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Street Theatre as Democratic Politics in Ahmedabad

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STREET THEATRE AS DEMOCRATIC POLITICS IN AHMEDABAD

by Caleb Johnston and Dakxin Bajrange

ABSTRACT

This work examines the politicized use of street theatre by an adivasi (indigenous) community in the city of Ahmedabad, India. We consider Chharas' deployment of theatre as a socio-spatial tactic in two interlocking registers: firstly, as a means through which to enact a re-scripting of criminalized subjectivity in the post-colonial moment; secondly and equally, to advance the practice and potential for democratic politics—a space for constructive encounter and dialogue across difference. We argue that performance furthers the staging of affirmative subjectivities, while providing a mechanism to challenge who has the right to be seen and heard within a public sphere. This article draws on ongoing collaborative research in Gujarat. **Keywords:** Adivasis, Ahmedabad, Theatre, Politics

अहमदाबाद में लोकतांत्रिक राजनीति के रूप में नुक्कड़

नाटक

लेखक : कालेब जॉनसन और दक्षिण बजरंगे

सार

यह प्रयास भारत के अहमदाबाद शहर में एक आदिवासी (देशज) समुदाय द्वारा नुक्कड़ नाटक के राजनीतिक उपयोग की पड़ताल करता है। हमने स्थानीय प्रक्रियाओं को सामाजिक रणनीति के साथ जोड़ते हुए छारा जनजाति के रंगमंच की उपस्थिति को लेकर दो अंतर्सम्बंधित पहलुओं पर विचार किया है : पहला, ऐसे साधन के रूप में, जिसके माध्यम से उत्तर-औपनिवेशिक काल में अपराधीकृत मानस के पुनर्पाठ को अभिनय के ज़रिए सामने लाया जाता है और दूसरा बराबर महत्व वाला पहलू है – लोकतांत्रिक राजनीति की ज़मीन को विस्तार देना और संबंधित संभावनाओं को टटोलना ताकि एक ऐसे दायरे को विस्तार दिया जा सके जहां रचनात्मक मुठभेड़ें संभव हों और असहमति के स्वरों के साथ संवाद के पुल बनें। हमारी दलील है कि ऐसा नाटक सकारात्मक मनोस्थितियों के मंचन को प्रोत्साहित करता है। साथ ही, सार्वजनिक क्षेत्र में किसे देखा जाएगा, किसे सुना जाएगा और किसे नहीं जैसे सवाल उठाकर अपने अधिकारों के लिए चुनौती पेश करने की एक क्रियाविधि भी मुहैया कराता है। यह आलेख गुजरात में चल रहे सहभागी शोध से उपजा है।

की-वर्ड्स : आदिवासी, अहमदाबाद, रंगमंच, राजनीति

INTRODUCTION

| | |
|-------------------------------------|--|
| <i>Ham ye natak karte hain</i> | <i>We enact this drama</i> |
| <i>Aavaz uthao</i> | <i>Raise your voices</i> |
| <i>Sach dikhao</i> | <i>Expose the truth</i> |
| <i>Hamara mitti ka khela</i> | <i>This play of our soil</i> |
| <i>Hamara mitti ka khela</i> | <i>This play of our soil</i> |
| <i>Khel khel main khel</i> | <i>A play within a play</i> |
| <i>O sathi khel khle main khel.</i> | <i>My friend, a play within a play. – Budhan Bolta Hai</i> |

In February 1998, Budhan Sabar, a young adivasi¹ (indigenous) man was arrested and murdered while in police custody in West Bengal, India. The episode of extreme state violence sparked the formation of the Denotified Rights Action Group (DNT-RAG)—a national movement orchestrated to assert the collective rights of the country’s adivasis. The continuing actions of the DNT-RAG have been narrated elsewhere (Johnston 2012). Here, we examine an ancillary site and mode of organizing spurred by the death of Budhan Sabar. Following the founding of the DNT-RAG and its efforts to forge a national coalition, acclaimed Indian activists Mahasweta Devi and Ganesh Devy met with a community of Chharas in the city of Ahmedabad, Gujarat. They inquired if Chharas were interested in preparing a street theatre play to inaugurate the first national conference organized to discuss action to be taken on issues relating to India’s former Criminal Tribes—the itinerant populations subject to the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 (CTA), who in the post-independence period were reclassified as *vimukta jan-jatis*, or the Denotified Tribes of India (DNT). Chharas accepted the invitation. The encounter prompted their writing and performance of *Budhan*, a documentary play that retold the events surrounding Budhan Sabar’s custodial murder; it premiered in August 1998 for adivasi delegates from across India who had gathered in Chharas’ former labour camp in Ahmedabad.

Chharas’ participation in the meeting was quickly followed by a second performance at Ahmedabad’s Darpana Academy of Performing Arts, the city’s premiere cultural centre instituted by the Sarabhai family dynasty. “Mallika Sarabhai² invited us to perform in her

theatre”, narrates Dakxin, “And she invited some judiciary people and legal administrators to watch this performance. We performed the play and after we had very good discussion with the judiciary people. That means judges, advocates, IPS [Indian Police Service] officers, police inspectors. So many people came to watch this performance. And [for the] first time, the public interaction started for Chharas, that we are not criminals. We are actors. We are performers... And that conversation led to many performances.” Buoyed by the attention of prominent political and state actors situated within considerable networks of authority, Chharas established Budhan Theatre as a people’s movement. The theatre play *Budhan* has since been performed many hundreds of times: on the street, outside the Ahmedabad’s municipal commissioner’s home, and in book stores and police training colleges, conferences and adivasi gatherings and elsewhere. Chharas have written and performed dozens of documentary plays that circulate a gritty realism. “Our performances are always based on real issues”, explains Dakxin, “on the real story, on real events... Like when people die in policy custody; we perform that story. We go to the people, and when people see the performance of our actors, it becomes [a] sensitive issue for the audience.”

What follows is divided into three acts that stage some of the effects of Chharas’ politicized deployment of street theatre as a socio-spatial tactic (Nagar 2002) through which to navigate an entangled personal, governmental and public politics. Through these three acts, we glean the political potentials opened up by performance and performativity; we look to the work that these potentials do in furthering a material politics through overlapping sites and scales. Street theatre is examined as an everyday form of embodied practice enacting what Sallie Marston and Sarah de Leeuw (2013: xii) describe as “doings that perform work in the world.” This follows Donna Houston and Laura Pulido’s (2002: 401) interest in the role that performance can play as a form of “socially transformative, imaginative, and collective political engagement” which has the potential for social critique and collective politics. Act I

argues that Chharas' turn to performance has prompted a re-working of a problematic postcolonial subjectivity, with theatre serving as a means through which to work constructively with caste discrimination and social exclusion stemming from their status as a former Criminal Tribe. In this arena, Chharas' creative practice enacts what Judith Butler (1997) describes as "re-signification", setting the stage for community members to disrupt a traumatic disassociation to refashion selfhood in Chharanagar. Working in the wake of collective amnesia, intense stigma and spatial segregation in the city, we argue that theatre is enabling a discursive re-scripting that has had pronounced material effects.

Situated within a long history of Marxist theatre in India (see Bharucha 1984; Costa 2010), Act II shifts to consider how Chharas mobilize street theatre beyond Chharanagar to facilitate constructive dialogue with state actors and to forge solidarity with other *jan-jati* communities. Here, theatre is understood as a mechanism generating a critical public sphere, a space for productive encounter by transforming the street into what Jacque Rancière (2004: 12) describes as a space for the "distribution of the sensible", which is to say, a space for democratic encounter wherein audiences *can* move in-between and beyond their existing social positions. This takes up a broader geographical interest in the possibilities that theatrical space holds for getting people thinking and feeling the issues directly and differently (see Houston and Pulido 2002; Johnston and Pratt 2010; Johnston and Pratt forthcoming; Nagar 2000; Pratt and Johnston 2007). Utilizing street theatre to stimulate civic conversations and circulate their capacity for politics, we suggest that it is the liminal and embodied quality of performance that holds potential for substantive dialogue across difference and for the practice of politics within the contingency of social relations. Act III ends by thinking through how Chharas' organizing has furthered solidarity politics enacted through local, national and international networks.

This article derives from our shared but differentiated expertise, and this collaborative writing is an important performance in its own right—one into which we enter differently. It draws on Caleb’s ongoing ethnographic work with Chharas in Ahmedabad; it is equally steered by Dakxin’s expertise as a Chhara playwright and activist who lives in Chharanagar. He is the co-founder and current artistic director of Budhan Theatre. Our research relationship began in 2009 and has involved continuing efforts to explore meaningful collaboration. In 2009-10, we spent several months conducting a photographic and participatory video production program in which Chhara youth scripted, filmed, edited and screened a short documentary film animating local struggles. In 2013, we engaged youth in documenting the displacement of an adivasi community in the city and have begun translating research materials into a new street theatre play. These engagements are situated within local efforts to get youth working creatively and politically with issues relating to DNT groups. The authors’ endeavor to articulate substantive collaboration remains an ongoing practice.³ We begin in Chharanagar.

ACT I POLICING AND REFASHIONING SELFHOOD

The bitter truth about our present is our subjection... our inability to be subjects in our own right. – Partha Chatterjee (1997:20)



Figure 1 Housing in Free Colony Photos by Caleb Johnston

You are looking into several homes in Chharanagar. They are among the forty-odd tenements built by the British to house Chhara families released from the Naroda Settlement sometime in the early 1940s (figure 1). These remain lived spaces, some having been resurfaced with painted plaster, their roofs vaulted with sheets of corrugated tin. A community of former itinerant adivasis, Chharas were forcibly settled in 1932 in Ahmedabad's Naroda Settlement, an industrial labour camp administrated by the Salvation Army on the northeastern fringe of the city. They were settled under the CTA, a legal apparatus that granted the colonial state arbitrary powers to map, measure and detain populations suspected of criminal or subversive activities in British India. As one of 191 populations produced under the CTA, Chharas were rendered subject to a legislative apparatus brought to bear on those adivasi groups widely considered threatening to the stability of empire. These were largely itinerant communities whose economies in northwestern India (and elsewhere) were devastated by revenue and land

use laws enacted throughout the 19th century as the British moved out from their coastal command and control centers to colonize metropolitan hinterlands. Asserting greater sovereignty over territory for resource exploitation and taxation, policy regimes stripped, or, at the very least, highly restricted itinerant's use and access to customary lands (see Devy 2006; Radhakrishna 2001). Many DNTs resisted colonial expansion, and the CTA represented a security and developmental apparatus enacted to police, regulate and improve those populations alleged to possess a hereditary and socially reproducing propensity for crime. Premised on the rationale that specific itinerant populations possessed a genetic and socially determined predisposition for criminality, the CTA provided the authority to notify and register without the burden of physical evidence brought before a court of law. As an executive document of structural violence, once rendered, 'normal' rights and due process were suspended: the law allowed for the suspension of law. Predicated on a racist and capricious system of colonial classification, the CTA implemented varied forms of spatial control wherein notified Criminal Tribes—as a governed subject category—were compelled to notify authorities if changing residences, present themselves to the police at regular intervals, and adhere to a pass system. It allowed for the separation of children and parents, and corrective training and corporeal punishment, whose application was the sole discretion of local settlement officers (for a greater consideration of the CTA see Johnston 2012; Pandian 2009; Radhakrishna 2001; Schwarz 2010).

It was to Ahmedabad's Naroda Settlement that Dakxin's grandparents were transferred and where they remained until the repeal of the CTA in 1952. Scattered throughout colonial territories, these labour camps were decommissioned five years after formal independence, at which point, Chharas were 'denotified' by Jawaharlal Nehru and reclassified as *vimukta jan-jatis* (liberated tribes) or the subject category widely known as the Denotified Tribes of India (DNT).⁴ Following the closure of their camp, Chharas settled

across the road, establishing a community built around the tenements of Free Colony, territory situated on a former cremation ground running parallel to passing railway tracks. Chharas' high visibility as a DNT population has rendered the community vulnerable to extreme forms of social and caste discrimination, as well as particular forms of localized state violence: false arrests, extortion and custodial violence. Chharas remain a heavily stigmatized and segregated community within the surrounding socio-economic landscape of the city.

The enduring effects of Chharas' subjection cannot be solely gleaned as material domination; they must also be contextualized within the disciplinary production of a complex post-colonial subjectivity. The myth of Chharas' prescribed criminality has had a durable weight that continues to resonate in the community's sense of self. Many Chharas routinely insist on the presence of a dangerous criminality at work in Chharanagar. "You can say that our ancestors, or our fathers, they were criminals", Kalpana and Roxy Gadgekar⁵ explain, "They were thieves." "Our forefathers were thieves", echoes Dakxin, "you know thieving is an art. You cannot thief. I can. We can. In fact, we have a different *modus operandi*... It's still the livelihood of many people. So we are specializing in thieving. It's *inherent*. It is our *genes*." Chharas' insistence on a criminal nature was a narrative scripted on many occasions over the course of this research; all variations on a singular theme: that lurking somewhere in the community exists a dangerous, monstrous criminality. Do such testimonials demonstrate the disciplinary effects of the camp? Of Chharas reproducing their alleged, determined propensity for crime? It is hard to say. The circulation of such imaginings certainly raises the specter of Michel Foucault's (1975) reminder that modern disciplinary power enters directly into the everyday order of things. It is not something merely done to us but something that we do to ourselves and to one another. It operates to the degree that we all become its conscious or unconscious agents. In working with Kallars, a former Criminal Tribe in South India, Anand Pandian (2009: 39) struggles to rationalize similar effects, wherein the "specter of

savagery” dominates the “imagination of a problematic selfhood.” “The specter of savagery casts a long shadow”, Pandian argues, “on the very fact that *being* Kallar in postcolonial south India, subjecting every feeling, thought, and action to a potential attribution of anger, impulse, violence, and haste. Assertions of savagery are the preeminent means by which Kallars are imagined as underdeveloped selves, both by others and by their own kith and kin” (33). Much of the same can be said of Chharas; their self-scripted criminality denoting the circulation of a problematic subjectivity; encoding the primitivism and threat of itinerant populations, the CTA—as a legal and spatial matrix—functioned as an instrument of biopolitical ordering, introducing identity formations and subject categories that continue to have effects in the immediate post-colonial moment.⁶

Theatre has emerged as one critical means through which Chharas’ attempt to work productively with the discursive injury caused by the CTA and to generate affirmative political subjectivities. “How”, asks Judith Butler (1997:104), in theorizing the psychic life of power, “are we animated and mobilized by that discursive site and its injury, such that our very attachment to it becomes the condition of our resignification of it? Called by an injurious name, I come into social being, and because I have a certain inevitable attachment to my existence... I am led to embrace the terms that injure me because they constitute me socially.” Butler’s insight is instructive in understanding both the disciplinary production of the Criminal Tribe, as well as Chharas’ attachment to subjection as the basis for political mobilization. “[W]hat is at stake”, she continues, “is whether that temporary totalization performed by the name is politically enabling or paralyzing, whether the foreclosure, indeed the violence, of the totalizing reduction of identity performed by that particular hailing is politically strategic or regressive” (96). Critical to Butler’s theorizing is the realization that such naming has both repressive and politically enabling potential. Focusing on the later, we do so without mitigating the former; indeed, we are mindful of the intimate ways that

“writing/performing/saying/theorizing violence”, as one reviewer astutely noted, “is so often bound to the possibility of reproducing the violence we seek to undo.”

The process of reclaiming the subjectivity of the Criminal Tribe in strategic ways is a recent development in Chharanagar; it is only since 1998 that Chharas have begun a politically informed remembering. “The great problem”, argues Dakxin, “is [that] our forefathers never want to discuss their history, about their lives... And second, there is no explanation or there is no description in any kind of history books about this kind of stigma. Till 1998, I also did not know about this history. But [then] Dr. Ganesh Devy and Mahasweta Devi, they came to Chharanagar... The only option to know our history is from our forefathers, you know, [history is passed down from] generation-to-generation, when they transfer knowledge. But in our case, our parents have not discussed.” Dakxin articulates a traumatic disassociation in Chharanagar, a collective amnesia of cultural memory. “The reason [is] because they don’t want to remember”, he continues, “They don’t want to continue the historical stigma in their life... In fact, my father did not want to discuss his life with me... They don’t want their children to be aware about this time. They did not know the importance of that information. It’s an amnesia kind of situation.”⁷ Prompted by the organizers of the DNT-RAG and the work of Budhan Theatre, Chharas have begun a process of reclaiming their communal history in politically engaging ways. “We are not only remembering”, Dakxin argues, “We are reviving our history... That history must be remembered by the people. We are reviving with the performing talent of Budhan Theatre.”



Figure 2 Performance of *Budhan Bolta Hai* Photos by Caleb Johnston

Staging a critical recall in the present has had important material effects, particularly for the youth who form the rank and file of Budhan Theatre.

Caleb: What effect has Budhan Theatre had for its members?

Dakxin: See, first, all of the actors and members of Budhan Theatre, they got educated about the DNT issues in the larger context, not only in Chharanagar. Before 1998, nobody knew about the DNT history... DNT identity... In India, where [the] caste system is very strong, you need to know who you are, which community you belong to. This is wrong but (in terms of politics), you need to know. Budhan Theatre gives this kind of education, the historical context of all the DNTs. And the kind of problems we are facing, and the reason why we are facing these problems. Now, all the actors, members of Budhan Theatre, they understand that, okay, this is the problem. Why I'm hated by my teachers. Why my friends [from school] will not come to my home. Now they know that. Now they can start to change the situation... through theatre, through dialogue.

The awareness about their own identity is the central activity of Budhan Theatre. And... all the Budhan Theatre actors, they are regarded as really good people of the community in the eyes of mainstream society. They get huge respect, huge respect in the field of the arts. Wherever they go, across the country, when they speak about Budhan Theatre, they always get respect. This respect makes them confident, for themselves... When they speak, when Budhan Theatre members speak, they always speak with great confidence... Our problem is identity. This is the central point of the Budhan Theatre activity. Members of Budhan Theatre are absolutely clear about their identity issues. And they also know how to counter the issue through dialogue, through the arts. They know this.

Chharas' use of theatre is situated within an entangled subaltern identity politics. On the one hand, we gesture to the critical importance of organizing along the fault lines of caste identities in contemporary India. An important aspect of Chharas' theatrical practice has been to (re)construct and circulate a DNT identity to further claims within a formal political field of governance. This operates in relation to the fact that in the post-independence period,

DNTs have never been governed as a uniform population category. They were, for instance, excluded in the writing of the Indian constitution, from Articles 342 and 366, which, at the time of independence, defined the country's Scheduled Tribes and enshrined the state's constitutional obligation to provide for the socio-economic improvement and political inclusion of state-recognized adivasi populations. This is part of a developmental and rights-protecting apparatus (however limited in its application) meant to make special provision for caste and tribal populations in terms of education, livelihood, representation, and protection from violence, along with varied social welfare schemes. This is not the place to detail the genealogy of state lacuna, its refusal to include DNTs within the subject categories of biopolitical power (see Johnston 2012). Suffice to say that no measures have been enacted to redress injustices particular to DNTs, namely, to redress the contemporary afterlives of colonial subjugation and legacies of caste discrimination, violence and socio-economic vulnerability. In one register, focused on re-occupying a subject category and recasting a subaltern subjectivity, theatre serves to circulate an identity formation in the hope of realizing state recognition, which could represent access to resources and lawful protections, political influence and moral legitimacy.⁸ Acutely aware of what Gayatri Spivak (Bhasha 2010: 10) describes in her work with DNT groups in West Bengal as the "calculus of politics", Chharas' mobilize theatre to enunciate a political identity in a bid to force state actors to remember and recognize. The Indian state remains the greatest violator of DNT rights and territories, while retaining the sovereign power to enact national rights and enforce them under the rule of law. It maintains the authority to determine whose rights are and are not to be protected.

But more than forcing state recognition, integral to the process of appropriating and recasting DNT subjectivity has been using performance to construct a localized affirmative identity politics within Chharanagar. This work has had effects, especially among the youth

involved in the activities of Budhan Theatre; for whom theatre has been pivotal in historicizing the discrimination that Chharas face in their day-to-day lives and to learn how to speak back against intense stigmatization. This performance-based organizing has contributed to youth gaining important skills, visibility and life opportunities. “We are helping people”, argues Roxy Gadgekar, “to become leaders... We are trying to give leaders to the community from within the community.”

At any point in time, there are some 50 youth engaged with Budhan Theatre; most, if not all, will finish secondary school, while many of its senior members have gained entry into college and employment based directly on their involvement with the organization. Since 1998, Budhan Theatre has secured the entrance of two members into the National School of Drama, an elite and highly competitive school in New Delhi, entrance to which meant a full scholarship paid by the central government. In 2011, Vivek Ghamande landed a small role in the *Dirty Picture*, a Bollywood film based on the life of Silk Smitha. This was followed by a part in Prakash Jha’s cinematic work, *Chakravyuh*, a Bollywood political thriller. Nitin Panchal, another Chhara youth, secured a role in the critically acclaimed 2011 production of *Patang (The Kite)*, set and filmed during Ahmedabad’s annual kite festival. Jitenra Indrekar is a three-time winner of the Best Actor award at the Indian National Theatre competition and is currently studying journalism in college. In 2008, Hardika Kodekar won Best Actress during an inter-school competition; she is now pursuing a degree in English literature in college. After completing his degree in drama at Gujarat College, Atish Indrekar is now working as both a professional actor and journalist for GTPL News, a local Internet news station. In 2006, Budhan Theatre member, Urvashi Gumane was selected by Sneha Prayas—a national NGO working on juvenile justice—to visit Japan. The program brought together 50 children from around the world from disadvantaged backgrounds involved in the arts. Urvashi⁹ was among 4 youth selected from India.

There is also the experience of Ankur, who, now 24 years old and married with one child, has been involved with Budhan Theatre from the beginning. “In my life”, reminisces Ankur, “I have learned theatre. It gives me a lot of things: writing, education, real education, and the right way to make decisions in my life. Before Budhan Theatre, I don’t know [what is] Bhantu¹⁰, what is a Chhara. What we are doing. After Budhan Theatre... I start to study. Yes, that moment was good.” Ankur speaks to the efforts of Chhara activists in getting youth involved in researching and performing their own community histories and identities. During his college studies, Budhan Theatre arranged for Ankur to attend a ten-day workshop at the Central Institute for Indian Languages, after which he was sent to the Adivasi Academy in Tejgadh, which boasts the single largest archive of adivasi languages and publications in the world. “I started my research”, Ankur narrates, “I started a glossary of our Bhantu language... I researched our songs, our culture, our religion.” In 2010, after completing a diploma in mass communications and then his bachelor’s degree in sociology, Ankur received a fellowship to pursue two months of training in community journalism in Sanand, Gujarat. The following year, he received a second fellowship—this from the Ford Foundation—that enabled him to take an internship with the American Institute of Indian Studies in Gurgaon, an edge city of New Delhi. There he spent three months training in audio editing and digital archiving. “I want to archive my community’s songs”, Ankur argues, “because our community’s culture is very strong. I want our own archive centre... I want my community to use my talent.” Since 2011, Ankur has been working as a full-time employee of Budhan Theatre, for which he is paid a monthly salary. He plans to complete his masters and doctoral studies in linguistics. Recently married, however, and the eldest son of a family with nine members, he has pressing financial responsibilities and faces a challenge in balancing familial obligations and his desire for further education. He remains nonetheless

committed to the performative organizing of Budhan Theatre: “I’m connected”, in his words, “physically, mentally, emotionally with Budhan Theatre because Budhan Theatre *made* me.”

These brief vignettes provide a window into the role that performance has played in the refashioning of selfhood and in improving the life opportunities for youth in Chharanagar. A great deal has been accomplished by Budhan Theatre since 1998, whose activities have been organized from a small 8x15 foot single room based at the front of Dakxin’s home. Open to the main frenetic road jutting through Chharanagar, this community space was moved in 2012 to a larger room at the backside of the family home: it has a computer workstation, hundreds of books, newspapers, plays, and press clippings. It provides a sheltered space for rehearsal and signage has been mounted at its entrance marking the offering of ‘non-formal’ education, course work in the performing arts, and its function as the Ahmedabad branch of the DNT-RAG.

Chharas deploy street theatre to produce an affirmative identity politics through which its members can develop critical skills, understand their own selfhood wider circuits of discursive and governmental power, and connect their own struggles with those of other DNT populations. In arguing that collective trauma necessitates collective action, Ernst van Alpen (1997) argues that ‘speech acts’ have a transformative and restorative potential. “Initially, being a Chhara meant being a thief or criminal”, argues Kalpana Gadgekar—an established professional film actor and the only adult woman who has remained a fulltime member of Budhan Theatre—“But nowadays, we’re recognized as members of Budhan Theatre. And this makes me proud that I’m a Chhara. I’m not ashamed to be a Chhara.” Through the performative practice of theatre, Chharas are appropriating the very idioms and categories produced by a colonial modernity to subvert and challenge, to recast the meaning of what it means to be a former criminalized adivasi population. They do so to establish the legitimacy of DNTs, and in doing so, advance the project of righting the wrongs of the state apparatus.

Chharas' deployment of street theatre, however, extends well beyond the discursive body as a site of resistance politics; it is equally utilized as a means through which to further the practice of democratic politics. To the street we now turn. It is time for a performance.

ACT II SPACES OF ENCOUNTER

A *dhhol* drum rang out in the open air; its rhythmic beating began the performance, demanding the attention of the assembled crowd. The chorus shouted in unison:

| | |
|--------------------------------|------------------------------|
| <i>Hay natak natak</i> | <i>Hey, drama, drama</i> |
| <i>Hay natak natak</i> | <i>Hey, drama, drama</i> |
| <i>O bhai</i> | <i>Hey uncle</i> |
| <i>aa o hamara natak dekho</i> | <i>come see our play</i> |
| <i>Khel khel main khel</i> | <i>A play within a play.</i> |

Several Chhara actors continued singing; their only prop was several *lathi* (truncheons) arranged on the ground to form a circular improvised stage.

| | |
|------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| <i>Shoshiton ka ye khel!</i> | <i>A play for the oppressed!</i> |
| <i>Roti ka ye khel!</i> | <i>A play for survival!</i> |
| <i>Mazdooron ka ye khel!</i> | <i>A play for labourers!</i> |
| <i>Bhukhon ka ye khel!</i> | <i>A play for the hungry!</i> |

"Listen to me", a young Chhara man began, "My fingers are cut. I am hungry. This play is a reflection of that." The chorus chanted in response: "The system is a mirror. The system is a mirror. Cut the forests. Sell the rivers. Sell, sell, sell, sell." The actors circulated one another and gathered together tightly, throwing their arms in the air:

| | |
|--------------------------------------|---|
| <i>Ham ye natak karte hai</i> | <i>We enact this drama</i> |
| <i>Aavaz uthavo</i> | <i>Raise your voices</i> |
| <i>Sach dikhao</i> | <i>Expose the truth</i> |
| <i>Hamara mitti ka khela</i> | <i>This play of our soil</i> |
| <i>Hamara mitti ka khela</i> | <i>This play of our soil</i> |
| <i>Khel khel main khel</i> | <i>A play within a play</i> |
| <i>O sathi, khel khel main khel.</i> | <i>My friend, a play within a play.</i> |

"We present to you the story of one [DNT] community", the narrator continued, taking center stage in a direct address to spectators, "This is the story of Budhan Sabar, a young man belonging to the Sabar community who was killed in a police atrocity." "What", Shyamali,

the character playing Budhan's widow, explained, "you are about to witness is not an end but a beginning." Chorus:

| | |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| <i>Hamen badalav chahiye!</i> | <i>We want change!</i> |
| <i>Ham kranti chahate hai!</i> | <i>We want revolution!</i> |
| <i>Ek kranti aayi thi</i> | <i>There has already been one revolution,</i> |
| <i>Ek kranti aayegi</i> | <i>and another is about to take place.</i> |
| <i>Vo kranti bapu ki thi.</i> | <i>That was a revolution brought about by Bapu [Gandhi].</i> |
| <i>Ye kranti ghumantu-vimkuta</i> | <i>This revolution will be of the denotified</i> |
| <i>janjatiyo ki.</i> | <i>and nomadic tribes.</i> |

The audience was witnessing Chharas' performance of *Budhan Bolta Hai*. As documentary theatre, the play stitches together a series of short skits, each animating a well-documented case of state violence. It weaves together the custodial murders of Budhan Sabar in West Bengal and that of Pinya Hari Kale in Maharashtra in 1998, the 'encounter' killing of Deepak Pawar, and finally, the play stages the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation's (AMC) forced eviction and demolition of an unauthorized DNT settlement alongside the city's Maninagar railway station. The chorus' invocation of Gandhi within the context of Ahmedabad is potent. Having established his ashram on the banks of the Sabarmati River, the city served as the political headquarters of the Indian National Congress, from which Gandhi launched the Salt Satyagraha in 1930—an event that sparked the Civil Disobedience Movement. Invoking a particular political imaginary, Budhan Theatre mobilizes theatre in an effort to forge a national adivasi politics. "We do not confine issues to only Chharas", explains Dakxin, the play's author and director, "We take our issues, real issues from all over India; especially the atrocities, exploitation, discrimination of the Denotified Tribes by mainstream society, the legal system, and government. The play becomes a voice for the Denotified Tribes." The scaling of DNT issues has required particular tactics; for instance, most often, Chharas opt to perform in Hindi, which (along with the published English translation of plays) is a political strategy. Much of Budhan Theatre's work concentrates in the metropolitan centers of north and western India where Hindi is the dominant language

and considered by local activists as best suited to work across the heterogeneity of DNTs and the most effective means to engage state actors.

This particular performance of *Budhan Bolta Hai* was unusual; Chharas' were performing in Ahmedabad's Indian Institute of Management (IIM-A), widely considered the most exclusive training ground for the country's elite corporate and public sector managers. In 2007, an audience of 200 had gathered for the performance, an audience composed of IIM-A professors, graduate students and, most notably, members of the Indian Administrative Services—senior civil servants assembled from across the country. It presented an opportunity for Chharas to affect experts situated in considerable positions of local and national power. The performance at IIM-A included a second play, a new script based on an adaptation of Jean Genet's *The Balcony*—whose original 1957 production was set in an unnamed city amid the throngs of revolution. In a loose revision of the central themes running through Genet's script, Budhan Theatre reworked the play. They did so—in part—by inserting a character drawn from one of Mahasweta Devi's short stories, *Mahadukh* (immense grief), based on a young adivasi man who travels to the metropolis. He is so hungry, so famished that upon his arrival, he begins devouring the city. "Mahadukh is hungry since [the] last two hundred years", Dakxin explains, "He's a traveller [*ghumantu*]. When he comes to the city, he starts to eat everything... He eats the Gateway of India. He eats [the] Apollo Hospital. He eats dams. He eats roads. He eats railways. He eats everything. Everyone is scarred of him. They say, 'Who are you?' He replies, 'I am a common man... If you do not feed me, I will eat everything.' It's a warning." Staging the destruction of the iconography of India's modernist development, Chharas' rendition of *The Balcony* communicates a warning—the potential for a subaltern adivasi uprising driven by hunger and socio-political exclusion. "The play tried", continues Dakxin, "to make an understanding to all these policy makers, decision makers... the feel of pain."

Attempting to communicate the ‘feel of pain’, the performance provoked strong reactions from the audience, which included dozens of civil servants, one of who, the Secretary to the Speaker in the Lok Sabha (Parliament of India), was particularly vocal in her anxiety regarding the conflict enacted on stage. “She told [us] that”, Dakxin recalls, “‘Your play has given a message of violence and destruction.’ I told her, ‘My play is not giving a message of violence because I believe in Mahatma Gandhi’s values. I’m absolutely non-violent.’ For me, it’s constructive. But the play warns you that there’s a limit for the common people... Absolutely, it would disturb you. And we believe in the disturbance, that people should be disturbed. Their heart should be disturbed... because when people are disturbed, they will think about what they want.” This was one of many exchanges or disruptions that prompted an extended post-performance debate. We argue that these encounters were possible because spectators were participating in a theatrical event. Chharas, after all, were only acting in a staged ‘fiction’.

Many have commented on the liminal and embodied quality of theatre that renders it an especially effective and ‘safe’ space in which to narrate difficult experiences and to facilitate productive encounters (Houston and Pulido 2002; Johnston and Pratt 2010; forthcoming; Kondo 2000; Nagar 2000; 2002; Pratt and Kirby 2003). Premised on lived experiences, because it is staged, theatre provides Chharas a means for bringing others into an intimate and (sometimes) uncomfortable emotional and physical proximity to the issues. In doing so, they hope to push audiences to examine their own complacencies, to forge more complex identifications with the struggles of DNTs, and ultimately, to get people thinking, feeling and (in some small way) taking action within their own lives. “Street theatre is a powerful [means of] communication”, argues Dakxin, “it is very effective... Street theatre speaks directly to the audience. When we speak through performance, it becomes very deep.” The potential of such affective encounters depend upon Chharas embodying and bringing

audiences close to emotional intensities. “We face the public with eye-to-eye contact”, observes Kalpana Gadgekar, “and deliver dialogue directly to them. This closeness affects... They understand things [that are] happening around them.” “With street theatre, you have to have the audience very near you”, echoes Roxy Gadgekar “So it’s eye-to-eye contact... they speak while seeing into the eyes of the audience.” For performance theorist Jill Dolan (2005), these sites of intensity are hopeful, figuring “utopian performativities” wherein audiences and actors can feel themselves allied to one another and sense the opportunity to imagine alternative futures. This reflects Augusto Boal’s (1998: 142) sense that theatre has the potential to create spaces in which it is possible “to transgress, to break conventions, to enter into the mirror of theatrical fiction, to rehearse forms of struggle and then return to reality with the images of their desire... [providing] an uneasy sense of incompleteness that seeks fulfillment through real action” (see also Pratt and Johnston 2007).

It is hard to say what effect Chharas’ performance may or may not have had for those policy makers and others attending the play at IIM-A—at worst, this witnessing did little except reinforce social hierarchies, at best, it generated empathy as a space for mediation (Pedwell forthcoming) and a means to feel the injustice of structural violence. We temper the potential of such disruptions with the stark realization that (neo)liberal restructuring in India continues to usurp adivasi territories with astounding speed and scope. The setting of Gujarat is pertinent in these regards; the city and state serve as a laboratory for some of the most aggressive experiments in economic liberalization in India and a heartland for a violent state-sponsored Hindu ethno-nationalism that virulently targets minority rights (Gidwani 2008). We are not suggesting that street theatre deflects the effects of structural violence. In such conditions, however, spaces for egalitarian debate are urgent, and we suggest that theatre excavates spaces for democratic politics. In this, we draw on Jacques Rancière’s (2004) interest in theatre as a space of concrete politics, a space not for consensus but divergence,

for active disagreement by redistributing the sensible—which is to say, redistribute what is possible to see and hear as politics within existing socio-spatial orderings (see Johnston and Pratt forthcoming). Forging a distinction between the political and politics, Rancière argues that a central component of contemporary democracy is the partitioning of the sensible—the regulation, allocation and spatial structuring of social classification, and the policing of where and who and who does not have the right and capacity to speak in public life (see Pratt 2012). The sensible refers “to both what is acceptable and naturalized”, so argues Erik Sywngedouw (2011: 375), as well as “an ‘aesthetic’ register as that what is seen, heard, and spoken, what is registered and recognized.”

Mobilizing to resist the enclosure of democratic politics in Ahmedabad (and beyond), Chharas look to reclaim spaces and speaking positions from which to be seen and heard. Circulating their capacity for politics, it is through performative interventions that Budhan Theatre seeks to speak on an equal footing with others to redress a range of issues: the lasting effects of colonial subjugation, intense stigmatization, spatial segregation, and socio-political exclusion from existing governmental structures. Theirs is the “transgressive appearance of unauthorized speakers”, following Rancière (2004: 19), wherein the stage becomes a means through which to circulate “what is seen and what can be said about it, around who has the ability to see and the talent to speak” (13). “Politics exists”, argues Geraldine Pratt (2012: 207), “when people who do not count or have a fixed place within the social order demand to be included in the public sphere, to be seen and heard on an equal footing. Politics is not the business-as-usual of contestation between already existing interest groups; it is a fundamental disruption of an existing ‘distribution of the sensible’”.

For many, contemporary democracy is marked by a rapidly shrinking public sphere, wherein public life—as a space of egalitarian debate and politics—has eroded and become increasingly regulated and policed. A key aspiration of Budhan Theatre is reclaiming spaces

for democratic politics by using theatre to stimulate open debate on issues pertaining to DNTs. Budhan Theatre claims to have carried out 700 performances since its formation in 1998; with each performance typically followed by an extended public forum wherein audiences are encouraged to debate the issues. “I think more than 250 shows [of *Budhan Bolta Hai*] have been performed all across the country”, notes Roxy Gadgekar, “from Delhi to Chennai. And the main focus what not just to perform the play. The main focus is to have discussion with policy makers.” “After each and every performance”, reiterates Dakxin, “We also have discussion with the audience; whatever kind of audience we have: mainstream people, legal, judiciary, or policy makers. We have conversation, and people participate in that... It is an emotional bridge between worlds.” Providing an ‘emotional bridge’, many of Budhan Theatre’s performances prompt conversations across substantive difference and open up the possibility for productive encounters with policy makers, members of the Indian judiciary, ‘mainstream people’, students and other jan-jati communities. Take, as one example, Chharas’ 2005 performance at the Police Training Academy at Karaj, Gujarat’s largest police training center in Gandhinagar. The director of the academy’s community outreach program, Keshav Kumar, had invited a performance for IPS officers, 50 police inspectors and some 200 sub-inspectors. Given that Chharas continue to be the subjects of localized state violence, such encounters are significant. “After that performance”, Dakxin recalls, “those fourteen IPS officers came to Chharanagar with a positive thought... They took an oath that whenever they come into contact with Chharas, or other DNT communities, they will not repeat these crimes. I don’t know if they’ll keep their oath, but it is a beginning.”

The engagement may have yet to transform Chharas’ relationship with local authorities, but as one performance among a multitude, it draws attention to the possibility for the practice of democratic politics in which (sometimes difficult) conversations are

possible. Performance—at the very least—has served Chharas a means through which to occupy spaces and audiences that would otherwise be inaccessible. It has served to further a “democratic public sphere”, which for Geraldine Pratt (2012: 208) represents a “space for encounter in which the logics of politics and police come into contest” (see also Swyngedouw 2011). Further, as we have argued, it is the quality of theatrical space that enables the doing of politics within and through the contingencies of social relations (see Costa 2010; Pratt and Johnston 2007; Nagar 2000). Chharas’ turn to theatre, however, has also pushed them onto other stages in the pursuit of democratic politics and to perform within a broader landscape of adivasi struggles.

ACT III BUILDING SITUATED SOLIDARITIES

Chharas’ organizing has enabled a number of productive solidarities. In the first instance, Budhan Theatre’s 2007 performance at IIM-A has prompted an ongoing collaboration with the University. In partnership with Navdeep Mathur—an IIM professor with the Public Systems Group—Chharas have since delivered several more performances on campus. They have also given guided tours of Chharanagar to graduate students with whom Budhan Theatre has conducted numerous theatrical workshops. In 2009, Dakxin worked with Mathur in creating *Global Sites, Local Lives*—a documentary film, which was part of a coalition of civil society organizations working to resist the displacement of thousands of families living in unauthorized settlements along Ahmedabad’s Sabarmati Riverfront. Most recently, Mathur has established a participatory theatre course for public policy students, a course involving students and Chhara youth performing on issues learnt through their joint collaboration. “Because [they are] IIM students, that means they will be [the] managers of multinational corporations”, Dakxin narrates, in describing the importance of the collaboration, “They said, ‘What can we do?’ I told them, ‘Just remember the Denotified Tribes... just accept them.

That's it. Your visit will be a success for Chharanagar.' And they committed." Imploring IIM students to recognize the histories and struggles of DNTs, these collaborations are meaningful; they circulate subaltern histories and facilitate potentially affective encounters for predominantly 'upper' caste/class students who are poised to take up positions within the machinery of the Indian state or those to be located in the higher echelons of corporate India.



Figure 3 Budhan Theatre at Kaleshwari Photo by Caleb Johnston

There is also Budhan Theatre's annual participation in an adivasi mela (gathering) in Kaleshwari, Gujarat (figure 3). Held on Shivratri (Shiva's birth date), 120 kilometers north of Ahmedabad, the mela takes place among an elaborate temple complex dating back to the 10th century. Originally dedicated to Shiva, the area is now the setting for the worship of the local manifestation of Kaleshwari Matajii; each year, the gathering brings together well over 10,000 DNTs from across the region. It is a meeting place in which to forge solidarity in a shared material politics. Here, Budhan Theatre regularly performs to large adivasi crowds. At the mela, however, their performances assume a different meaning and function. In one register, these serve to circulate information; in the case of *Budhan Bolta Hai*, it retells the custodial murder of Budhan Sabar, the grassroots action taken that resulted in a successful

legal challenge in the High Court of Calcutta, as well as the political mobilization that resulted in the formation of the DNT-RAG. The play “becomes advocacy and guidebook”, so argues Henry Schwarz (2010: 116), “a how-to manual on prosecuting police brutality. Documentation merges with practical instruction... We are offered a blueprint for protest and litigation in addition to documentary record.” The play thus offers a historicization of the issues and the sharing of information and political strategies, while providing a platform in which to built solidarity with other *jan-jati* groups. The context of the mela—as opposed to performing in policing training colleges or elite universities—also raises the awareness that the possibility for democratic politics do not travel evenly across geographical space; the disruptive potential of Chharas’ theatre is situational, it resonates differently in different places for different audiences.

Since its formation in 1998, Budhan Theatre has consolidated a number of productive partnerships. They now possess an extensive network with a range of institutions, which include the likes of Prithvi Theatre based in Mumbai and Jana Natya Manch in New Delhi. Budhan Theatre has established local affiliations designed to connect students with local civic struggles in Ahmedabad: the Institute of Technology, the Dhirubhai Ambani Institute of Information Technology, IIM-A, HK Arts College, and many others. “We have travelled all over India”, Dakxin muses, “we go to different locations, different places, different states... We’ve done all that. It’s true. People know about that, and [there has been] a lot of media coverage, video reports, news stories, written articles, everything.” In February 2012, Chharas organized and inaugurated the first Ahmedabad Theatre Festival; over a three-day period, the event brought together theatre groups from Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata, Chhatisgarh, Pune and Gujarat, with plays performed in Hindi, Gujarati, English, Marathi, Bangla and Bhojpuri. Three hundred artists descended on the city. “Budhan Theatre is the cultural

platform”, the festival’s program read, “to raise the voice of the denotified and nomadic communities and to defend their cause for social justice and human dignity” (ATF 2012).

Not only has performance provided a means to establish a number of national partnerships across the heterogeneity of DNT populations; Chharas have pushed themselves to be seen and heard on a transnational stage. Budhan Theatre has formed a number of alliances with academics and artists, including scholars of post-colonial literature at Georgetown University, anthropologists from the University of London and Taiwan’s National Dong Hwa University, as well as theatre scholars at the University of Leeds. In 2012, Budhan Theatre met with several Coast Salish artists funded by the Canada Council for the Arts in a project examining indigenous literatures. Previously, in 2004, Chharas participated in the World Social Forum in Mumbai, which was followed by Dakxin’s 2007 presentation on DNT issues at the United Nations’ Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization in New York. This was followed by Roxy Gadgekar’s delivery of the movement’s 2011 petition requesting an immediate investigation into the living conditions of India’s DNTs by the UN Rapporteur appointed to the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues—an advisory body to the UN’s Economic and Social Council. Enacted upon very different stages, participating in the World Social Forum and presenting at the UN are important performances in their own right; these global encounters raise the international circulation of DNT struggles and have the potential to shape the political identity of Budhan Theatre. It, however, remains to be seen what will emerge out of these transnational moments and relations. We argue that while these gesture to DNT activists venturing into a transnational sphere, it does not (yet) signal mobilizing the currency of an emergent transnational indigenous subjectivity. Chharas remain focused on articulating a national political identity, and prompting encounters within localized circuits of power situated in the territoriality of the Indian nation state. “We want to expand”, explains Dakxin, “Budhan

Theatre should be expanded into more DNT communities. There, we should create this same model... like what we are doing in Chharanagar... The time will come, that we will be an institution to create this kind of leadership.”

Focusing the spotlight on the contestation and negotiation of DNT territories, rights and identities, Chharas work within and across localized struggles. More than a performing arts society, Budhan Theatre is positioned within an expansive coalition operating to assert the collective rights of India’s DNTs. Representing the Ahmedabad branch of the DNT-RAG, their work in the city extends beyond the remit of performance. In 2010, Budhan Theatre established a theatre group at the Adivasi Academy in Tejgadh, which began with the collaborative writing and performance of a new script entitled *Ulguden* (a fight that will never end). Based on another of Mahasweta Devi’s short literary works, the play animates a buried subaltern history that retells the life of an adivasi leader killed in colonial India. In 2012, Chharas began a partnership with a Nayak community in Lunawada, a small town 100 kilometers east of Ahmedabad. As customary theatre artists and acrobats, Nayaks are well known practitioners of Bhavai—a popular folk theatre long practiced by itinerant adivasis. Having met Chharas at the Kaleshwari mela, Nayaks requested a collaboration with Budhan Theatre in creating a street theatre play addressing Nayaks’ displacement by city authorities in Lunawada. They plan to premiere the work outside the office of the Local District Collector.

Chharas also continue their political organizing in Maninagar, where, since 2004, they have been working with a mixed DNT community of Rajbois and Dabgars to resist eviction enacted by the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC). The scope of this struggle remains to be told. In short, Chhara activists, in conjunction with the DNT-RAG, have helped coordinate legal action with residents of the unauthorized settlement. In 2011, after 65 written applications to the AMC, a one-day hunger strike, and a five-year legal battle, the coalition

won an important case in the Supreme Court of India that dictates that the state government of Gujarat must provide alternative land to displaced DNT families. As in all the work of Budhan Theatre, politics is intimately shaped by performative interventions. Judicial action has been mirrored by the efforts of Kalpana Gadgekar (who has been leading negotiations with AMC officials following the Supreme Court ruling) to establish a street theatre group with Rajbois and Dabgars in Maninagar. Lastly, Chharas remain central in the ongoing action driven by the DNT-RAG to engage the highest political offices of the central Indian government on issues pertaining to DNT populations (Johnston 2012). More specifically, Chharas are involved in the movement's planned legal action to be brought before the Supreme Court that will challenge state governments to comply with an order issued by the country's National Human Rights Commission to provide lists of the DNT populations within their respective administrative territories. In 2013, this action will be shadowed by a national survey of DNT and nomadic populations to be carried out the representatives of 340 DNT organizations across India.

CURTAIN CALL

Chharas took centre stage. One stood defiant. His specter risen from the grave, the actor playing Budhan Sabar made a final appeal to the audience. "Tell me, what was my crime? Why was I killed?", he implored, "Did my crime lie in the fact that I was a Sabar? A DNT?"

The assembled chorus responded:

Dekho, dekho, dekho!
Bharat ke rashtrapati ka sandesh
Hame haashiye pe rakkha
Ye sab janjatiyan aaj bhi intezaar kar
Rahi hain apni sampurna aazadi ka.
Aazadi, jahan bhukh na ho
Police ki maar na ho
Bhedbhav na ho

Notice, notice, notice!
A message from the President of India
We have been kept on the margins
Even today, all these tribes are waiting
for their complete freedom.
A freedom, wherein there is no hunger
No police atrocities
No discrimination

The performance ended with actors forming a human chain; they moved in a radiating circle with their hands raised high. They shouted:

| | |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| <i>Kya ham doyam darze ke nagarik hain?</i> | <i>Are we second-class citizens?</i> |
| <i>Kya ham doyam darze ke nagarik hain?</i> | <i>Are we second-class citizens?</i> |
| <i>Kya ham doyam darze ke nagarik hain?</i> | <i>Are we second-class citizens?</i> |
| <i>Kya ham doyam darze ke nagarik hain?</i> | <i>Are we second-class citizens?</i> |
| <i>Kya ham doyam darze ke nagarik hain?</i> | <i>Are we second-class citizens?</i> |
| <i>Kya ham doyam darze ke nagarik hain?</i> | <i>Are we second-class citizens?</i> |
| <i>Hame chahiye aatma sammaan?</i> | <i>We want self-respect.</i> |
| <i>Hame chahiye aatma sammaan?</i> | <i>We want self-respect.</i> |
| <i>Hame chahiye aatma sammaan?</i> | <i>We want self-respect.</i> |
| <i>Hame chahiye aatma sammaan?</i> | <i>We want self-respect.</i> |

Each enactment of *Budhan Bolta Hai* closes with a strident call for restorative justice and *aatma sanmaan* (self-respect) before the stage is opened up for public debate on the issues staged in the play. In this writing, we have worked to convey some of the effects stemming from Chharas' turn to performance. In the first instance, we have argued that street theatre represents a means through which Chharas are working productively with a discursive injury and resulting post-colonial selfhood—engaging with an entangled subjectivity and public discourse that continues to reproduce and circulate their alleged criminality. Engaging the contemporary afterlives of colonial subjugation, performance has served as a mechanism to excavate and perform difficult histories in order to (re)construct affirmative identities.

Histories that 15 years ago remained largely untold and tabooed have begun to be reclaimed and redeployed in performative ways. Working with the violence caused by the judicial, governmental and discursive apparatus of the CTA—instituting their identity as a Criminal Tribe—Chharas muster street theatre to further what Judith Butler (1997: 104) describes as a “reoccupation and resignification”, a re-scripting of the subjectivity and subject category of the formerly criminalized itinerant adivasi. They do so build their capacity to speak and to envision how the political identities of DNTs might reconfigure structures of governance.

Chharas' theatrical turn equally concerns itself with expanding the practice and potential for democratic politics. Engaging civil servants and police officers, students and

policy makers, and activists and other *jan-jati* communities, theatre is deployed in a bid to reclaim public spaces and speaking positions in and from which to challenge and disrupt who has the right to be seen and heard in a public sphere. We have argued that theatre is well suited to the task because it can bring others into an intimate physical and emotional proximity to the issues and open up spaces wherein it is possible to have dialogue across substantial caste and class difference. Performance has served to circulate Chharas' capacity for politics and to gain access to institutional spaces and audiences that would otherwise largely remain inaccessible. We have sought, in the words of one reviewer, to detail how Budhan Theatre is working within the "crevices of power" without "losing sight of the shadow of colonial violence." Lastly, theatre has set the stage for forging a number of situated solidarities. We do not consider Chharas' organizing in isolation but rather as interconnected to other sites and individuals both near and far.

"We did not start [our] theatre with the focus", ends Dakxin, "that it will become a bridge... but it has happened. Why theatre? Because when we are performing, no one can stop us. They have to watch. And [the] police, judiciary, legal or mainstream people, when they watch, after one hour, some of them will feel it. It is an emotional bridge between worlds." It is through performance that Chharas hope to push audiences to reflect, to feel and to take action; they dare to believe that what can be imagined and rehearsed in theatre can enter directly into the (re)making of the world.

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ENDNOTES

¹ While indigeneity is an extremely complex and contested issue in the country, adivasis are widely considered to be India's indigenous peoples.

² The Sarabhais have long been one of Ahmedabad's most influential families, whose fortunes rose on the backs of its industrial textile manufacturing. The family is known for its philanthropy and for co-founding various institutions, including the Textile Mill Owners' Association, the Indian Space Research Organization, and the Indian Institute of Management. Apart from being an accomplished classical Indian dancer, Mallika Sarabhai remains a highly visible and vocal opponent of the governing BJP Party in Gujarat and Chief Minister Narendra Modi.

³ We are not suggesting that our collaboration transcends difference. We do, however, see value in staging shared conversations and argue that collaboration represents one strategy to work productively (however incomplete) with the politics of representation. Weighing the ethics of this collaboration is a project for another day. We are aware of how representing is intimately wired into fields of discursive power. We suggest that it is the very impossibility of a full ethical engagement that necessitates a constant revision of political strategies.

⁴ While denotification closed 'rehabilitation' camps, the CTA was replaced by the Habitual Offenders Act of 1952, which preserves similar powers and has yet to be repealed. Further, there exists a plethora of anti-begging and loitering legislation that draws explicit connections

between transient activities and criminality—policies wherein definitions of vagrancy and begging are remarkably broad and include activities that remain critical in the economies of many DNT populations (see Radhakrishna 2001).

⁵ Kalpana and Roxy Gadgekar are founding members of the Budhan Theatre and prominent community organizers.

⁶ We are not suggesting that Chharas are determined by their history. “[D]iscourses are polyvalent”, reminds Geraldine Pratt (2009:729), “they structure identities without determining them.” Chharas were never solely constituted by their identification and classification as a Criminal Tribe; they were always subject to multiple discourses and very much situated within the “disjuncture between various subject positions that agency can be located” (730), which is to say, they have always acted within and across overlapping subjectivities, categories, and subject positions.

⁷ Such amnesia is not uncommon among former Criminal Tribes. In her work with Yerukulas in Tamil Nadu, Meena Radhakrishna (2001:21) observes a similar geography. “The frequent, coerced interventions into their lived community life”, she argues, “seems to have led to irreparable breaches again and again, resulting in the blanking out of the collective memory of the community’s past.”

⁸ This recognition would involve a variety of measures, such as ensuring proportionate representation within the Reservation System—India’s version of affirmative action, as well as inclusion in the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act of 1989, the Schedule Tribes and Other Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act of 2006, along with the enactment of new social welfare measures designed specifically for DNTs (see Bhasha 2006).

⁹ Married at a young age, Urvashi was forced to withdraw from the activities of Budhan Theatre. The internal politics of Chharanagar are not the subject of this article. Urvashi’s

retreat, however, draws critical attention to a particular gendered politics in the community. ‘Child’ marriage remains common in Chharanagar, after which, young women are typically pressured and expected to abandon their work with Budhan Theatre in order to take up domestic responsibilities. It is an issue that community organizers continue to strategize around.

¹⁰ Bhanu refers to a broad ethnic aggregate to which Chharas claim membership; it is also a language or dialect shared by formerly and continuing itinerant adivasi populations throughout northwestern India—populations connected through kinship networks, language, economies, histories and customs.

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