas experienced no relief, with their marginalization and social segregation persisting. Without access to land or constitutional protection, many Chharas resorted to petty crime and brewing country liquor in Gujarat, a dry state. The colonial stigma of being 'Born Criminals' meant they were often the first to be suspected whenever a theft occurred, keeping them under constant police surveillance. As a result, the Chharas have

faced continuous police harassment and societal exclusion for many years. Despite India's independence, the label of being hereditary criminals has remained firmly attached to them, perpetuating their suffering and marginalization. In 1998, a turning point came when G. N. Devy and Mahasweta Devi, prominent figures in literature and activism, visited Chharanagar and helped establish a community library with the support of Chhara youths. Around the same time, the Calcutta High Court ruled on the case of Budhan Sabar, a member of the Kheria Sabar community in West Bengal, who had been killed in police custody after being wrongfully accused of theft. The court's decision, which led to the suspension of the responsible officer and compensation for Budhan's widow, gave hope to Denotified tribes in India. Encouraged by Prof. G. N. Devy, Chhara youths dramatized this case in a play titled *Budhan*, which they first performed on August 31, 1998, during the International Convention on Denotified and Nomadic Tribes in Chharanagar. In an interview featured in the 2008 documentary film *Actors are Born Here* (2008), Devy Praised the play *Budhan*, 'I believe that it was not an enjoyable play, or it was not the play to perform on the stage, in fact, I don't believe that it was the play at all. I think the play was associated with the life experience of the community and slowly, it was getting the voice and that voice had dramatic form'. He further explained that in the first performance of *Budhan*, 'There was hardly anybody in the audience who did not feel profoundly moved to see the Chhara youths enacting the entire Budhan Sabar case, with what passion, with what ease do they act, these Chhara boys and girls!' (Devy 26).

Budhan Theatre serves as a vital platform for India's Denotified Tribes (DNTs), transforming into a cultural symbol and myth for this marginalized community. Through theatrical activism, the theatre addresses the historical struggles, social exclusion, police brutality, and discrimination faced by DNTs, particularly the Chhara community. Utilizing "Theatre for Community Development" and "Theatre for Social Change," Budhan Theatre employs street plays and experimental performances to raise awareness and advocate for change. Caleb Johnston and Dakxin Bajrange Chhara, in their essay "Street Theatre as Democratic Politics in Ahmedabad," describe Budhan Theatre's impact as a political process with a three-fold purpose: "... to enunciate a political identity in a bid to force state actors to remember and recognize", "... using performance to construct a localized affirmative identity politics within Chharanagar" and "... reclaiming spaces for democratic politics by using theatre to stimulate debate on issues pertaining to DNTs" (14).

Budhan Theatre has been actively challenging the injustices faced by Chharas and other Denotified Tribes due to the colonial stigma of being 'Born Criminals'. Through their theatrical activism, they have effectively highlighted their marginalization by both the public and the state, creating an alternative space where justice is pursued. Their performances address various issues, such as societal discrimination against Chharas and other DNTs, police brutality, inadequate basic amenities, neglect of welfare schemes by the state government, and the unemployment of Chhara youth. By using theatre, Chhara youths are advocating for constitutional protections for DNTs and calling for their recognition as ordinary citizens rather than as 'Born Criminals' or 'second-class citizens'. Their plays have helped redefine their identity as 'Born Actors' rather than 'Born Criminals'.

Major Plays of Resistance and Protest by Budhan Theatre

This section examines key plays by Budhan Theatre, illustrating how the theatre has used artistic expression to amplify voices of resistance and demonstrate the power of artistic protest.

1. *Budhan*

In February 1998, Budhan Sabar, a man from the Sabar community in West Bengal's Purulia district, was brutally beaten on false theft charges and eventually died while in police custody after being subjected to three remand orders. It was only after renowned author and activist Mahasweta Devi filed a petition for a second post-mortem that the truth about the police brutality and the falsified first post-mortem report came to light. As a result, the officer in charge was suspended, and Budhan Sabar's widow, Shyamali, received compensation.

The news of the Calcutta High Court's justice for Budhan Sabar resonated with the Chhara community in Gujarat. The atrocities that Budhan Sabar faced were all too familiar to the Chharas, who endured similar treatment daily due to their stigmatization as "born criminals" under colonial rule. Chhara youth staged a play about Budhan Sabar's police brutality and custodial death, which became a significant production for Budhan Theatre. The play debuted in August 1998 during the "National Convention of Denotified Tribes" in Chharanagar and has since become the hallmark of Budhan Theatre. With over 300 performances to date, the play has been deeply internalized by the Chhara community and has become a symbol for India's vast population of Denotified Tribes.

The play *Budhan* centers on the life and death of Budhan Sabar. It begins with his arrest, where he is falsely accused of theft—a common plight for many members of denotified tribes. The play graphically portrays the brutality he faced in police custody, leading to his untimely death. Through Budhan's story, the play shines a harsh light on the systemic oppression and violence that continues to be inflicted upon marginalized communities in India. The narrative of *Budhan* is not just about the individual tragedy of one man, but a broader commentary on the deep-seated prejudice and discrimination that denotified tribes endure daily. It exposes the unjust legal and societal structures that perpetuate their suffering, and it serves as a stark reminder of the human cost of such systemic oppression.

Since its first performance in 1998, *Budhan* has been more than just a theatrical production; it has become a movement. The play has been performed hundreds of times across India, each performance serving as a call to action against the injustices faced by denotified tribes. It has also brought international attention to the plight of these communities, challenging the dominant narratives that have long marginalized them. *Budhan* has been instrumental in empowering the Chhara community and other denotified tribes. Through theater, these communities have found a powerful medium to voice their struggles, reclaim their histories, and demand justice. The play has also inspired a new generation of activists and artists who continue to use performance as a tool for social change.

Budhan is not just a play; it is a testament to the enduring spirit of resistance among India's denotified tribes. It stands as a powerful reminder of the transformative power of art and the role it can play in challenging oppression and demanding justice. Through *Budhan*, Budhan Theatre has given a voice to the voiceless, turning the stage into a platform for truth, justice, and human dignity. The legacy of *Budhan* continues to inspire and ignite the fight for a more just and equitable society.

2. *Encounter*

Among its impactful productions, the play *Encounter* stands out as a raw and unflinching critique of state violence and police brutality. Through *Encounter*, Budhan Theatre not only sheds light on the grim realities faced by these communities but also challenges the impunity with which such acts of violence are often carried out.

Deepak Pawar, a Pardhi from the Sholapur District of Maharashtra, lived a life of begging. When he refused to become an informant for the local police, they killed him in a staged encounter. *Encounter* is based on the real-life story of Deepak and many other DNTs in India who are beaten and killed in fake police encounters. The play was first performed at the Indira Gandhi Rashtriya Manav Sangrahalaya in Bhopal, where, for the first time, a deep discussion was held on the plight of nomadic and denotified tribes. The significance of this play is further highlighted by the attendance of many local police officers, which helped steer a new direction for the human rights of nomadic and denotified tribes.

The play begins with a portrayal of his everyday life, capturing the struggles, hopes, and dreams of someone who is constantly under suspicion due to his tribal identity. The narrative takes a dark turn when he is wrongfully accused of a crime and subsequently killed in a so-called encounter by the police. The play powerfully depicts the moments leading up to the encounter, the brutality of the act itself, and the aftermath, where the victim's family is left to mourn their loss while fighting for justice in a system rigged against them. Through stark dialogues and poignant scenes, *Encounter* exposes the routine nature of such killings and the ease with which lives are extinguished under the pretext of maintaining law and order.

Encounter delves deeply into the themes of power, impunity, and the devaluation of marginalized lives. The play is a searing indictment of the Indian state's use of violence as a tool of control, particularly against communities that have historically been oppressed and stigmatized. It questions the narrative of "justice" that is often used to justify such encounters, highlighting the gross violations of human rights that occur when the rule of law is subverted. The play also explores the theme of identity, focusing on how the label of "criminal" is unjustly applied to entire communities, rendering them perpetual suspects in the eyes of the law. The use of stark, minimalist staging in *Encounter* serves to underscore the bleakness of the victim's fate and the pervasive sense of fear and helplessness that these communities experience.

Encounter has also sparked important conversations about the role of law enforcement in a democratic society and the need for greater accountability and transparency. By bringing these issues to the forefront, Budhan Theatre has once again demonstrated the power of theater as a tool for social change, using art to hold a mirror to society and demand justice for the oppressed. *Encounter* is more than just a play; it is a powerful act of resistance against the normalization of state violence. Through this production, Budhan Theatre has continued its mission to give voice to the voiceless and challenge the structures of power that perpetuate injustice. *Encounter* is a stark reminder that the fight for justice and equality is far from over and that the stories of those who suffer under the weight of systemic oppression must continue to be told.

3. Bulldozer

Among its many poignant productions, the play *Bulldozer* has emerged as a powerful narrative, reflecting the struggles, resistance, and hope of those who live on the fringes of society. *Bulldozer* was conceived in response to the increasing state-led violence and forced

evictions that have plagued the lives of the poor and marginalized across India. The play is not just a story but a reality that many communities face, where the 'bulldozer' becomes a symbol of the state's ruthless authority—one that destroys homes, lives, and hopes in the name of development and urbanization. Budhan Theatre, with its roots deeply embedded in activism, took up this theme to showcase the harsh realities of those who are often rendered invisible by society. The play is a response to the arbitrary demolitions carried out in the name of development, often targeting slums and informal settlements where the urban poor reside.

The play unfolds in a makeshift settlement on the outskirts of a booming city. The inhabitants, primarily from marginalized backgrounds, have built a community with their limited resources. Their world, however, is threatened by the looming presence of a government-backed construction project. The story captures the fear, despair, and resistance of these people as they face the imminent destruction of their homes by a 'bulldozer'—a metaphor for the state's oppressive machinery. The narrative is interwoven with personal stories of the inhabitants—stories of migration, poverty, and survival. As the bulldozer approaches, the tension escalates, culminating in a dramatic confrontation between the state's forces and the residents. The play ends on a somber yet hopeful note, urging the audience to reflect on the meaning of development and whose interests it serves.

Since its debut, *Bulldozer* has been performed in various locations, drawing attention to the plight of those who are often ignored in mainstream discourse. The play has been lauded for its raw and unflinching portrayal of state violence and its impact on marginalized communities. It has sparked conversations about the ethics of development and the rights of the urban poor, making it a significant work in the repertoire of Budhan Theatre. *Bulldozer* has also been a tool for advocacy, used by activists and human rights organizations to highlight the injustices faced by displaced communities. The play's ability to resonate with audiences across different backgrounds has made it a powerful vehicle for social change.

Budhan Theatre's "*Bulldozer*" is more than just a play; it is a call to action. It challenges the audience to confront uncomfortable truths about the society we live in and the cost of development that is too often borne by the most vulnerable. Through its compelling narrative and evocative performances, "*Bulldozer*" continues to amplify the voices of the oppressed, ensuring that their stories are not just heard but felt. In doing so, Budhan Theatre reaffirms its role as a crucial cultural and political force in the ongoing struggle for justice and equality in India.

4. *Majhab Humein Sikhata Aapas Mein Bair Rakhna*

The play *Majhab Humein Sikhata Aapas Mein Bair Rakhna* (translated as "Religion Teaches Us to Hate Each Other") is a striking example of this commitment. This provocative and poignant piece offers a critical examination of religious intolerance and communal strife in contemporary India, urging audiences to reflect on the deep-rooted divisions that continue to fracture the social fabric of the nation.

Majhab Humein Sikhata Aapas Mein Bair Rakhna is a daring exploration of the role religion plays in fostering division and hatred among people. The title itself is an ironic twist on a popular patriotic song that promotes unity and harmony, suggesting instead that religion, when misused, can lead to enmity and violence. The play delves into the communal tensions that have often led to riots, bloodshed, and a breakdown of social cohesion in India. It explores how religious identities are manipulated by political and social forces to create an

atmosphere of distrust and hostility. Through its narrative, the play questions the blind adherence to religious dogma and the ways in which it can be exploited to serve the interests of those in power.

The story unfolds in a small, tightly-knit community that has coexisted peacefully for generations. However, underlying tensions begin to surface as external forces, including politicians and religious leaders, start sowing seeds of discord. The community, once united, gradually becomes divided along religious lines, leading to mistrust, fear, and ultimately, violence. The play follows the lives of several families who find themselves torn apart by the growing animosity. It portrays the emotional and psychological toll that communal violence takes on individuals, especially the young, who are caught in the crossfire of hate. As the situation escalates, the play reaches a climax that leaves the audience with a stark reminder of the consequences of letting hatred guide our actions.

One of the most poignant themes of the play is the loss of innocence, particularly among the younger generation. The play highlights how children, who initially see no difference between their peers of different faiths, are gradually indoctrinated into a culture of hate, leading to a tragic loss of their innate sense of humanity. Since its debut, *Majhab Humein Sikhata Aapas Mein Bair Rakhna* has been performed across various platforms, resonating deeply with audiences who have witnessed or experienced communal tensions firsthand. The play has been praised for its raw and honest portrayal of religious conflict, as well as its unflinching critique of the forces that perpetuate such divisions.

Majhab Humein Sikhata Aapas Mein Bair Rakhna is a testament to Budhan Theatre's ability to confront some of the most pressing issues facing Indian society today. Through this powerful play, the theatre group continues its mission to challenge injustice, provoke thought, and inspire change. As religious intolerance and communal violence remain persistent challenges, the play serves as a timely reminder of the importance of unity, empathy, and the need to rise above the forces that seek to divide us. Budhan Theatre, through this and many other performances, remains a vital voice in the ongoing struggle for a just and inclusive society.

Conclusion

Budhan Theatre utilizes street theatre, a form of performance that is accessible and immediate, to communicate its messages. Street theatre, or "nukkad natak," is characterized by its direct engagement with the audience, often performed in public spaces without the need for elaborate sets or costumes. This form of theatre is particularly effective in reaching a wide and diverse audience, making it an ideal tool for social and political advocacy. The group's performances are rooted in the real-life experiences of the Chhara community, blending elements of traditional folklore with contemporary issues. This combination not only preserves cultural heritage but also makes the performances relatable and impactful. The narratives often revolve around themes of police brutality, discrimination, poverty, and the struggle for justice, resonating deeply with the audience.

Budhan Theatre exemplifies the power of artistic protest in challenging oppression and advocating for justice. Through its compelling performances, the group not only raises awareness about the issues facing the Chhara community but also empowers individuals with the tools to resist and transform their realities. Budhan Theatre's work is a testament to the resilience and creativity of marginalized communities and a powerful reminder of the

potential of art to drive social change. As the group continues to evolve and expand its influence, it remains a vital force in the ongoing struggle for human rights and equality.

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