



FLAME
UNIVERSITY



Chharanagar
in the Era of
Bholhan
Theatre

2018-2019



Chharanagar in the Era of Budhan
Theatre

DISCOVER INDIA PROGRAM

2018-19

Certificate

This is to certify that the work incorporated in the report titled “Chharanagar in the Era of Budhan Theatre” submitted by the undersigned research team was carried out under my supervision. Such material as has been obtained from other sources has been duly acknowledged.

Sr. No.	Name	Designation	Signature
1	Riya Shah	Group Leader / Writer	
2	Ashita Ahuja	Writer	
3	Esha Ahuja	Writer	
4	Isha Doshi	Writer	
5	Juanita Thota	Writer	
6	Nioshi Shah	Writer	
7	Damayanti Saha	Writer	
8	Prerna Mohan	Writer	
9	Mary Wojcicki	Writer	
10	Siddhant Patel	Writer / Finance and Logistics in-charge	
11	Aman Vakharia	Writer / Videographer / Finance and Logistics	
12	Manas Sambare	Writer / Videographer / Finance and Logistics	
13	Neelima Mundayur	Writer / Videographer/ Photographer	
14	Abhishek Dixit	Writer / Videographer / Photographer	

15	Purvi Rajpuria	Writer / Videographer / Photographer / Creative Head	
16	Smriti Jalihal	Writer / Creative Team	
17	Aakash Reddy	Writer / Videographer / Creative Team	

Faculty Mentor: Dr. Michaela Henry

Signature:

Date:

Table of Contents

Sr. No.	Particulars	Page Number
1	Acknowledgement	vi
2	Abstract	vii
3	<p style="text-align: center;">1.0 Introduction</p> <p>1.1 History</p> <p>1.2 Budhan Theatre</p> <p>1.3 Current Scenario</p> <p>1.4 Geographical Overview</p> <p>1.5 Area of Research</p> <p>1.6 Research Methodology</p> <p>1.7 Limitations</p>	1
4	<p style="text-align: center;">2.0 Literature Review</p> <p>2.1 History</p> <p>2.2 Theatre</p> <p>2.3 Women</p> <p>2.4 Gaps in Literature</p>	15
5	<p style="text-align: center;">3.0 Through the Windows: Four Houses in the Neighbourhood</p> <p>3.1 Women who Brew Liquor</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">3.1.1 Reasons for Brewing Liquor</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">3.1.2 Marriage and Gender Roles</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">3.1.3 Brewing Liquor and Respectability</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">3.1.4 Relationship with Police</p> <p>3.2 Budhan Theatre Women</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">3.2.1 Education</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">3.2.2 Marriage</p> <p style="padding-left: 40px;">3.2.3 26th July</p>	26

5	<p>3.3 Women with Other Occupations</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3.3.1 Access to Other Occupations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3.3.1.1 Age 3.3.1.2 Relationship with Liquor Brewing 3.3.2 Security <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3.3.2.1 Mobility 3.3.2.2 Budhan Theatre 3.3.2.3 Age and Budhan Theatre 3.3.3 Conclusion <p>3.4 Budhan Theatre Leaders</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3.4.1 Integration of Theatre in Personal Lives 3.4.2 Consciousness through Budhan Theatre 3.4.3 Impact of Budhan Theatre 3.4.4 Challenges faced by Budhan Theatre 3.4.5 Resolution through Art 3.4.6 Women in Budhan Theatre 3.4.7 Growing into a Political Movement 	
6	<p style="text-align: center;">4.0 Outburst of Police Violence: The 26th July Incident</p> <p>4.1 The Incident</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 4.1.1 Accounts of the Origin: How it Began 4.1.2 Disproportionate Response: Storming of Chharanagar 4.1.3 Indiscriminate Attack: All Chharas are Fair Game 4.1.4 Aggressive Assertion of Authority <p>4.2 Abuse against Women</p> <p>4.3 In the Lock-up</p> <p>4.4 To the Civil Hospital and Judges’ Bungalow</p> <p>4.5 To the Central Jail</p> <p>4.6 Community Responses</p> <p>4.7 Media and External Support</p> <p>4.8 Aftermath and Ongoing Struggle</p> <p>4.9 Victims’ Messages</p>	71

7	5.0 Conclusion	99
8	6.0 Budhan Bolta Hai: “Building Bridges to the Mainstream” 6.1 Theatre and Empathy 6.1.1 Theatre for the Audience 6.1.2 Theatre for the Actor 6.2 Theatre and Resistance	102
9	7.0 References	111
10	8.0 Appendix 8.1 Glossary 8.2 List of Acts and Laws 8.3 Questionnaires 8.3.1 Community Leaders 8.3.2 Victims of 26th July 8.3.3 Women in Theatre 8.3.4 Women who Brew Liquor 8.3.5 Women in Other Occupations 8.3.6 Kalpana 8.4 List of Interviewees	115

Acknowledgements

The team's journey over the course of the Discover India Program (DIP), from assembling the team to the research work post the field expedition has been incredible. The program has provided the team with the opportunity to explore Chharanagar and its relationship with society, which led to uncovering the reality behind one of the most developed cities in the country. Furthermore, the experience has helped the team members to discover themselves and get a sense of their strengths and weaknesses.

The On-field, the research would not be a success if it were not for Dakxin Bajrange, Roxy Gagdekar, Jignesh Mevani, Atish Indrekar, and the members of Budhan Theatre, who were the mediators for our research, organised all the interviews, and provided us with a framework to structure our project. We would also like to thank the members of Chharanagar who were very welcoming and extremely cooperative with our team. We were very fortunate to meet people from various backgrounds who shared their experiences and their life stories with us.

The team would like to express our gratitude to the Vice Chancellor of FLAME University, Professor Dishan Kamdar, as well as the Dean of Liberal Education, Dr Santosh Kudtarkar, for providing us with an enriching opportunity to experience research and gain practical knowledge.

The team would like to thank Dr. Ravikant Kisana, the chair of the DIP 2018-19, the co-chair of DIP 2018-19, Prof. Nidhi Kalra, and the head of travel and logistics, Dr Divya Balan, for helping and guiding us through the journey. We would also like to thank our DIP Faculty Mentor, Dr. Michaela Henry who was an excellent support system and guided us throughout the process. We also want to extend our gratitude to the DIP Committee and the Collegium for sharing their knowledge and experience through several masterclasses. We would also like to thank our Research Assistant, Nidhi Prabhakar, who provided her inputs as a student who has experienced DIP in the past. A vote of thanks to the FLAME Travel Desk as they ensured that our logistics to and from the Pune railway station was smooth, and ensured punctuality. We would also like to thank the owner of Hotel Laxmi Palace for their hospitality.

And a vote of thanks to all the people who made this project possible.

Abstract

Title: Chharanagar in the Era of Budhan Theatre

Pushed to the tail of Ahmedabad, Gujarat, Chharanagar is one of the most isolated and stigmatised localities of the city. The residents of this area are discriminated against as one of the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes (DNTs) under the Habitual Offenders Acts. Because DNTs are tagged as “habitual offenders,” all community members are homogenised as criminals, and they face exclusion from outsiders and harassment from the State and police.

In this oppressive context, Budhan Theatre, led by Dakxinkumar “Dakxin” Bajrange Chhara, was formed with the aim of bringing about political change through art. In our initial research, we had read about the stigma experienced by the community on a daily basis. We gave particular attention to the major groups in Chharanagar who face unique oppression because of additional markers: women who brew liquor, women of Budhan Theatre, women from neither backgrounds, and Budhan Theatre leaders. While we noticed a gap in the representation of the various women of the community, we also recognised the significance of Budhan Theatre members in binding factions of the community, together with the repercussions of the recent police violence on Chhara lives.

The title of this report is *Chharanagar in the Era of Budhan Theatre*. While violence and stigma were present in Chharanagar before the inception of Budhan Theatre, these are forces are in play even today, despite the work of the group. However, one cannot deny the impact made by the group not only on the community but also on other oppressed and marginalised communities across the country. Therefore, any study of Chharanagar cannot solely depend upon the story of Budhan Theatre separate from the rest of the community. At the same time, no story of Chharanagar since 1998 can deny the presence, influence, and labour of Budhan Theatre and its leaders.

List of Images

Figure	Caption	Page Number
1	Budhan Theatre members rehearsing their play <i>Girgit</i>	5
2	Map of Chharanagar in the Chharanagar library	9
3	Entrance of Chharanagar	18
4 & 5	Blue drums outside houses	31
6	Poonam - Former Budhan Theatre member	44
7	A woman walking out of her house	51
8	Dakxin and other Budhan Theatre members after our theatre workshop	59
9	Chhara women at the protest after 26th July	64
10	Budhan Theatre members practicing their songs	73
11	The <i>Besna</i> rally conducted on 27th July	94
12	Abhishek Indrekar's Facebook Post	97
13	Theatre Workshop - One of our plays being performed in the library	113

List of Maps and Tables

Sr. No.	Name	Page Number
Map 1	Police stations around Chharanagar	9
Table 1	Timeline of the community responses to the 26th July incident	87
Table 2	List of Interviewees	128-130

Introduction



1. Introduction

On July 26, 2018, around 500 police officers stormed into one of Ahmedabad's so-called notorious neighbourhoods, after the alleged assault of a policeman by two young men of the locality. This resulted in large scale police brutality against the community, which lasted more than four hours. Video evidence shows police indiscriminately beating them, including women and children, with lathis and fists, as well as pelting stones, and vandalizing homes and vehicles. Activists, theatre artists, journalists, and lawyers, all uninvolved in the original incident, were beaten and arrested. The incident was one of the many instances of police brutality faced by the Chhara community of Chharanagar, Ahmedabad.

Chharas are one of the many denotified tribes (DNTs) that are scattered in pockets across the country. Officially labelled as born criminals by the British in 1871, these tribes still retain the stigma of criminality despite having been "denotified" by the Indian government in 1952. It is this stigma that materialises itself in the state policies, social behaviour and perception, material deprivation and educational opportunities available to Chharas, and it culminated in the incident of state violence against the entire community on July 26, 2018. Members of the tribes still struggle to rid themselves of this identity and attain the dignity that is the right of every citizen of the country.

Our research proceeded in the shadow of this unexpected yet unsurprising incidence of violence on the 26th of July. We had initially set out to study the position of the women of the community, which came across as a major gap in our literature review, and the role of Budhan Theatre, which began in 1998 as a form of protest against state violence and oppression. However, after 26th July, we realised the yet ongoing weight of the identity of criminality with which Chharas were branded so long ago and saw its effects play out in real time. In our interviews, we noticed the underlying theme of a constant attempt to negotiate with this identity, and work in search of a life of dignity. This was seen especially in the case of Chhara women, a sizeable number of whom brew liquor and, thus, often remain at the receiving end of police violence and harassment. 20 years ago, this search for dignity culminated into the formation of Budhan Theatre, changing the trajectory of the history of Chharas and Denotified Tribes forever. While the last 20 years have been a period of change for many in Chharanagar, life has remained the

same for others, who are unaffected by the sustained movement of Budhan Theatre. Thus, our research focuses on the intertwined narratives of the various sections of the community in the era of Budhan Theatre—specifically, but not exclusively, women—after the violence of 26th July.

1.1 History

The identity of criminality that is so inextricably attached to Chharas today can be traced back to mid 19th century when India underwent several social and political changes under British rule. While the exact series of events that led to the community attaining this identity is unknown, historians and community members have more or less agreed upon the community's general historical trajectory. Dakxin Bajrange Chhara, filmmaker and Budhan Theatre co-founder, narrated the Chhara history from his point of view as a community leader.¹

According to Dakxin, the history of Chharas dates back to 1830, when a tribal king, Umaji Naik, became wary of the Britishers' exploitative attitude towards the forests and other natural resources of the country. In an attempt to curtail them, he offered a reward to anyone who brought him the head of a coloniser. Thus, many colonists were killed by his subjects located in different parts of the country. News of this violent resistance soon reached England, who sent William Sleeman to take control of the territory (D. Bajrange, personal interview, October 6, 2018).

By that time, societies had long organized themselves around settlement, and nomadic life was uncommon and suspicious. Operating under this bias, Sleeman was wary of India's nomadic tribes and suspected them as bearing inherent criminality. In an attempt to control and regulate these isolated tribes, he labelled them as "Thugs" and formed the Thuggee and Dacoity Department in 1830. Under this act, he arrested thousands of people across the country, and around 3,000 people were simultaneously hanged.

By Dakxin's telling, nomadic tribes were instrumental in carrying information and arms to different parts of the country during the Revolt of 1857. Their contributions, instigated by the injustice of the formation of the Thuggee and Dacoity Department, helped the pan India movement become a reality. However, the country has forgotten

¹ The interview was conducted in a semi-formal capacity, in the Chharanagar library, and saw Dakxin opening up at length about several personal and political issues surrounding the community.

their role in the movement, and they have been erased from the narrative of Indian history.²

Thus, official legislation branded around 200 tribes as “born criminals.” Five years after India’s Independence, in 1952, the Indian government replaced the Criminal Tribes Act with the Habitual Offenders Act, which exists even today. This “de-notification” of criminal tribes, however, was not the end of their oppression: it merely changed the way this oppression was officially carried out.

The tribes continued to face stigma from society and the state. For example, they did not receive any affirmative action and remained ineligible for various economic, social, and political opportunities available to mainstream society. New and existing legislation, such as the Bombay Beggary Prevention Act (1959), and the Dramatic Performances Act (1876) criminalised the livelihoods of street performers, dancers, jugglers, musicians, and so on, many of whom happened to be members of nomadic or denotified tribes.³ Thus, in the absence of adequate formal education and other avenues of financial security, many DNTs turned to criminal activities, which only intensified the scrutiny of the state. Nomadic and Denotified Tribes often thus remain in a vicious circle of stigma of criminality, that they struggle to escape even today (D. Bajrange, personal communication, October 6, 2018).

² Not only has this role been forgotten...but the reputation of nomadic tribes as criminal was codified in colonial law with the CTA of 1871. (This was an application of Eugenics Theory in the colonies)

³ While the former categorises anyone performing on the streets (whether receiving alms or not) as beggars, the latter requires that a group of more than four performers acquire State permission before performing, get the scripts reviewed and censored, as well the locations approved before the performance.

1.2 Budhan Theatre



Figure 1. Budhan Theatre members (from left to right - Sahil, Atish, and Jayendra) rehearsing their play *Girgit*

Source: Discover India Program, 2018-19

Forty-six years after denotification, in order to combat what they identified as their systematic dehumanisation, stigma, and oppression, a small group of young Chharas gave birth to Budhan Theatre. Chhara community leaders Dakxin Bajrange, Roxy Gagdekar, and Kalpana Gagdekar began the movement of Budhan Theatre in 1998 in collaboration with Mahashweta Devi and Dr. Ganesh Devy. After establishing the Chharanagar library and community center, Mahashweta Devi suggested that the young people write a play. Budhan Theatre's first play depicted the case of Budhan Sabar, a member of the Kheria Sabar tribe of Purulia, West Bengal, who died in custody due to extreme police violence. The play went beyond the boundaries of conventional theatre to depict reality in its starkest form. Budhan Theatre became a symbol of resistance to state violence and oppression. Over the years, the movement has come to see itself as responsible for raising the issues, not just of Chharas or DNTs alone, but of any and all marginalised and oppressed communities across the country. Notably, Dakxin and other

members of Budhan Theatre have become prominent leaders far beyond their own community (D. Bajrange, personal communication, October 5, 2018).

In order to tackle overtly political themes that often challenge the authority of the state, Budhan Theatre has developed its own unique form of street theatre. Atish Indrekar, a prominent member of Budhan Theatre, explains the group's collaborative creative process as connecting art and politics. In relation to working with other oppressed and marginalised communities, he says, "We go to a community, and talk to them, listen and understand their stories" (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 5, 2018). Budhan Theatre members center their plays around issues specific to a particular community, in the community's own language, and aim to develop leadership and grounded political consciousness among them through theatre workshops (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 5, 2018). For members of Budhan Theatre, this act of raising awareness and creating space where local leaders can emerge is revolutionary in itself.

Explaining how Budhan Theatre differs from other theatre groups across the country, Dakxin says:

Budhan Theatre isn't just a cultural group, it's a cultural-political group. See many people just look at art in just the context of aesthetic, and I don't think you can separate politics from that, it's a very integral part of it. (D. Bajrange, personal communication, September 9, 2018)

In other words, they do not simply integrate politics into theatre, but their theatre itself stems from the need to address political issues. Specifically, this thirst for theatre is less about the need to perform than the need to engage artistically and politically.

Within Chharanagar, the role of Budhan Theatre extends beyond simply making plays; it provides community members with a space to educate themselves and engage in various forms of art. Members explain how participating in Budhan Theatre helped them become conscious of their own oppression and, thus, more politically aware citizens (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 5, 2018). Until recently, the group ran a "non-formal education" (NFE) centre for supplementing local children's education. However, in conversation with members of our group, Roxy Gagdekar, a journalist and community leader, revealed that the NFE centre had to be shut down due to a shortage of funds (R. Gagdekar, personal communication, September 9, 2018). This resulted in reduced participation from the community, especially children, who would often later join Budhan Theatre in a formal capacity. In fact, the group now has to collect funds every

time they plan an activity, and, often, the members are forced to contribute from their personal incomes. However, they are determined to keep the library⁴ running and sustain Budhan Theatre in any way possible.

1.3 Current Scenario

Over the 20 years since the inception of Budhan Theatre, the Chhara community has undergone several changes. While it has over 200 lawyers, theatre activists, filmmakers, journalists and government employees (among other professions), a part of the community still engages in the illegal activities of brewing liquor (also referred to as “bootlegging” in this report) and thieving. While many members of the community strive to move away from the illegal activities that they historically engaged in, the presence of several social and political forces nevertheless retrenches this cycle of criminality. A continued involvement in criminal activities is thus often used to justify the inhuman treatment they receive from the State. Because most people who brew liquor are women, they are often at the forefront of police violence and harassment.

While members of the community are using theatre as a form of protest, they recognise the strong need for government intervention in the development of the community. In his interview, Roxy asserted the community’s need for Chhara-specific government policies and long-term rehabilitation plans. Speaking against the rampant NGO-isation of the community, that fails to provide the community members with sustainable alternatives to their current livelihoods, Roxy stresses the need for a meaningful education that does not simply seek to generate a class of labourers, but aims to create independent thinking individuals capable of sustaining themselves (R. Gagdekar, personal communication, September 9, 2018). Thus, Chharanagar lies at the intersection of being incorporated into mainstream society, while sustaining the vision of a classless, egalitarian world.

On our fieldwork, we noticed that Chharas sometimes refer to themselves as a community, and other times as a caste. There is a general sense that all belong to the same caste, and, while they clearly experience caste discrimination, they do not often speak about this overtly. The castes of other Denotified Tribes (DNTs) is also ambiguous, and their legal caste status differs from state to state. While Chharas come under the category

⁴ The library and community centre is presently located at Dakxin Bajrange’s home, and its rooftop terrace was also used for some of our activities.

of “Other Backward Classes” in Gujarat (M. Tamanche, personal communication, October 2, 2018), it seems as though most are either unaware of this status or unable to access its benefits.

1.4 Geographical Overview



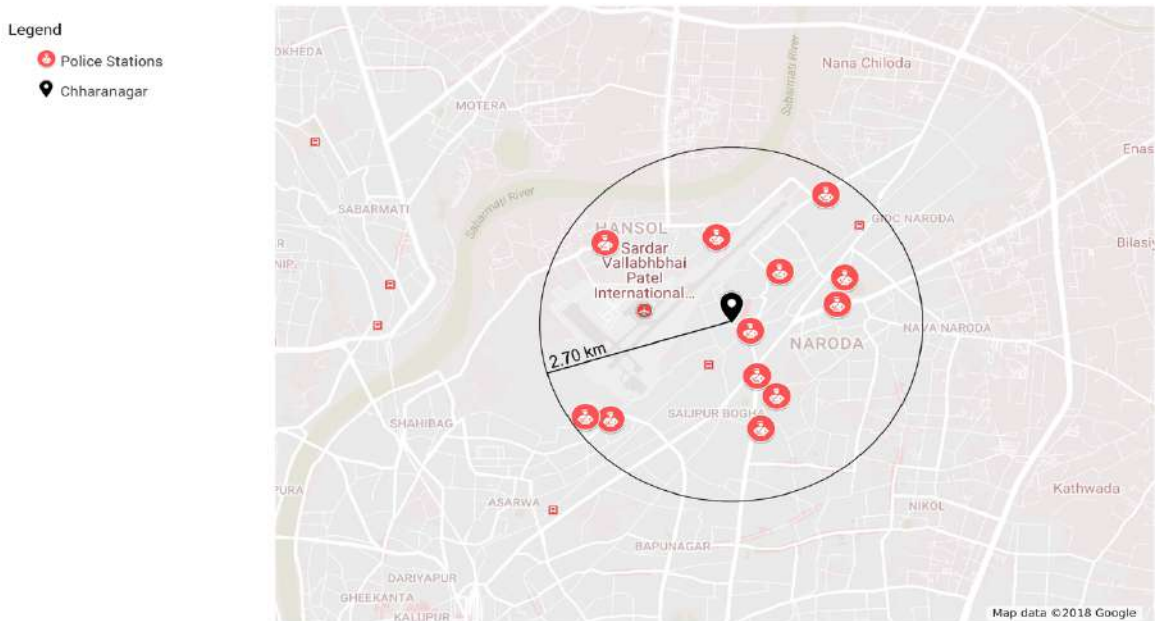
Figure 2. Map of Chharanagar in the Chharanagar library

Source: Discover India Program, 2018-19

We entered Ahmedabad expecting to see the image of developed Gujarat as portrayed by mainstream media. While this image was reflected in the well-off areas of the city, such as Satellite and Sarkhej-Gandhinagar (SG) Highway, Chharanagar presented a complete contrast to our expectations of development. Pushed to an isolated corner of Ahmedabad, Chharanagar shows that it has been subject to nothing but neglect and dismissal from the Amdavad Municipal Corporation (AMC). Upon entering the locality, one immediately notices the lack of a garbage disposal system, proper sewage system, and the absence of basic sanitation facilities. Thus, Chharanagar’s population of 20,000 people is left with minimal help from the AMC for attending to its basic infrastructure needs (Da Costa, 2016, p. 25). The isolation of the community from the rest of the city is further highlighted by the community’s preference to speak Hindi instead of

Gujarati, when they are not speaking the Chhara language⁵. We noticed this on multiple occasions, during interviews as well as in casual conversations.

During our time in the city, we were advised to avoid Chharanagar by auto drivers, cab drivers, street hawkers, and family members alike; delivery men from surrounding localities also refused to enter the area. With startling regularity, outsiders always described Chharanagar as a place of constant conflict, rogue alcoholics, and thieves. We could thus infer and comprehend the intensity of the stigma attached to the locality and community firsthand when we interacted with these people from various sections of the city. According to community history, the British forcibly settled Chharas in an open-prison, before they were moved to Chharanagar. In a personal interview with our group, Gopichand, a sixty-year-old member of the community, said that, during settlement days, the police accompanied Chharas wherever they went and locked them into the settlements by 5 p.m. (Gopichand, personal communication, October 6, 2018). Remnants of this colonial mentality are seen even today in the unusually large number of police stations set up around Chharanagar in order to keep the area under constant watch.



Map 1: Police stations around Chharanagar

(“Chharanagar, Kuber Nagar, Ahmedabad, Gujarat [Map]”, 2018)

⁵ The absence of the Chhara language in the dominant culture of the state reflects the multiple cultures and experiences that are made invisible in order to portray a singular, unified narrative of the state.

Twelve police stations surround Chharanagar in a three-kilometer radius, with the closest being the Kubernagar Police Chowki (300m away), and the farthest being Meghaninagar Police Station (2.7km away). Chharanagar falls under the jurisdiction of Sardarnagar Police Station (R. Gagdekar, personal communication, September 9, 2018). Rahil, one of the men who brews liquor claimed that, if there is misconduct or evidence of liquor in any area of Ahmedabad, the first place suspected and raided by the police is Chharanagar (Rahil⁶, personal communication, October 5, 2018). The sheer number of police stations reflects a clear bias in the state ideology which still attaches the tag of criminality to Chharas, more than 50 years after their decriminalisation and denotification.

1.5 Area of Research

In our initial research, we had read about the stigma experienced by the community on a daily basis. However, we saw how stigma easily slides into outright violence when we observed, in real time, an incident of extreme police violence that occurred in the middle of our pre-field research process. Specifically, it was the uninspired grounds on which the police violence of 26th July was carried out that drove home the extent and impacts of stigma faced by the community. While before the incident occurred, we had planned to center our research on the role and position of the various women of the community, we realised that there was no way we could overlook the 26th July incident and its impact on various aspects of the lives of Chharas.

When we visited Chharanagar, we observed a large number of distinct sections within the community, which were all, though in different ways and at different points in their lives, being affected by the stigma of being a Chhara. While we noticed a gap in the representation of the various women of the community, we also recognised the significance of Budhan Theatre members as the binding factors of the community, together with the repercussions of the recent police violence on Chhara lives. In order to bring to the forefront these aspects of the community, we decided to center our research around these three diverse facets of the community, and present their narratives in the framework of the last 20 years, i.e., since the inception of Budhan Theatre in 1998.

Our research was not driven by a single question or statement. It aims to present the multiple, diverse, distinct and yet overlapping narratives of the various sections of the

⁶ The name Rahil has been changed as per request.

Chhara community, and how these sections have been impacted (or not) by the presence of Budhan Theatre over its 20 year lifespan. We present an oral history of these sections of Chharanagar and aim to put forward the various factors that shape their lives, highlighting how different members of the community manoeuvre through these factors in search for a life of dignity.

1.6 Research Methodology

The research methodology for our study was qualitative. It emerged from a critical research paradigm which took a theoretical approach to our research topic that was rooted in intersectionality, or the way in which different types of power structures are linked and affect matters of oppression or privilege (Crenshaw, n.d.). Viewing our topic through this lens better allowed us to address the historical and systemic barriers faced by Chharas, as well as the more recent violence against their community in Chharanagar. Chharas are subject to discrimination due to the social stigma that has followed them as a denotified tribe of “born criminals”. Chhara women, then, become doubly oppressed, both in terms of their gender and in terms of their identity as Chharas.

For our study, we employed three different methods to obtain primary data during our on-field research: interviews, oral histories, and performance ethnography and experiential learning. Interviews were used as a means of learning more about different aspects of the various roles adopted by community members. Oral histories—both the testimonies of the victims of the police violence which occurred on the 26th July and the recollections of some of the community’s elders—provided us with a greater context of life in Chharanagar from the past to the present day. Performance ethnography (Given, 2008), which became a component of experiential learning, gave us greater insight into the work of Budhan Theatre, whose members’ leadership assisted us throughout our fieldwork. Throughout the process of data collection, we gathered informed consent from all participants in order to ensure ethical research practices that will not cause harm or distress to any individual. We also recognised the participants’ right to revoke their consent at any time, and have maintained anonymity where requested. As a result, some names have been changed to protect the identities of those involved.

Much of our data was collected through interviews, both semi-structured and unstructured, and we used two different non-probability sampling techniques for our research: purposeful and convenience. The semi-structured interviews were conducted with notable members of the Chhara community and others within and outside of the

community, including academic scholars, whereby we used a rough structure of predetermined questions but allowed for flexibility and the possibility of adaptation to the answers provided. For our interviews with notable members of the community and those outside of it, we selected participants through purposeful sampling, and these interviews were scheduled ahead of time. We also conducted semi-structured interviews with members of the community whom we did not know beforehand. These participants were identified through a mixture of purposeful and convenience sampling, as we worked directly with the community leaders who acted as liaisons. (This was particularly important with regard to some of our female interview participants, and there were occasions on which we tailored our student interview teams to consist mostly or entirely of women.) While on-field in Chharanagar, we conducted unstructured interviews with members of Budhan Theatre through informal conversation. Similarly, our research considered the oral histories of several participants who were victims of the 26th July violence, as well as the histories of two of the most aged members of the community. In these interactions, we did not seek objective accounts but, instead, aimed to obtain subjective, personal accounts of significant historical events.

Many of our interviews, especially those with community leaders, were filmed using a digital camera and a tripod as well as recorded with either a microphone or a smartphone, depending on availability. Nearly all interviews were audio-recorded, if not video-recorded⁷. When taking audio recordings, wherever possible, we ensured that multiple devices were being used to record the audio simultaneously. This was a precautionary measure, in the event that any of the devices failed at recording the audio or did not record it audibly enough for it to be transcribed. This was especially true of settings in which there was significant background noise.

While the locations of these interviews varied, most of them were conducted either in the Budhan Theatre's library, also known as Chharanagar's community centre, or in the homes of the participants or their relatives. Each interview teams generally consisted of three to four members of our group, and also one of the Budhan Theatre members. In every case, one member of the team was on hand to operate either the video equipment, and to ensure that audio was recorded. Teams were generally consistent

⁷ The majority of our interviews were conducted in either Hindi or Gujarati and were later transcribed and translated into English.

throughout each day, although some alterations were made depending on factors such as availability, interest and health conditions.

Performance ethnography and experiential learning (Oberg, 2008) was also a significant component of our research. Every evening, members of Budhan Theatre would conduct theatre workshops for us on the terrace before we left Chharanagar for the night. These workshops helped us experience and understand Budhan Theatre's process of developing and performing a play and get a sense of the philosophy of the activism in which Budhan Theatre is engaged. As part of this work, we were asked to develop our own plays from scratch, which allowed us to experience—at least in part—how doing theatre as Budhan Theatre does affects the performers themselves.

Sample size was generally not a concern for us. Achieving quantitative targets did not make up our primary aim; rather, we focused on the depth of information we could acquire from the participants, conducting over 62 interviews during our fieldwork. The one exception to our approach to sample size was with regard to the victims of the 26th July incident. In that case, we aimed to gather all 29 victims' testimonies of that night.

1.7 Limitations

Our on-field research work was not void of limitations. To begin with, most members of our group had no or limited research experience. The research was the first of its kind for all of the group members, and carrying out such extensive, systematic work and gaining in-depth knowledge was, at times, difficult. Due to this lack of on-field experience, there may have been instances where data could have been affected, for example, due to the use of unintentionally leading interview questions.

Time was yet another limitation. Apart from the limited time on-field, the nature of the interviews was volatile. Although many interviews were scheduled, many others were contingent upon the availability of the community members. Teams were equipped and organized for scheduled interviews, but there were also some interviews for which members who were free at that instance had to be chosen to form a team, resulting in limited preparation.

The combination of weather and illness became a limitation for our group over the course of our field-work in Ahmedabad. The temperatures each day were very high (with highs of around 38°C to 40°C), and the weather was very dry. The heat therefore exacerbated any illness that our group members developed on-field. Due to illness, some group members had to return to the hotel during the day, when they would have been

conducting interviews otherwise. This therefore altered the composition of some of our interview teams and the timings of our interviews for the sake of a respite from the heat.

Language was also a minor limitation. Most of the interviews were conducted either in Hindi or in English (or occasionally in a mixture of the two). The former was spoken and understood by nearly all of our group members, and all group members were fluent in the latter. A limited number of interviews were conducted in Gujarati, understood by a few of our group's members. Thus, interview teams were usually assembled on the basis of language, where applicable. There were moments during some of the interviews we conducted where the interviewees would converse in the local Chhara language in addition to the primary language of the interview. This could have led to a loss of information, since no members of our group spoke the language used within the community. However, Budhan Theatre members did act as translators to help mitigate these moments of misunderstanding.

There was also the possibility of biased sampling. Since the team did not have any means to reach out to the members of the Chhara community beyond the community leaders with whom we were in contact, the members of Budhan Theatre acted as mediators for us. They arranged interviews with people they deemed fit and willing to speak with us. (This was also contingent upon availability, as previously discussed.) Furthermore, each interview team was accompanied by a member of Budhan Theatre when out in the community, which might have led to a deliberate misrepresentation of information on the part of our participants.

Literature Review



2. Literature Review

This chapter focuses on the existing academic literature on the Chhara community, Budhan Theatre, and Denotified Tribes in general. The prominence of Budhan Theatre, as well as its connections to notable intellectual figures, such Mahasweta Devi and G.N. Devy, has led to the Chhara community receiving scholarly attention from all over the world. The scholarly work on the Chhara community is sometimes couched in the larger context of DNTs in India. At other times it focuses more on Budhan Theatre and is part of the literature about protest theatre and film. Women's development and the literature on it addresses tribal women's issues broadly, and touches on certain DNTs such as the Bedia tribe. All these three types of literature that were most relevant to the Chhara community, do not adequately address Chhara women.

Based on these observations, we chose to center our literature review around three broad themes: the history of DNTs, the role of theatre in the community, and the role of women in the community. The literature on these themes, and the gaps that emerged, helped us come up with a framework and lens for our own research.

2.1 History



Figure 3. Entrance of Chharanagar

Source: Discover India Program, 2018-19

The history of the denotified tribes in India begins when the British colonial government passed a legislation, called the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA), in 1871 (Bokil, 2002, p. 150). This piece of legislation was intended to suppress castes who were seen as a threat to India's prosperity by stating that anyone born into one of the tribes, under this act, was seen as a criminal (Heredia, 2007, p. 8). In an attempt to justify this legislation, the British colonial government accused these people of having predatory nature towards their vision of making India a secure and prosperous country (Heredia, 2007). However, the reality stated by J.R. B. (2010), was that the British wanted to suppress any group that took to arms and opposed the colonial rule, and hence branded them as criminals. The Criminal Tribes Act was first enacted in North India, though, over time, it spread throughout the country—beginning with Bengal in 1876 and ending with the Madras presidency in 1911 (Heredia, 2007, p. 8).

With the labeling of certain groups as hereditary criminals, there arose a need to reform these groups socially (Heredia, 2007, pp.8-9). Thus, the British government employed the Salvation Army to carry out social engineering through a policy called "criminocurology" in the settlements of the so-called "Criminal Tribes" (Heredia, 2007, p. 9). The rehabilitation of the supposed criminals only came after their harsh treatment under the law was questioned. Initially enacted in 1908, their rehabilitation took the form of the Criminal Tribes Settlement Act (Bokil, 2002, p. 150). Gradual reforms to the Criminal Tribes Settlement Act and to the Criminal Tribes Act itself ultimately led to widespread protest, and the previous "Criminal Tribes" were denotified with the countrywide repeal of the Criminal Tribes Act in 1952 (Bokil, 2002, p. 150).

However, it must be taken into notice that while India attained freedom in 1947, the repeal of the Criminal tribes act took place only in 1952, five years after Independence. Additionally, although the Indian government officially "denotified" these tribes, the Habitual Offenders Act was enforced in place of the Criminal Tribes Act. According to the Habitual Offenders Act, habitual offenders present a danger to the society in which they live. The act covers 150 Denotified and Nomadic Tribes and a population of approximately 60 million for their "criminal tendencies," giving the police wide powers to arrest them, and control and monitor their movements (Bokil & Raghavan, 2016, p. 761). While some members of denotified communities do engage in illegal activities, it is not uncommon that entire communities are subjected to police atrocities after a crime has taken place (Bokil, 2002, p. 150). Both the Criminal Tribes Act and the Habitual Offenders Act negate the universally proclaimed principle that "all

human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights” (UN General Assembly, 1948).

Following Budhan Sabar’s murder while being held in police custody, there was a marked increase in consciousness of DNT communities towards their own rights. A group of academicians—Mahasweta Devi and G.N. Devy among them—founded an organization called the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes Rights Action Group, also known by the acronym DNT-RAG (India Relief and Education Fund (IREF), 2007). The DNT-RAG advocated for DNT rights on national and international levels, including being “instrumental in setting up the National Commission for Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-nomadic Tribe [sic]” (National Alliance Group for Semi-nomadic, Nomadic and Denotified Tribes, n.d.) in the early 2000s.

Despite the growth of the DNT movement, both within the Chhara community and across the country, the stigmatization of DNTs remains. In 2008, the National Commission for Denotified, Nomadic and Semi-Nomadic Tribes (NCDNSNT) recommended in its report to Prime Minister Manmohan Singh that those “falling under the denotified, nomadic or semi-nomadic tribe categories” be granted the same protections as those belonging to Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Rao, 2008). The Indian government stated in January 2018 that it was considering repealing the Habitual Offenders Act of 1952 (TNN, January 5, 2018), a move that would be in keeping with the recommendations of the National Human Rights Commission’s, and the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination in 2007 (Sharma, 2017). However, a news report from 2018 noted that little progress had been made following the NCDNSNT recommendations from 10 years prior, such that “94 DNT, 171 NT, and 2 SNT communities fall by the wayside as they are not included in any of the categories [of SC, ST, or OBC groups]” and thus not protected by the Constitution of India (Nair, 2018).

Although the situation of DNT communities means that many people do not have or cannot exercise certain rights, many communities do show solidarity towards one another. One shared celebration is of August 31, which marks the anniversary of the repeal of the Criminal Tribes Act in 1952 (Gandee, 2016). The date is viewed as a liberation day by those who celebrate it, despite the continued existence of legislation such as the Habitual Offenders Act (Gandee, 2016).

2.2 Theatre

One of the primary foci of our research on the Chhara community is the role of Budhan Theatre, an activist theatre group based in Chharanagar. Some of the group's senior members are featured in, or have even authored, the literature that we have found. Dakxinkumar "Dakxin" Bajrange Chhara is perhaps one of the most prominent members of the Chhara community and one of the founding members of Budhan Theatre. His postgraduate dissertation covers the history of Budhan Theatre as well as its ethos and practice within and outside the Chhara community, providing a strong first-hand account of what the theatre group is and what it does (Bajrange, 2010). Bajrange (2010) additionally links the Chhara community's status as a "Criminal Tribe" to one of their people's original livelihoods: entertaining. Prior to them being criminalized, Chharas performed as street singers and dancers, though Bajrange (2010) notes that the colonial administration was suspicious of the community's ties to thievery (p. 18). Even after independence, Chharas were known for their entertaining ability, and Bajrange (2010) writes that the community drew the attention of United States-based Indian classical dancer Ragini Devi (p. 18).

While theatre existed in India prior to the colonial era, the British colonizers brought their own conceptualization of theatre to the subcontinent as a way of promoting their own culture and values (Bajrange, 2010, pp. 20-21). Moreover, only the elite class were permitted to watch theatre; it was not available to the common people (Bajrange, 2010, p. 21). This drew the ire of the Bengali writers of the time, who then created their own variety of theatre in 1833 (Bajrange, 2010, p. 21). Differentiating their works from the plays created by the British, the Bengali plays were targeted towards the common people and their struggles (Bajrange, 2010, p. 21). Ultimately, though, the British colonial government introduced legislation, the Dramatic Performances Act, 1876, to combat those performances which they viewed as a threat (Bajrange, 2010, p. 21).

The dissertation by Bajrange (2010) similarly covers the history of protest theatre as an art form in India. This art began prior to independence from the British, with the formation of the Indian People's Theatre Association (IPTA), itself a wing of the Communist Party of India, in 1942 (Bajrange, 2010, p. 22). Although the association disbanded following independence, the connections between theatre and politics did not. Former members of the IPTA staged street theatre performances in the following decades to raise public awareness about various issues (Bajrange, 2010, p. 22). These performances then led to the creation of smaller theatre groups, known as social action

groups (SAG), in rural villages, where the people were able to address their local concerns, using theatre as a medium (Bajrange, 2010, p. 23).

Bajrange (2010) describes Budhan Theatre as having been created out of these social action groups, though the history of theatre in Chharanagar itself began when director Prem Prakash came to the area in search of actors who were dark-skinned enough to play slaves in a production of Badal Sircar's *Spartacus* (p. 25). Although Chhara actors had been praised for their performance in *Spartacus*, and theatre work in the community continued to an extent, financial and other barriers kept the community from doing more with theatre (Bajrange, 2010, pp. 26-28). It was, in fact, the formation of a community library by academician Ganesh Devy and Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi, that became instrumental in the establishment of Budhan Theatre, created at Devy's urging, following the Budhan Sabar case of 1998 (Bajrange, 2010, p. 29).

Johnston and Bajrange (2013) examine the politics of Budhan Theatre, both in terms of its re-enactment of past events and its potential for future political change. The authors examine Budhan Theatre's beginnings with the creation of a play based on the Budhan Sabar case, titled *Budhan Bolta Hai*, as well as the group's philosophy and praxis (Johnston & Bajrange, 2013). As quoted in Johnston and Bajrange (2013), Dakxin Bajrange states that Budhan Theatre's performances are always based on real events, in order to turn those events into a "sensitive issue" for the audience (p. 3). Budhan Theatre is thus analysed by Johnston and Bajrange (2013) through the lens of other researchers' work on street theatre, and the authors describe the group's politicization of theatre as a "socio-spatial tactic" (p. 3). According to Bajrange (2010), the philosophy of Budhan Theatre is one of the creation of dialogue, and the Chhara community has created a pedagogy, in the vein of the works of Paulo Freire (pp. 35-36). This is supported by Friedman (2011) and Van Erven (1992), although the latter does not refer to Chharas specifically. It is also supported by Schwarz (2010), who holds a similar view and writes that there is a role reversal present in Budhan Theatre's works, such that the police, rather than members of the Chhara community, are viewed as criminals.

Other works on similar forms of activist or protest theatre suggest that other theatre groups have also found success through similar methods and have faced similar struggles. Bhagwat (2016) analyses the Dalit theatre movement in terms of its purpose, content, and audience, arguing strongly in favor of street theatre as a medium. One example within the American context, from Selman and Heather (2015), highlights the importance of participatory theatre techniques. Van Erven (1992) writes of how theatre

can be used as a tool for liberation by the oppressed in the Asian context, further supporting Bajrange (2010). Meanwhile, Bhatia (2004) covers protest theatre as it relates to nationalism and censorship. This is significant to our research, as Johnston and Bajrange (2013) also discuss how Budhan Theatre has been viewed as anti-national by some. Anandan (2018) additionally writes about how the colonial-era Dramatic Performances Act continues to impact the material that Budhan Theatre is able to perform without fear of censorship.

Regarding the role of women in Budhan Theatre, however, a gap in the literature is clear. While much of the literature surrounding Budhan Theatre itself focuses on its potential for social change, little is said about women's involvement. Bhagwat (2016) and Bhatia (2004) discuss women's issues in relation to theatre, and Bhatia (2004) is particularly clear about the intersections between women's issues and theatre. From a lot of our research on Budhan Theatre, we know that men are known to portray women, such as in the case of *Choli Ke Peeche Kya Hai?*, a play performed by male members of Budhan Theatre which focuses on the exploitation of women. The failure to address women's issues can be seen in some of the existing literature on Budhan Theatre, including the work of Johnston and Bajrange (2013). Bajrange (2010) provides an example of Kalpana Gagdekar, who is also profiled by Da Costa (2016). However, we have been able to find few other women involved in Budhan Theatre. Van Erven (1992) provides the example of the women's theatre group called *Stree Sangharsh* (Women's Battle), which found difficulty in retaining its female performers. We wonder, then, if the lack of women in the literature is because Budhan Theatre has faced similar challenges, and, if so, what the reasons for these challenges might be for Chhara women.

As 2018 marks 20 years since the Budhan Sabar case and the start of Budhan Theatre, we are also curious to know how the group has evolved over the past two decades. While we know parts of the history of Budhan Theatre, it is not a comprehensive one, and this 20 year milestone appears to be an ideal point for reflection. Not only are we interested in knowing what Budhan Theatre has done in this time, but we are also interested in seeing how the group's aims have evolved. Where did they start? Where are they now? Where do they plan to be in the future—whether one year or 20 years from now?

2.3 Women

While the denotified tribes are some of the most marginalised and overlooked sections of Indian society, the women from these tribes tend to suffer the most. Bokhil (2002) wrote of the general societal structure of denotified communities. According to the article, DNT communities are primarily patriarchal in structure: the women of the communities are severely repressed and experience a very low status, while the eldest men of the tribe command the most authority (Bokhil, 2002, p. 148). Women are often treated as property, with child marriages being quite common (Bokhil, 2002, p. 152). The communal laws that dictate the behaviour of the women are quite stringent and harsh; adultery, exogamous marriage, and premarital pregnancy are treated as serious offences (Bokhil, 2002, p. 152).

In a study by Sarthak (n.d.) about the status of women from denotified tribes in Delhi, it was found that these women face discrimination right from the time of birth, as members of the community show a much greater preference for boys rather than girls (Sarthak, n.d., p. 14). During times of sickness, women's healthcare is not prioritised (Sarthak, n.d., p. 14). As women tend to stay at home, it is thought that, in time, they will get well on their own (Sarthak, n.d., p. 14). The level of illiteracy among the women of these communities was found to be extremely high (Sarthak, n.d., p. 54). Moreover, a general lack of awareness regarding antenatal and postnatal care was seen (Sarthak, n.d., p. 18). Begging was found to be quite a common activity, especially among the women and children (Sarthak, n.d., p. 12). During begging, many of the young girls experience sexual abuse by men in that area, and a lot of them are harassed by the police (Sarthak, n.d., p. 20). Additionally, prostitution is very common among the women of denotified tribes (Sarthak, n.d., pp. 71-74).

Under the influence of alcohol, husbands tend to physically abuse their wives, who do not even report these incidents (Sarthak, n.d., p. 14). Furthermore, according to the study, the Caste Panchayats of the communities are largely male-dominated and often present verdicts that are not in favour of women and their rights (Sarthak, n.d., p. 75). In some of the communities, women are even obliged to go through virginity tests on the first night of their marriage, which is "a violation of their womanhood" (Sarthak, n.d., p. 71).

The women from these communities are actively involved in providing support for the household and, while they do not experience the confines of the four walls of the

house, they still face the constraints of the patriarchal society (Bokil, 2002, p. 148). Women are married off as children, and the dowry system allows the families of the groom to extract as much money from them as possible (Bokil, 2002, p. 152). Women are quite vulnerable to and easy targets for the police, as the men of the family are either in custody, absconding, or dead (Bokil, 2002, p. 152).

Due to the lack of an earning male member, women are forced to provide for the household. This usually means wages from labour work, which are hard to come by because of the marginalisation due to their DNT identity (Bokil & Raghavan, 2016, p. 765). Given that some of the men are in police custody and require legal representation in court, the women of the house need to work harder to provide for the fees needed for such help. Bokil and Raghavan (2016) stated that this process proves extremely difficult for poor and at-times illiterate women. The legal fees as well as bail incur a huge cost. If gathering the sum is not possible through wages, they end up having to take on loans and to pay off the interest rates, and they sometimes have to turn to prostitution and crime (Bokil & Raghavan, 2016, p. 765). From victims, they thus turn into offenders and are further plunged into a vicious cycle.

It is worth noting that information about specific denotified tribes cannot be applied to all DNT communities. Furthermore, the available literature about women from denotified tribes could be considered as generalisations in the case of our research about Chhara women.

In her book *Politicizing Creative Economy: Activism and a Hunger Called Theatre*, Dia Da Costa (2016) explains that the rules of Chharanagar dictate that “good women” must not work against the wishes of their marital home (Da Costa, 2016, p. 195). Besides housework, the dominant “acceptable” vocation for women is in the production of liquor (Da Costa, 2016, p. 196). Gujarat is a dry state, and the illegality of alcohol sales and consumption allows the police to treat the Chhara women’s production of liquor as a regular source of income through bribes (Da Costa, 2016, p. 196). They also continue to instigate violence, harassment and brutality within Chharanagar (Da Costa, 2016, p. 196). Thus, bootlegging as women’s work is connected to the police and the survival of the community. In the book, Da Costa (2016) interviewed Kalpana Gagdekar, a prominent Chhara actress, who said that women must try to give up liquor production (p. 197). She also believes it should lose moral legitimacy, even though it is a matter of survival for many. Her reasoning behind this is the fact that production of liquor generates affective

burdens by creating alcoholics, who often die early and leave their young widows to fend for themselves and their families (Da Costa, 2016, p. 209).

Kalpana stated that, in the past, even theft was considered common work for women (Da Costa, 2016, p. 196). Just as brewing liquor is legitimized today, the women were once respected for being thieves (Da Costa, 2016, p. 196). However, the young Chhara women do not tolerate theft as a career option anymore (Da Costa, 2016, p. 196). According to Gagdekar, there exist numerous rigid boundaries for working women to be accepted in the community (Da Costa, 2016, p. 196). For instance, not many women participate in theatre and are often looked down upon if they do (Da Costa, 2016, p. 196). When Kalpana was asked about women's contribution to Budhan Theatre, she said that being a married woman as well as a mother becomes a major hindrance in participating in theatre (Da Costa, 2016, p. 196). Societal norms state that women of the Chhara community cannot go out and work, and going out to perform various plays is seen as an objectionable activity. However, brewing liquor from home is not generally seen as an undesirable task (Da Costa, 2016, p. 196).

The short film *The Widow's Home* found that the women who brew liquor in Chharanagar see no other suitable options for themselves to earn money (Pawar, Batunge, & Indrekar, 2014). However, the solution to keep their daughters from brewing liquor is thought to be a good marriage (Pawar, Batunge, & Indrekar, 2014). This is in spite of their own entry into bootlegging being because of their husbands' deaths (Pawar, Batunge, & Indrekar, 2014). The film shows that women who are criminalised on the basis of their profession may experience some amount of autonomy as women, while women who may not have to go into the profession face a loss of autonomy when they are married off. In either case, women in the Chhara community face a unique and complicated form of repression.

While the activism of Budhan Theatre has allowed for a transformation of the Chhara community from political economy, identity, and subjectivity centered on criminality to one centered on creativity (from "born criminals" to "born artists"), the optimism brought on by the new ideals is itself treated with a sense of pessimism due to historic experiences of betrayal (Da Costa, 2016, p. 194). More importantly, women experience a lack of representation in Budhan Theatre, with Kalpana Gagdekar being the only prominent actress of the theatre company. This may give way to a lack of control for women of their own narrative, in turn leading to the continuation of their marginalisation.

It is important that a distinct narrative is built for women by women. This separation in narrative is to address the marginalisation they face at the hands of men from the denotified tribes as well as from the men outside the community.

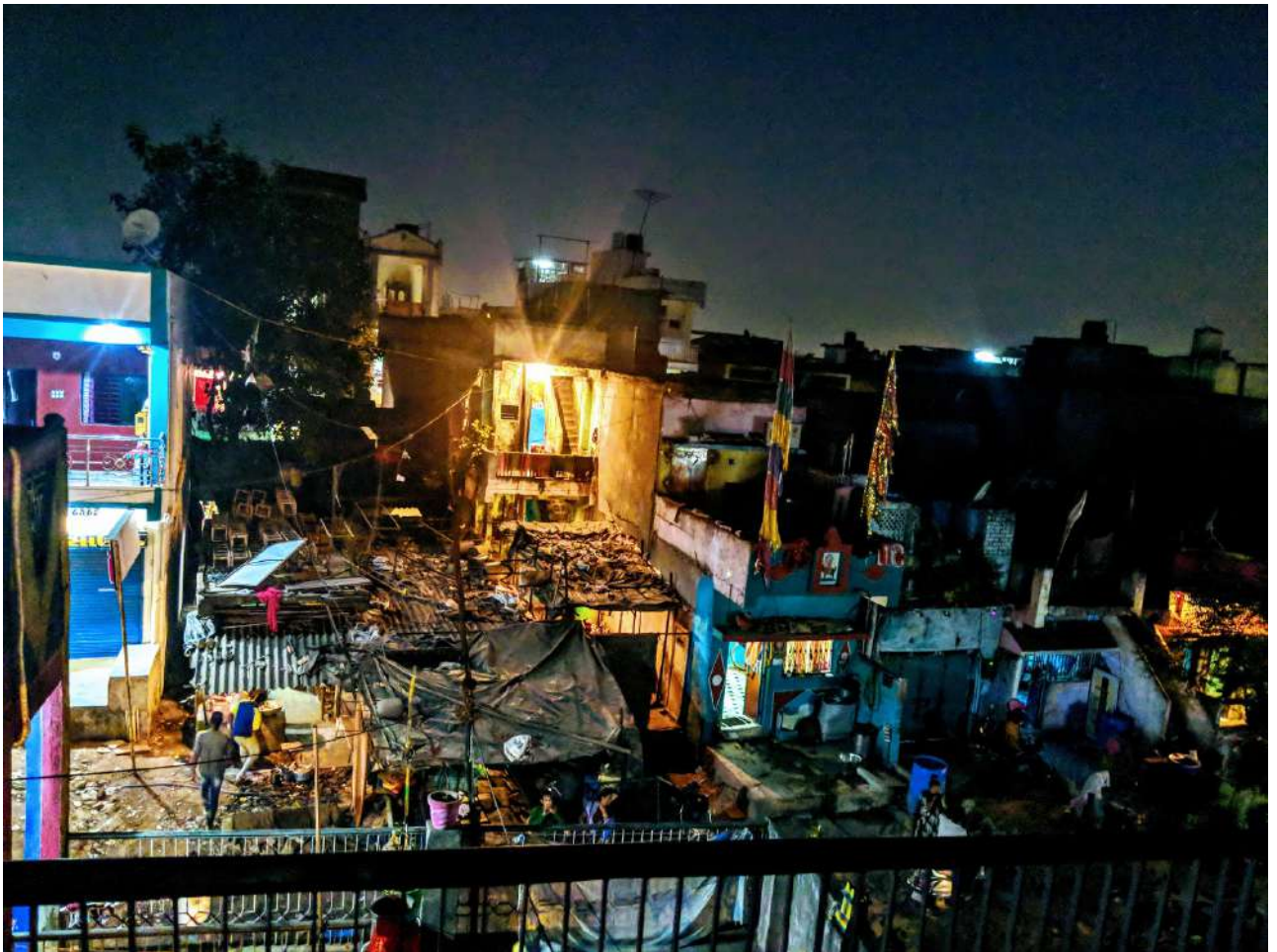
2.4 Gaps in Literature

In our search for literature on DNT communities and, more specifically, the Chhara community and Chharanagar, we encountered some challenges. While the literature on DNTs as a broader category is extensive, extrapolating from this literature could have led to our homogenization of these communities. Knowing that the experiences of one community could not necessarily speak to those of another, we sought sources on the Chhara community specifically but found that there were limited sources of information, as compared to DNTs as a whole. Many of the sources that were available to us on the Chhara community, Budhan Theatre, and Chharanagar, were created by or with members of the community themselves. Within the literature on the Chhara community, we observed a significant gap in the available literature on the experiences of Chhara women. As a result, this became one of the initial foci of our research.

On the subject of Budhan Theatre, the absence of women's experiences was also very noticeable. Although Budhan Theatre's works have dealt with women's issues like marital abuse, sexual violence, and child marriage, these themes have more often been represented by men in their performances than by women. From the current literature, Kalpana Gagdekar, appeared to be the only prominent female voice within the community as a whole, which left us with additional questions of representation.

While we found a great deal of information about the present status of the Chhara community and the stigmatization that they have faced as a result of having been labeled as a "Criminal Tribe," we were unable to find a lot of information in the literature about how and why the British started associating the members of DNTs, and specifically Chharas, with crime in the first place. The current status of the Habitual Offenders Act was also ambiguous in the literature, and its applicability and range were difficult to ascertain. Beyond this, we were also unable to find much information about the history of Chharanagar itself, which we felt was necessary to our understanding of the community.

Through the Windows: Four Houses in the Neighborhood



3. Through the Windows: Four Houses in the Neighborhood

Despite the extensive research on the history of Chharanagar, the role of Budhan Theatre, and the status of women in the community, our understanding of the intricacies of the Chhara community in their entirety still remained inconsistent. This chapter helps us get a clearer glance at the community, as we glimpse at it through the windows of different houses in the neighbourhood. Not only does it provide us with a better understanding of the daily lives of Chharas in the community, but it also emphasizes the nuances that make this community heterogeneous. Even though, in many ways, all Chharas face the same stigma, we realised that it is not possible to have a uniform view of the Chhara community. Individuals and sub-groups of this community do not necessarily have the same experiences of being subjected to this stigma, nor do they have a consistent perception of the community as a whole. These differences hence affect their personal lives in vastly divergent ways. Instead of forcing these diverse experiences into a single, rigid narrative, we have provided four smaller views of particular positions within the community. We look at the major groups that explicitly prevail in Chharanagar and thus shape the community. The four houses we portray are: women who brew liquor, women of Budhan Theatre, women with other professions, and Budhan Theatre leaders.

We look at women extensively, as Chhara women are often doubly oppressed: with regard to caste and class discrimination, as well as to gender. We look at the leaders of Budhan Theatre, as they have emerged as strong leaders in the community as a whole for the past 20 years. Through the process, we attempt to understand what their lives are like, and how these different houses interact or merely co-exist in Chharanagar. From a certain point of view, these groups are more defined by their differences than their similarities. However, we observe that both, women of Chharanagar, and Budhan Theatre leaders share a mixture of power and vulnerability. While our interviewees often reported the respect for women's power and roles that exists in Chharanagar, their vulnerability to police violence and the quotidian violence of patriarchy is abundantly visible. Similarly, while the leaders of Budhan Theatre gain strength and leadership from their participation, they also take up responsibility for the entire community in the process, which makes them vulnerable as they attempt to match the expectations of their family versus the community. The purpose of this chapter however, is not to force unnatural lines of connection, but rather to place these scenes next to one another, for the reader to gain a

fuller picture of the complexities of the community as a whole. This section, hence provides a view through the window into different kinds of lifeworlds that coexist in Chharanagar, sometimes interacting and overlapping and sometimes not.

3.1 Women Who Brew Liquor



Figure 4 and Figure 5. Blue drums (used for water or alcohol) kept outside houses

Source: Discover India Program, 2018-19

On our first day in Chharanagar, as Krishnakant, a member of Budhan Theatre, took us on a walk around the locality, we noticed identical blue drums at the doors of a majority of the houses. We tried to gauge if they had anything to do with brewing liquor, but saw no clear signs indicating that. However, we did notice the smell of liquor wafting through the air. Krishnakant explained that there was going to be a raid, and everyone had hidden everything that suggested that they were bootleggers (K. Machharekar, personal communication, September 30, 2018). Everyone knows of the raid, he said, because everyone is warned by the police. They are warned by the police because the police don't want them to get caught, and the police don't want them to get caught because the actual curbing of bootlegging is against their interests (K. Machharekar, personal communication, September 30, 2018).

The public's perception of the Chhara community as criminals, although originating from the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act, finds most justification today in the prevalence of brewing liquor in the community. Our literature does not give us an adequate explanation for how bootlegging first started in there, but the interviews we conducted (Amita, personal communication, October 5, 2018; Gopichand, personal communication, October 6, 2018) and media reports (Katakam, 2009) suggest that the brewing of liquor as a knowledge system existed before prohibition in Gujarat made it an

illegal practise. Our interviews with women suggest that after people from the community were released from the settlements, where they were mostly exploited for manual labour, many turned to their knowledge of brewing liquor as the only available means of livelihood (Amita, personal communication, October 5, 2018). Although there are no official statistics, community leaders like Roxy Gagdekar have estimated that around 60% of the households in Chharanagar are engaged in bootlegging (Da Costa, 2016). At present, most of the people in these households who engage in this are women (Da Costa, 2016).

From our review of the existing literature, we know that this puts them in a complicated position. Bootlegging is in many ways, one of the few acceptable forms of livelihood that women can seek outside of their domestic roles. While this presents them with a certain amount of autonomy, it also makes them vulnerable to various forms of stigma and police harassment. Even though the figure of the bootlegger woman has been represented in various forms in mainstream media (Bhan, 2009), academic work (Da Costa, 2016), and artforms of resistance (Pawar, Batunge, & Indrekar, 2014), we were interested in attempting to go beyond an essentialized portrayal of her role and looking at diverse and specific experiences of bootlegging women. The fact that these women must negotiate their dual roles as bearers of culture on the one hand and criminality on the other, is essential to understanding the community's relationship with respectability, morality, and finally, a fight for human dignity. On field, we spoke to eight women of different ages and varying levels of education, who were initiated into bootlegging for a variety of reasons, and have been engaged in it in varying degrees.

3.1.1 Reasons for brewing liquor.

The interviews we conducted showed a pattern of women in the community taking to bootlegging as a legitimate means of livelihood due to a lack of other choices. The compulsions that led them to start, however, are varied in nature. Janvi⁸, a woman who got married around 40 years ago when she was 12, told us that she started bootlegging at around the same time:

No one is here to pay for the needs; what to do? Only if I can make 5 or 10 litres of liquor, do I get enough money to run the house. What else can I do? People

⁸ All names except Krishnakant, Gopichand, and Nitesh have been changed on request.

only want girls from rich families. They ask for dowry; where should I get that from? (Janvi, personal communication, October 3, 2018).

Although she grew up with a mother who also brewed liquor to make ends meet, she herself did not start the business until she got married and found out that her husband was “not a nice man, but a drunkard” (Janvi, personal communication, October 3, 2018). “Some days he’d work, some days he wouldn’t. Some days he’d drink and fall asleep. I can’t remember how long he worked,” she said (Janvi, personal communication, October 3, 2018). The pressure of running the household, and of paying the dowry for her own daughters in the future, then, fell almost entirely on her. Although her husband had a job that contributed, however minimally, to the household, he too passed away around 10 years ago. She now lives with her five daughters who work as domestic helpers in other houses, and has a sixth daughter who is married.

Widowhood is, in fact, a common reason for many women to start bootlegging to make ends meet. Bhavana, who got married when she was 13, was widowed within a year after marriage. For her, bootlegging presented, in many ways, the only avenue to lead a bearable life outside of “suffering”.

My mother was very sad. They used to make alcohol. My father died early. I didn’t even see him. I was one. Two sisters and one brother. My son also didn’t see his father. We saw so many sufferings. We didn’t have food to eat. Then we started making alcohol. Made some money. Got good food to eat...Yes, I thought [of what I wanted to do when I grew up]. But my parents were poor. My mother also used to make alcohol. I used to help her. Then I also learnt how to make alcohol. Then I got married. Then I had a suffering. So, I started again. (Bhavana, personal communication, October 5, 2018).

On the other hand, Tanvi, a 38-year-old woman, got married when she was 15, to a family who already had their own liquor business: “Whatever was written in our destiny happened. I did not know that I would get married to someone whose business would also involve alcohol. My mother had a huge business of liquor,” she said (Tanvi, personal communication, October 4, 2018). She studied till the 10th standard, and although she comes from a family where bootlegging was the primary occupation, she never thought she herself would have to engage in it until after her marriage, when it became more of a responsibility than an option. She says that although some men help in liquor brewing,

her husband is not one of them. He too struggles with alcoholism, and works as a singer sometimes. Other than that, his only means of livelihood, comes from selling the liquor that Tanvi brews.

In fact, many women like Tanvi find themselves shouldering the financial responsibility of the entire household on their own. “I was hoping that my husband had a job and would keep me happy, but he left the job. He ruined our lives, the entire responsibility of the house is on me,” said Nandini, who had to take up brewing liquor when her husband lost his job because of his alcoholism (Nandini, personal communication, October 5, 2018). Aarti, another woman who got married when she was 13 years old, and had her son when she was 14, started bootlegging right after marriage, and had to carry out the business almost entirely on her own. When asked if her husband did any work, she said:

No, nothing! He would just gamble a lot. If I would get money after doing some work, he would steal my hard-earned money and lose it in gambling. He was a gambler and an alcoholic. We didn’t have money to eat. He used to abuse the kids also. He would use such profanity that you could not even bear it. He would bad mouth me to them. He would abuse my kids to an extent where it was unbearable for me also (Aarti, personal communication, October 4, 2018).

Though her husband left soon after her son was born, she told us that while he was living with her, he was extremely controlling and abusive towards her:

He used to stay with us when the kids were quite young. He used to hit both the kids and me a lot. If a young boy would even talk to me, he would frown and question how he dared to look me. He used to blame me for such reasons that it would mentally harass me. He used to throw me out of the house at midnight. Sometimes he used to tell me to go leave the house and go away. Where would I go at night? Sometimes in the winter when it was cold, he would throw me out with the kids. Then I used to sit outside my house with them (Aarti, personal communication, October 4, 2018).

In spite of starting bootlegging in an extremely repressive context, in many ways, after her husband left, it was also a way for her to take control of her life, and a direction in which to channel her hopes:

His father had left me 18 years ago. Kids were young at that time and I didn't know what to do? How to get food? Where should I go? How will I be able to raise my kids? How to get them educated? How to make them realise their worth? I was able to do all this because of getting into this alcohol brewing business. I have made this cabin type place around 7 months ago. I started my business by brewing in a small vessel and now I have made this cabin for brewing. I have made this through my own hard work and effort. However, I still encourage my kids to study and get a good job, so that I can leave this business. I have done this for my entire life, and now I am not being able to do it. Now that kids have grown up, they can get a good job and their lives get set. This is my only dream (Aarti, personal communication, October 4, 2018).

Her dream, however, is difficult to achieve as her son who is now educated, tells us about the stigma he has to face in the job market:

Our business is selling alcohol which is illegal. We have tried getting out of this business. My brother and I are both educated. I am doing my M.A and my brother just graduated. However, when we do seek out for a job, we are turned down because of our caste. We get till the interview, but when they ask us where do you live and we tell them that we live in Chharanagar, they just tell us, "We'll call you back," and then they mostly never call back. They don't look at our results which are good or other extra-curricular activities which we are good at. I am not saying that everyone has a negative perception about us, but most of them do, and because of this we still have to continue with the alcohol brewing business and we are also tired of doing this business, because you know how people change when they become alcoholic (Dhruv, personal communication, October 5, 2018).

Thus, as we can see in the above excerpts, Chhara women earn their livelihoods by brewing liquor for several reasons. While some of them are forced into it because of the financial dependence on husbands that comes with child-marriages, others have to take it up as a result of lack of alternative sustainable means of earnings following their husbands' deaths (which may or may not be because of alcoholism). Moreover, in some cases, women are married into families that already brew liquor, and have to share the responsibilities, while in others, they are forced into it due to the stigma which prevents even their educated children from getting jobs. What also emerges from the interviews is

that there is a general pattern of such reasons persisting through generations, and women learning how to brew liquor through observation from older generations (Nandini, personal communication, October 5, 2018; Amita, personal communication, October 5, 2018; Bhavana, personal communication, October 5, 2018). All of these scenarios are related to the fact that women find themselves and their families isolated by stigma and confined by an environment of limited choices where brewing liquor is common and available.

3.1.2 Marriage and gender roles.

In most cases, either directly or indirectly, there is a strong correlation between marriage and women's entry into bootlegging. Yet, even when women are unhappy brewing liquor, their attitudes towards marriage do not seem to have changed. Janvi is still worried about the dowry she is going to have to pay (Janvi, personal communication, October 3, 2018), and many are planning to get their daughters married as soon as possible, since they view marriage as the solution that would keep them as far away from bootlegging as possible. Even when some women have negative views of marriage, they are not equipped to deal with the societal pressures which force young girls to get married in the first place. Tanvi, for instance, told us that she wants her children to help her improve her life in the future, but she only has these expectations from her sons. She is sure that her daughter will have to get married, and leave soon. However, later in the interview, she says with conviction that she personally does not want her daughter to get married and lead a life like she did:

I do not want to get my daughter married. I want her to be more educated. It is my dream to make her study further. If I get her married, she will not study and will start brewing alcohol as well. There is no job other than brewing alcohol in Chharanagar (Tanvi, personal communication, October 4, 2018).

Aarti, too, relies on her now-educated sons in the hope of a better future for herself. Her daughter, who remained silent throughout the group interview, is 18 and already engaged (Aarti, personal communication, October 4, 2018). The common pattern of problems that have led most of the women to start bootlegging, lies mostly in the domestic sphere. Unlike her daughter, Aarti's son Dhruv, in spite of being educated, enters the profession because of continuous stigma in the job market. Thus, for the few men who do brew liquor, the triggers for getting into bootlegging are located first in the

public sphere (Dhruv, personal communication, October 5, 2018). For women, this stigma is further reinforced by the inaccessibility of education. “I want her to do something else, but nobody is ready to give a job. We are not highly educated, highest education received was the fifth grade, so it is tough to find jobs. Earlier what used to happen was that girls were married off at the age of twelve, and after marriage, it is difficult for them to continue their education,” said Nandini (Nandini, personal communication, October 5, 2018). She expressed her views on the higher number of women engaged in bootlegging:

All women make alcohol, so the officers take the bribe from all. Ninety per cent of the women are widowed and have no financial support hence; they have to bootleg to run their house...Men do not bootleg because they will run away from the police, but the women will stand...They do not help. We are the ones who brew, extract, and sell. The entire responsibility of the household is on the woman (Nandini, personal communication, October 5, 2018).

When we asked Tanvi if the women of Chharanagar have any alternative to bootlegging, she told us:

No. What else will we do? Where can females go to work? We know the job of cooking and taking care of our kids only. If you go to any female in Chharanagar, you will find her telling you that our job is to make alcohol and eat. No lady does any job other than making food, taking care of children and brewing alcohol (Tanvi, personal communication, October 4, 2018).

Thus we see that although both men and women face stigma and discrimination from outside communities, women specifically have the added responsibility of caregiving and household maintenance, that leads them to start brewing liquor. In fact, even though many women start brewing liquor out of financial pressure and in the absence of other choices, we also notice that brewing liquor as a means of livelihood enjoys a certain legitimacy. In the domestic space, it is generally accepted as women's work, and contributes to the household income. This is perhaps the reason why marriage seems to be the catalyst for most women to start bootlegging. It is important to note that even in lower-class families, in the lack of options, it is mostly the women and not the men who start bootlegging (Tanvi, personal communication, October 4, 2018; Nandini, personal communication, October 5, 2018).

If the men do not work, what will the women do to raise their children? Other than the lawyers and judges, no men in Chharanagar work. If their husbands remain drunk all the time, what will women do other than selling alcohol? (Tanvi, personal communication, October 4, 2018).

Women's engagement in bootlegging, then, cannot be segregated from the larger concepts of domesticity, morality, and respectability that dictate their lives.

If she is hanging out with her guy friends and someone sees her? Our caste is disgraceful and rubbish. If they see you do something that goes against their values, they directly start blaming you and make you a victim. They won't think that both of them are friends, they will start spreading rumours that both of them are having an affair (Aarti, personal communication, October 4, 2018).

Says Aarti, explaining how according to her, the unjust monitoring of women is prevalent in the community. The anxiety around controlling women is perhaps also the reason for the prevalence of child marriage. "It is a social norm in Chharanagar that if a girl is eighteen she should get married, otherwise they start mocking us. The family forces her into marriage by hitting her," says Nandini (Nandini, personal communication, October 5, 2018). While these patriarchal notions are not unique to the community, what is important to note here is that they are, in this case, not incompatible with women's role as breadwinners, as long as it is done through bootlegging.

3.1.3 Brewing liquor and respectability.

On the one hand, then, women who fulfill the role expected of them and contribute to their households or earn a livelihood earn a certain amount of respect in the community. "In the whole town, I have a name. It's been 32 years. Can a woman stay alone with a child? I survived. I'm known in this town," says Bhavana (personal communication, October 5, 2018). On the other hand, this is in conflict with the channels other people in the community want to follow to seek respectability in society. For instance, we spoke to Ganga, a 33-year-old woman, who stopped studying at 13 because of household work and got married at 20. Under extreme financial distress, she often feels like bootlegging would make her life much easier, and she admires her mother-in-law who survives through bootlegging. However, her husband does not live with his mother because he disapproves of bootlegging, and does not allow Ganga to brew liquor as he

believes it is a “bad” job (G. Ghansi, personal communication, October 4, 2018). In cases like these, women are forced to make a choice between the financial autonomy and agency that comes with brewing liquor on the one hand, and respectability on the other, making the search for dignity especially complicated.

The perception of bootlegging as an unrespectable profession also affects these women’s relationship with the rest of the community. Talking about the lack of support from her community as a bootlegger, Nandini says, “There is no unity. When there was a case filed against the advocates, everybody from the community showed up for support, but nobody will stand up for us. They do not want to support us” (Nandini, personal communication, October 5, 2018). She is right in that while the unprecedented amounts of violence faced by the community on 26th July were seen as going “too far,” there was an accepted rationalisation of similar kinds of violence towards those who had criminal records, amongst them, bootleggers. For instance, when we spoke to Nitesh Minekar, one of the victims of the incident, who was attacked without reason and arrested, he seems to find the violence justifiable against criminals, as opposed to innocent people. He says, “Their behaviour was not right. If we had done something wrong, then their behaviour would have been justified” (N. Minekar, personal communication, October 1, 2018).

3.1.4 Relationship with police.

Unlike the animosity that was displayed against other sections of the community on 26th July, the police’s attitude towards these women seems to be more of constant harassment, rather than outright violence. Even amongst women who brew liquor, there are varying perceptions of the police. Many women rationalise the difficulties they have. Janvi, for example, tells us:

The difficulties I face are from the police officers. But they also have to do what they do; they have a job to do, too. They say brew as much is necessary to provide for your family. They have never taken me in. No incidents have taken place with me. They don’t even take money from me (Janvi, personal communication, October 3, 2018).

Others, like Tanvi, talk almost systematically about the functioning of the police. While others file cases, the police from nearby stations collect bribes and they spread the word amongst themselves about where to collect these bribes from (Tanvi, personal communication, October 4, 2018); they are able to demand whatever bribe they want

because obtaining bail can often be more expensive (Tanvi, personal communication, October 4, 2018; Nandini, personal communication, October 5, 2018). They do not target houses which sell desi liquor (Tanvi, personal communication, October 4, 2018), they ignore small businesses and target the big ones (Tanvi, personal communication, October 4, 2018), and continue raiding the locality because the police in more superior positions do not get bribes (Nandini, October 5, 2018). In spite of this mechanical knowledge, the women are not free of fear or distress. When asked if she is scared of the police, Tanvi, who seems to know them in and out, replies, “Yes, I am scared of the police. Who will not be scared of the police?” (Tanvi, personal communication, October 4, 2018).

Women then, find themselves negotiating between two conflicting models of morality and respectability, where each offers varying degrees of financial independence and autonomy. While bootlegging may help women become more independent without backlash from their families, it means that they do not fit into that model of respectability which shuns the criminal history of the community and seeks integration into society through mainstream professions. Women who use an alternative from both models through theatre and activism, may be able to seek dignity as individuals, but are faced with pressure to get married from their families and the community. In many ways then, in the midst of this conflict, while women become the site of criminality as well as respectability for the community, they also present one of the strongest possibilities of resistance.

3.2 Budhan Theatre Women

When we first saw the documentary *Please Don't Beat Me, Sir!* by P. Kerim Friedman and Shashwati Talukdar, which depicted the story of Budhan Theatre and its members, we noticed something that piqued our interest. We observed that most plays performed by Budhan Theatre, which were displayed in this and other documentaries about the Chhara community, consisted of many male artists, but not nearly as many female artists (Friedman & Talukdar, 2011). When we went to Chharanagar, we were introduced to the Budhan Theatre members. We realised then, that the few women we saw in the documentaries were not present during the introduction of the team. We found that the women who were a part of Budhan Theatre during its peak of popularity had been gradually leaving over the last decade. Out of those women, only two or three remain, and

participate as much as their personal lives allow. Kalpana Gagdekar, a founding member and leader of Budhan Theatre⁹ is 38 years old. She is now a well known actress in the Gujarati film industry, but has reduced her participation in the working of Budhan Theatre (K. Gagdekar, personal communication, October 3, 2018). She says:

Now I do very little of theatre work with the Budhan Theatre. There are a lot of new people who have come into Budhan Theatre. Now I stay almost 25 km away and I cannot reach everywhere and do rehearsal every day. So it's not possible. And another issue is as long as I keep working there the other girls who should come won't come. It is important that there should be a rotation of the girls there so that's why I have reduced my acting in Budhan Theatre, but I am very active in the DNT work (K. Gagdekar, personal communication, October 3, 2018).

Chetna Rathore is Dakxin's younger sister, and she was 14 when she joined Budhan Theatre. She had to leave when she got married in 2006 at the age of 20. Now she is a housewife, and even though she is not able to actively participate in performing plays with Budhan Theatre, she continues to volunteer with them (C. Rathore, personal communication, October 4, 2018). She says:

I was away for 6 years... but as a volunteer I was still involved. He never said no for that. In fact, as a volunteer, I've even gone on tours with Budhan [Theatre] (C. Rathore, personal communication, October, 4 2018).

Ruchika, a young theatre artist is one of the only active female Budhan Theatre members at the moment who continues to perform plays with them. In spite of her current active participation as a female member of Budhan Theatre, she was not introduced to our group as the other community leaders were. She never wants to get married, so that she is never asked to leave theatre (Ruchika, personal communication, October 4, 2018). She says:

My parents have no problem with me doing theatre or not wanting to get married. They say that they are okay... but in their mind they must be thinking that later, at some point, they will get me married. But I will never get married, and I will always do theatre (Ruchika, personal communication, October 4, 2018).

When we interviewed all of the women who were once a prominent part of Budhan Theatre and asked them why they had left, we got various answers. Some of the

⁹ Kalpana has reduced her participation in Budhan Theatre and is not one of the leaders anymore. Hence, she has not been included in the section 'Budhan Theatre Leaders' later on.

reasons were marriage, pursuing further education, not being able to get permission from their husbands and their families, relatives getting suspicious of their behaviour, and a lack of help at home. While speaking to all the former Budhan Theatre women, we realised that even though their reasons of leaving Budhan Theatre were diverse, there remained a common, unspoken understanding that they would not be able to pursue theatre all their lives. Out of their passion for acting, they would often make concessions in other freedoms to be allowed to participate in theatre by their families.

3.2.1 Education.

A pattern we observed amongst women who have been a part of Budhan Theatre is that access to education has been relatively easier for them, in comparison to other women of the Chhara community. Most of the women who have been a part of Budhan Theatre are related to the leaders of Budhan Theatre, which made it easier for them to enter theatre. This opportune entry into Budhan Theatre has also made it possible for them to be able to express their desire for an education, and has opened up possibilities for a career as a result. Dakxin Bajarange and Atish Indrekar, the leaders of Budhan Theatre are also Ruchika's uncles. In a discussion with Ruchika, she tells us about how her first interaction with theatre was when Dakxin chose her to act in one of his plays. Dakxin also helped her family in dealing with their financial conditions. While he gave her father 20 rupees everyday to sustain an everyday living for her family, Ruchika desired to be a part of the Budhan library but did not know how to manage the membership money. She explains how Dakxin helped her out then too. She says:

So I thought I'd go to uncle [Dakxin], and maybe he could help me. I told him about the librarian and asked him to go and convince him to let me join for free. But he did not do that, and took out 20 rupees from his own pocket and gave it to me, and said, go read whatever you want. I went, and I started reading so much- whatever I'd see...(Ruchika, personal communication, October 4, 2018).

Poonam, is 26 years old and a housewife. She was 12 when she joined Budhan Theatre. At the age of 17, she was forced to get married by her relatives. The man whom she got married to would drink, and physically beat and harass her on a regular basis. This abusive relationship ended when he died from excessive alcohol consumption. This is when she, with the help of Dakxin and Roxy Gagdekar, fellow founding member of Budhan Theatre, decided to go back to theatre. She tells us:

People used to say that as a widow, I should not be going back. But I still came. My father also supported me, because he really respected Dakxin bhaiyya and Roxy. Roxy is actually my relative, because we're both Gagdekar. He told my father that he had made a mistake by not letting me come earlier, and that he should let me come back to theatre. So he listened to him. Then, from there I finished my studies. 10th and 12th (Poonam, personal communication, October 3, 2018).



Figure 6. Poonam - Former Budhan Theatre member

Source: Discover India Program, 2018-19

As compared to the previous generation, more women from Chharanagar are going to college now. Kalpana points out how the level of education for girls has increased due to their involvement in theatre (K. Gagdekar, personal communication, October 3, 2018). Even though parents of these women may or may not have been educated, they see education to be an important agent to gain the dignity that has been taken away from their lives. The parents of some of these women brew liquor and have had a low quality of life. As Poonam says in her interview, “My parents, sure they were not educated, they used to brew liquor - but they wanted us to study, to go out” (Poonam, personal communication, October 3, 2018). The families of these women are closely related to various leaders, and hence view being part of Budhan Theatre as a respectable and dignified position. They therefore allow their daughters to join Budhan Theatre, at least until the concept of respectability changes and women are required to fulfil the

position of the wife, the daughter in law, or the mother. Further, many families also believe that men favour educated women who can contribute to the household after marriage (Poonam, personal communication, October 3, 2018). Theatre however, does not translate to any tangible value for the husband and his family. According to some women who have worked with Budhan Theatre, women being allowed to study does not necessarily mean that they will be allowed to participate in theatre (Poonam, personal communication, October 3, 2018). Ruchika explains:

Earlier girls were only allowed to study till the 7th standard... because till 7th they'd go to government school and after that they'd have to shift to private. Now girls are much more mature, they go to college. At least 20-25 girls from Chharanagar are currently in college. So there has been a lot of change in Chharanagar, for girls. Now parents don't stop girls from studying. Now men also want educated girls... because they want their wives to be able to work and contribute to the household (Ruchika, personal communication, October 4, 2018).

When girls show an interest in higher studies, it is their experience in Budhan Theatre, relation with the leaders, and the trust that they have established with their parents that influences their argument for being allowed to pursue higher education. The beginning of education for most of these women has been Budhan Theatre. Bhumika, for instance joined Budhan Theatre at a very early age. She was three years old when she started coming to the Budhan library and then started theatre which she continued until she was 15. She had to leave theatre because of an accident that occurred with her mother at home, due to which she also left her studies. Although she wishes she could continue studying and acting, she is soon getting married. She talks about incidents at school and how her community was misunderstood even there (B. Bajrange, personal communication, October 5, 2018). She says:

Ever since I joined Budhan [Theatre] and they told us what other people think of us... and in school also, there was a lot of discrimination. Like they would always make us sit in the last bench. Once in 9th, someone else had done something, but the teacher was blaming us and scolding us (B. Bajrange, personal communication, October 5, 2018).

Bhumika, amongst other women who claim to have faced discrimination at school for being Chhara, says that they have realised, through Budhan Theatre, why dealing with this discrimination is important (B. Bajrange, personal communication, October 5, 2018).

Many Budhan Theatre women state that they want to educate their children more than what their parents had done for them. Moreover they want their children to be respectable members of the community, and Budhan Theatre is seen as a way of increasing people's confidence and refining behaviour. Many women mention how Budhan Theatre has taught them "how to speak" and how to present themselves (B. Bajrange, personal communication, October 5, 2018). Chetna, Dakxin's sister and one of the senior members of Budhan Theatre says, "Budhan [Theatre] has taught us to go from 'tu' to 'aap'¹⁰" (C. Rathore, personal communication, October 4, 2018).

After their primary education, some women choose to continue Budhan Theatre while many choose to pursue different careers and hence currently have jobs in various fields. However, whether they continue to be a part of theatre, get a job, or finish their higher education, the purpose remains similar - to educate themselves, be able to speak up for themselves, empower themselves, and seek the dignity that they have not received, and have not seen their parents in Chharanagar receive.

You could say my whole life is Budhan Theatre. I was born because of Budhan Theatre. From when I was very young I began acting, coming to the library, studying there. I learnt Computers in the library itself. I learn how to speak and write in English, how to read books, everything, in the library. We used to be in the library the whole day. Since I was very small till three or four years ago when I left Budhan [Theatre], my whole life was Budhan Theatre, there was nothing else. Budhan Theatre brought many changes in my life. From working in Budhan Theatre, in all the plays that I did, I got a lot of power. I now raise my voice against things that are wrong because I have done this in Budhan Theatre plays. I have also gained a lot of confidence because of it (C. Rathore, personal communication, October 4, 2018).

When women of Budhan Theatre were first made conscious of the discrimination against them, they started understanding the stigma that existed against the Chhara community and at the same time realised the importance of education (Hardika, personal communication, October 5, 2018). For some women, joining Budhan Theatre gives them enough individual independence which enables them to achieve the desired dignity. For others, this attempt to seek dignity finds expression in leaving Budhan Theatre and

¹⁰ Aap is used to address people to whom you want to show respect. By addressing everyone as aap, Chetna is asserting that she too deserves the same respect.

pursuing a good marriage and education. Many women like Urvashi Chhara, who is currently 25 years old and is studying to become a PSI (Police Sub Inspector) officer, have left theatre and are studying to get jobs, while women like Ruchika have no plans of leaving theatre or getting married (U. Chhara, personal communication, October 3, 2018).

3.2.2 Marriage.

Marriage is one of the main reasons most women leave Budhan and many times even education. The consciousness that drives these women to study, their parents to educate them further, let them pursue theatre, or get a job is often lost because the ultimate goal is to get the woman married once she crosses a particular age. After marriage, most women like Poonam, Urvashi, Chetna, and Bhumika get busy with housework. They now have to take into consideration the views of their in-laws and what they consider as acceptable. It took three days for Hardika, who is also married, to take time out for an interview with us. She tells us, “I haven’t been able to find time. There are many responsibilities that come after marriage” (Hardika, personal communication, October 5, 2018). She also tells us about the community’s tendency to get women married off at a young age. She says:

In our community, they marry off the girls at a young age, that’s why. They get the girls married at the age of 15 or 16, and before that when girls are 10, 12, 14, the families make the girls do the housework and don’t let them go out. Then, they get them married at 16, 17 or 18. They have a child within a year. After that, it is difficult to leave the house (Hardika, personal communication, October 5, 2018).

Apart from the responsibility of taking care of the house, women also get busy in monitoring the education of their children and hence, are not able to make enough time for theatre. Some of them try to take time out from their chores to study to get a job, but are unsuccessful in most cases and end up having to attempt the final examination multiple times. For instance, while Urvashi is studying to become a PSI officer, with her son going to school and her husband to work, it is difficult to give time to theatre as it may not provide her with financial stability (U. Chhara, personal communication, October 3, 2018). Hence, the only time she can spare for her studies is one hour in the morning and one hour in the evening, which may not always be sufficient. She tells us:

Our family is very big now, then I have my studies. I have to take care of my son also. Wake up, do the housework, make some tea and breakfast for my husband,

make food, take my son to school, do the housework, take him to tuitions (U. Chhara, personal communication, October 3, 2018).

In some cases, women like Chetna decide to let go of theatre to avoid personal problems in the future. Chetna, who is also Dakxin's sister, left theatre after her marriage as her husband did not approve of it. It took her a long time to change his perceptions about Budhan Theatre. Chetna however, remained patient. She decided to put theatre aside until her husband was ready to accept it (C. Rathore, personal communication, October 4, 2018). She says:

Because I listened to him for a long time. If I had been stubborn, if I had been like, "who are you to tell me? I will do whatever I want"... but I had to think before and after myself. I was the eldest in the house, I thought if I don't manage then how will others manage... so I had to think long term. That's why how he used to talk, I used to handle him like that. But then you say that time improves many people (C. Rathore , personal communication, October 4, 2018).

This was the case for many Chhara women who had been a part of Budhan Theatre. It is not possible for Chhara women who are married to allocate two hours of rehearsal time, especially at night, for theatre, along with the risk of going outside Chharanagar to perform plays. This, in the eyes of the in-laws was not respectable, and hence was avoided by most women (Poonam, personal communication, October 3, 2018). Though some women like Urvashi show the courage to resist marriage for education, most women still end up being forced into it (U. Chhara, personal communication, October 3, 2018). She says:

They said, we will not let you study, we will get your married. There are a lot of bad customs- like get married, give birth to children, don't study, brew liquor, don't do any jobs- if a woman does a job, they say that she goes outside and does all this. Never talk about why they had gone behind her to see. Only my grandmother's support was there. My entire family kept saying, don't let her study, don't let her study. So from school I called the Sardarnagar police station, and I told them, they are trying to kill me, they are trying to marry me off. So my family stayed in jail custody for a day and came. I had done this for studying. They were not letting me study (U. Chhara, personal communication, October 3, 2018).

As much as Budhan Theatre has attempted to alter the community's perception of marriage for young women, in most cases they end up being unsuccessful (B. Bajrange, personal communication, October 5, 2018). The point of view of the future in-laws is considered most important. Many women like Deepali Jitendra who used to be a part of Budhan Theatre, express how they really wish to study further and get a job, but after marriage they have to adjust many of their dreams (D. Jitendra, personal communication, October 5, 2018).

3.2.3 26th July.

The peak of violence against women was highlighted on 26th July, when the police raided the community. Everyone was scared because no exceptions were made by the police. All kinds of people, starting from educated lawyers to uneducated women who brewed liquor, were not spared from the possibility of being abused. Deepali says that at that point, the only thing that saved her and her family was the fact that their home was in a rather hidden area (D. Jitendra, personal communication, October 5, 2018). Hardika says that there was so much fear of the police that night that she had to stay back at a neighbor's house with her baby until 4:30 am, after which also she was scared of facing the police while going back to her home. When she reached home, she realised that her vehicle had been broken by the police (Hardika, personal communication, October 5, 2018). She tells us:

I too was assaulted that night. Young girls were not there at that time, there were two or three older women who were taken into custody. But young girls or youngsters were not taken. They were breaking vehicles outside, so, we heard the noise and went outside to check. My baby had also woken up so I took her with me. We all went outside and the police were beating people with sticks (Hardika, personal communication, October 5, 2018).

What we realised from our interactions with these women is that despite the fact that theatre empowered them, gave them their desired dignity, made them 'visible' in the eyes of the community, gave them the chance to educate themselves, and gain economic stability, on the night of 26th July, none of this mattered. They were as worried as any other member of the community. They were nervous of stepping outside their home. They were fearful of the police. They were terrified of being beaten (Hardika, personal communication, October 5, 2018). They were horrified by the violence. On that night, they were powerless, helpless, and vulnerable.

An inference we made from our talks with the women who had easy entry into Budhan Theatre due to their families' close relation with the leaders of Budhan Theatre, was that in spite of this close relation and the dignity they received, they became visible members of the community. While on one hand they were looked upon by many from the community as inspirations, on the other, as they approached a 'marriageable' age, they were noticed more and said to have gotten 'out of hand' This was a common occurrence that we heard of among the women of Budhan Theatre. Another similarity we found was in how they felt now that they were not a part of Budhan Theatre. Every woman we interviewed was immensely fond of acting even after having left Budhan Theatre for years. Many wish they could go back to it because of their desperate longing to perform and moreover, to be visible again. In the words Urvashi when asked about her experience at Budhan Theatre - "It felt like I was in a new world.. It felt like, this is something worth doing" (U. Chhara, personal communication, October 3, 2018).

3.3 Women With Other Occupations



Figure 7. A woman walking out of her house

Source: Discover India Program, 2018-19

In the limited literature available on Chhara women, we noticed that women were segregated into a binary - those who engage in criminal activities, and those who participate in Budhan Theatre. However, a sizeable number of women in Chharanagar do not fall into either of these categories, and still find themselves navigating the world as doubly oppressed people, as Chharas and as women, with either marker taking precedence depending on the context. The professions of women in Chharanagar range from homemaking and domestic work to being managers, actresses, air hostesses, policewomen and journalists. The interviews we conducted gave us an insight into their diverse experiences and opinions on the issues of education, safety, mobility and dignity.

3.3.1 Access to other occupations.

For some women, such as Dimple Kodekar, education is a force that enables her to break free from societal obligations. As an air hostess, she looks at it as a means of attaining financial freedom (D. Kodekar, personal communication, October 5, 2018). However, this is a privilege limited to a few. Dimple herself belongs to a well educated family from a relatively higher class of society. Others find it difficult to break free from societal pressures.

3.3.1.1 Age.

Women of the older generation in particular face difficulty to break away from these norms since many of them were forced to leave their education between the 5th and 8th grades in order to manage a family.

Our parents sort of convinced us, that all our lives we will be doing work from home, no jobs or anything. So even we believed them and took more interest in household chores than in studying (M. Bajrange, personal communication, October 1, 2018).

Maya is Dakxin's wife and a homemaker. After 8th grade, she was forced to leave her education behind and, by the tender age of 14, started getting pressured into marriage:

I told my mother that I wanted to study and then she asked me what I wanted to do after I studied. Nobody did a job at that time so I didn't know how to answer my mother's question (M. Bajrange, personal communication, October 1, 2018).

For older women such as Maya, the way they were conditioned in their childhood restricted their ability to imagine a different lifestyle. Despite resistance towards a life of child-rearing and housework, many of the older women we interviewed said that they did not have any hobbies or aspiration beyond the same. Thus, oftentimes a woman's

contentment is confined to her family (M. Bajrange, personal communication, October 1, 2018). Many a times it is due to the lack of education received by them due to larger societal pressure. Many women like Maya have been vocal about it.

I haven't studied much, so I don't think about myself. I feel that because I haven't studied, I don't even have a good understanding of activities that are happening outside Chharanagar. I want to see my kids successful in whatever they want to do. They should be known for the good reasons (Kamla, personal communication, October 2, 2018).

However, according to Kamla, a 60-year-old woman, even the educated Chhara women struggled to find employment simply by the virtue of being a Chhara, and/or were coerced into marriage (V.R. Garange, personal communication, October 5, 2018). Another woman from the older generation, Kusum, a homemaker, spoke of the struggles she faced after entering married life:

I learnt to look after the kids myself, my husband did not help at all. Used to drink and sleep, when he got a job, he went to work. Mother-in-law helped (K. Batunge, personal communication, October 2, 2018).

Most older Chhara women spend their days doing an array of household work. The men of the family, in most cases, do not contribute in this labour (K. Bajrange, October 3, 2018) . As with Kusum, oftentimes the mother-in-law helps the daughter-in-law out and hence we witness a strong bond in many such relationships. Due to this, Chhara woman entering household labour often means falling into a vicious cycle where she must either work as the helping mother-in-law, or the daughter-in-law upon whom domestic duty falls.

Though not as prevalent as before, Dimple tells us that this remains true for many women in her generation as well, who are expected to marry before the age of 18 (D. Kodekar, October 4, 2018). Many women who want to continue their education after marriage are pressured into dropping out by their in-laws and forced into domestic lifestyles (G. Ghansi, personal communication, October 4, 2018). Because of such marital obligations, many women also find themselves at a disadvantage from early stages in their education (R. Kodekar, October 4, 2018). While boys, who are expected to work outside the home, are enrolled into English medium schools, girls are sent to Gujarati medium schools instead (R. Kodekar, personal communication, October 5, 2018).

3.3.1.2 Relationship with liquor brewing.

Nevertheless, regardless of the type of education, both Chhara men and women struggle to find work because of the stigma attached to their identity. As a result, many men turn towards alcohol and the burden of raising their children falls on the woman alone. As Pooja and Kamla tell us:

I want to become something for the future of my kids, to set an example for them. I want them to be successful when they grow up. I want them to study. But, most of the time we don't get jobs because we are a Chhara. They don't give us jobs as soon as they hear we are a Chhara (Pooja, personal communication, 3 October, 2018).

Even I don't have a job even though I am well educated. This is why people here continue stealing and brewing liquor. Girls become widows at 20 and 25 because their husbands die of alcoholism. They start brewing liquor to sustain their families. Life here is terrible. 2-5 years after marriage the husbands die and it is like the end of the women's life too. My daughter has been a widow since she was 25 and now she brews liquor (K. Bajarange, personal communication, October 5, 2018).

Criminalization of brewing liquor in Gujarat, and the increased rates of alcoholism-related deaths in the community have caused many women, especially those who come from an educated background, to look towards bootlegging as a less respectable job which harms the community. For instance, Shefali, a postgraduate and manager at JustDial and one of the most educated and successful women in Chharanagar emphasizes that there is little motivation within the community to move away from criminal activities as it provides an easy source of income. Moreover, she tells us that the police is also resistant of curbing bootlegging. Many others like Kamla feel that the benefits of brewing alcohol are not worth the risks that one undertakes for it. Neelam, another younger Chhara woman feels that people must break out from this profession and instead, make double effort in taking up more respectable jobs.

In Gujarat, Chharanagar, whatever wrong activities are taking place, the police are responsible. If you close all of this, the people will get out to find work. Why wouldn't they? The money would stop coming in from these illegal activities, so they would do other jobs, for lesser money as well. There are all sorts of jobs now, and they won't even face things like discrimination now, because people are very

forward now (S. Tamanche, personal communication, October 5, 2018).

Selling alcohol comes with a lot of risks. It will affect our grocery business and our record. Bootleggers are earning in lakhs, but one's record gets spoilt, so there is no point in selling it. Nobody in my family sells it (K. Bajarange, personal communication, October 3, 2018).

I mean always keep telling them to stop doing this. To stop this business of making alcohol in Chharanagar, our people should start getting jobs somewhere. There should be some other source of income for these families so that they can carry out their daily expenses, help the kids to study and can carry out that expense and basically, carry out all their other expenses like food, clothing, etc (N. Indrekar, personal communication, October 4, 2018).

Though the option of bootlegging is available to most in the community, many refrain from it because of the moral repercussions attached to it. However, the idea of choice behind this decision is blurred. For instance, Ganga, a 33-year-old homemaker in Chharanagar, believes that her husband's income alone does not suffice for the family.

I feel I should brew liquor too. Because I can't do anything for 3 children. I feel sad that I get 300-400 Rupees in the small jobs. I need to pay their school, tuition fees, and run the house. I'm not educated to do any other job. So I feel like doing it (G. Ghansi, personal communication, October 4, 2018).

However, she is forbidden by her husband from taking up bootlegging since it is seen as a "bad job." He shares the same notion which paints bootlegging as a profession that involves the interplay of greed, criminality, and a different sense of ethics. Ganga believes that if she were to disobey his will and start brewing alcohol, her husband would leave her. This is a gamble she cannot make since she believes that she needs his help in raising her three young children. This is a common dilemma that holds back a few women in the community from brewing liquor (G. Ghansi, personal communication, October 4, 2018).

3.3.2 Security.

When women do go into bootlegging they have to prioritise economic autonomy over personal safety. They have to face the threats of drunk men and the police on a daily basis. Even though, the harassment they face is mostly verbal, some of them also spoke of

cases of sexual assault and violence. When talking about her granddaughter who is involved in brewing liquor, Rajkumari illustrated this:

Drunk gents would pull her dupatta, pull her hair. In the evening, if the girls go out, drunk gents would do this. So there is fear to let the girls out. In the evening, we don't let the children out either. For young girls, They are not let out of the house then. If they have some work outside, then their Papa, Dada, go along with them (R. Batunge, personal communication, October 3, 2018).

In stark contrast to this, women who didn't brew alcohol spoke about the unique safety of Chharanagar. Even though she did not venture out often in the night, Neelam mentioned that she felt safe within the vicinity of the community. Dimple says, "I do not know about the safety outside. But there is safety here. You can go out at two in the night, and boys outside will safely escort you home. Everyone is very protective about the women (D. Kodekar, personal communication, October 5, 2018).

3.3.2.1 Mobility.

Even though some women of the community engage in jobs outside the walls of Chharanagar, their mobility is often curbed or restricted. Dimple expressed her desire to work as an air hostess and travel outside of Gujarat, but stated that even though she is more privileged than other women in the community, she too was forced to stay within the confines of Ahmedabad (D. Kodekar, October 4, 2018). For this reason, in her job applications, she had to emphasize that she only wished to work at Ahmedabad Airport. Therefore, a large number of Chhara women's movements are also quite minimal.

3.3.2.2 Budhan theatre.

Due to such norms, many of the women who are involved in Budhan Theatre do not get the opportunity to act alongside the male members of the troupe as they travel to different parts of the country. According to Krishnakant, a members of Budhan Theatre, though Budhan Theatre itself is supportive of the women who want to join, many parents of the women are not. Even the ones who let their daughters perform in Chharanagar, either join them when the group performs outside, or don't let them go at all. They worry about the atmosphere considering the number of men in the group. He also tells us that a number of girls start leaving Budhan as they grow older and are considered to be of a marriageable age. Budhan Theatre members often meet at night to rehearse, and this may worry the parents of women about the consequences of being seen

with men at night, on their marriage prospects. He notes that out of the eight girls who joined Budhan Theatre alongside him, only one remains active. Boys also leave when they grow older as their responsibilities increase, but the ratio of the ones who stay is much higher as compared to that of women (K. Machharekar, personal communication, October 4, 2018).

3.3.2.3 Age and Budhan Theatre.

It must also be noted that women who join Budhan Theatre do so at a young age. Some older women, who find theatre interesting, believe it is too late for them to join Budhan Theatre now. They feel that they would not get the same training as the women who were specially selected by Budhan Theatre in their childhood, and therefore do not have the same oratory or performance skills that the other women in Budhan Theatre do (G. Ghansi, personal communication, October 4, 2018). Ganga speaks about how her brothers developed communication skills through Budhan Theatre, which also played an integral part in shaping their later career. Her brothers were educated and when asked whether she wants to get involved in Budhan Theatre, she tells us:

No, no [I've never wanted to do theatre]. I haven't studied, so I won't be able to say dialogues! I don't feel like I can do anything. I don't even feel like doing anything. I'm happy seeing my children itself (G. Ghansi, personal communication, October 4, 2018).

Many of these women, such as Neelam, however, expressed interest in sending their children to Budhan Theatre at a young age so that they would inculcate habits like reading (N. Indrekar, personal communication, October 4, 2018). They believe that by joining Budhan Theatre, its members are able to develop their identities, become more confident, learn more about their own passions, be it film, theatre, anchoring or any form of acting, and develop skills. Dakxin Bajrange wonders if this is another reason why parents do not send their daughters into theatre. He tells us:

Secondly, they do not let them participate in theatre because if she goes into theatre she will get a lot of exposure, and normally people get very outspoken after joining theatre, because they become aware about a lot of things, so they are scared of these things. So these are the reasons for not sending women in. Out of the women who came here, very few have stayed on, that too with great difficulty, they had to fight their parents to do so. Then, if they got engaged, the boy's family refused, because you have to perform with boys. So these social

concerns are present in the community. That is the reason for there being few women in Budhan Theatre (D. Bajrange, personal communication, October 6, 2018).

3.3.3 Conclusion

From the interactions that we have had with different members of the community, especially the women who aren't involved in Budhan or bootlegging, it is evident that the notion of respectability dictates their movements, activities, and opportunities. While the search for dignity seems to be a recurring theme in all the interviews conducted in Chharanagar, it is evident in the lives of the women of the community, who are denied dignity on the grounds of their gender as well their identity as Chharas. This search for respectability takes different forms for different women, and accordingly drives them into various occupations like brewing liquor, participating in Budhan Theatre, working in other professional spheres or staying at home. While professional spaces outside of Chharanagar give some women the feeling of respectability, by providing them with distance from their Chhara identities and giving them an avenue for integration into mainstream society, they allow others to formulate an identity that is distinct from that of bootlegging women. In the domestic space, many women take up the role of a homemaker to find dignity beyond the conventionally accepted domestic role of the bootlegger. Thus, we can see how negotiations between the various models of morality and respectability play out in the lives of these Chhara women.

3.4 Budhan Theatre Leaders



Figure 8. Dakxin and other Budhan Theatre members after our theatre workshop

Source: Discover India Program, 2018-19

Based on the literature we reviewed before going on field Budhan Theatre seemed like any other theatre group, the only difference being the subjects and goals they worked for. However Budhan Theatre, much like Chharanagar, is made up of a heterogenous group of people, each having his/her own individual history, struggle and worldview. For them theatre is more than just an art form or a means to an end; it is a process of seeking dignity for themselves and their community. This process that goes into creating every single play and performing it, is one through which members develop political opinions and consciousness. The process of Budhan Theatre has been intricately entrenched in the life of Chharanagar. As Roxy Gagdekar, founding member of Budhan Theatre tells us, “It is impossible to ignore Budhan Theatre when you talk about Chharanagar” (R. Gagdekar, personal communication, September 9, 2018). The plays that are often created based on theirs and other communities’ lived realities of everyday oppression, imbibe a bodily experience that create a very deep sense of empathy in themselves and their audience. Owing to the passion and commitment of the leaders of Budhan Theatre in using art and theatre as a sustained form of resistance, there has been an increasing sense of solidarity and leadership within the Chhara community and across other marginalized communities.

3.4.1 Integration of theatre in personal lives.

Recounting their first experience of watching a play by the group, many current members of Budhan Theatre talked about how the play was unlike any they had seen; here, their own realities were being depicted, the characters were people they saw everyday. Dakxin Bajrange, writer and director of Budhan Theatre's first play *Budhan Bolta Hai*, tells us:

I prepared a play called *Budhan*. The play was very emotional for me, my actors and the audience. It was such a powerful play that people still remember the play as though we performed it two days back. It was not what you would call a play by the conventional boundaries of theatre, but it was reality. It was real life experience that we were trying to perform in that play (D. Bajrange, personal communication, October 6, 2018).

However, the impact of the play was not limited to its audience; it resonated strongly with members of the play who identified their own lives in Budhan's story. Although unique in the specific conditions of violence, his story held true for almost all members of the Chhara community, who struggle against the same kind of stigma and police violence on a daily basis. Atish Indrekar – an actor and volunteer of Budhan Theatre for the last 16 years who has performed in several productions of the play, says:

I didn't know who Budhan was at the time, but the dialogues, the feel, I felt a strong connection with them. People at home spoke like that - my aunt, my grandmother, my mother - all these people...this was how all the women of Chharanagar lived. So, I felt compelled to do it. So it was the strong connection that I felt, that made me join theatre (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 5, 2018).

In the 20 years of its existence, Budhan Theatre has remained true to its role as a form of political expression for marginalised communities across the country. Roxy says, "we are a political group...We stand against anything that is unconstitutional" (R. Gagdekar, personal communication, September 9, 2018). Their commitment to bringing about social change through theatre, art, and poetry is what sets them apart from proscenium, and other commercial forms of theatre. Atish tells us:

Budhan is not a professional theatre group. It is a community theatre, it works at the community level. And uses art to talk about persons from the community to other people. That is why Budhan Theatre is known amongst the people. In Ahmedabad, Gujarat, all over the country there are different theatre groups,

working in their own ways. But, Budhan Theatre is known world over for this (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 5, 2018).

Budhan Theatre has thus emerged as a platform that aims to create awareness about the issues of marginalised and oppressed communities. Through theatre, they hope to dissociate themselves from the identity of born criminality and to rid themselves of the stigma that comes with it. They are driven by the desire to reclaim the status of respectability that has been systematically denied to them by the state and society. When in conversation with Siddharth Garange – an actor and volunteer of Budhan Theatre for the last 16 years, and Snehal Chhara – a student of Journalism and Law attached with Budhan Theatre since he was 10, they tell us:

Our goal is to destroy the perception people view us with. We will fight until that happens (S. Garange, personal communication, October 4, 2018).

Till people call us thieves, we will fight. Till we are not considered good people, we will fight (S. Chhara, personal communication, October 4, 2018).

Budhan Theatre makes use of an extremely different creative process when coming up with its plays; it emphasises the process of improvisation, interaction with the audience, and minimal use of props and costumes. When asked about how Budhan Theatre works, Snehal tells us:

We can't perform in proscenium or semi-proscenium, because in that you have to do what is written. But in street theatre, you can go anywhere and say any kind of dialogue in front of anyone. So you get to know what is happening around you, if it's right or wrong. For me Budhan is a means to make people's issues reach people. If you can't make your issues heard by the people, you come to us, and we will help you (S. Chhara, personal communication, October 4, 2018).

Budhan Theatre members often internalise the roles they play, and influences of these roles have helped them get through many difficult moments of their lives. For instance, in Atish's interview about the incident of 26th July, he gave an account of how the police had pinned him against a van and proceeded to beat him brutally. In that moment, his lines from *Budhan Bolta Hai* came back to him, and, echoing Budhan's character, he questioned, "Why are you beating me? What have I done?" He found himself embodying the role of character, only this time it wasn't a play (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 2, 2018).

Atish also tells us about another instance from 26th July that reminded him of theatre: "The day I was taken for the check up, I was handcuffed. At that time, I

remembered the props we utilised for our theatre plays and the way in which we used to arrest our characters” (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 2, 2018). He thus felt a strong connection with the character he had performed in the play, and understood it with a much more nuanced perspective.

Narrating yet another anecdote from his time in jail after the 26th July incident, Atish tells us another instance when they applied theatre to maneuver through a real life problem. One of the 29 victims was an alcoholic, and, in jail, he woke up every night with a strong craving for alcohol. Not having consumed it for longer than he was used to, he was in a state of half consciousness, and refused to let others sleep until someone gave him his drink. In this situation, Atish quickly orchestrated a play where, along with his other cell-mates, he pretended that a bottle of water was alcohol. Their acting was so convincing that the alcoholic believed the water to be alcohol, and went back to sleep satisfied (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 2, 2018).

Thus, theatre has become a tool used by members of Budhan Theatre to cope with difficult situations. It is such an inextricable part of their being that it now comes to them as instinctive response to various problems, and it gives them a framework of how to act and think. The connection that the members of Budhan Theatre feel when they indulge in art, whether it’s theatre or poetry, is so powerful that it gives them the strength and courage to resist the stigma attached to their community, the hateful eyes of the state, and the consequent police violence. Theatre gives them the ability and platform to express their rage, their sorrow, and their struggle in a society that is bent upon silencing them. Through this, theatre not only becomes their support system, but also their weapon.

3.4.2 Consciousness through budhan theatre.

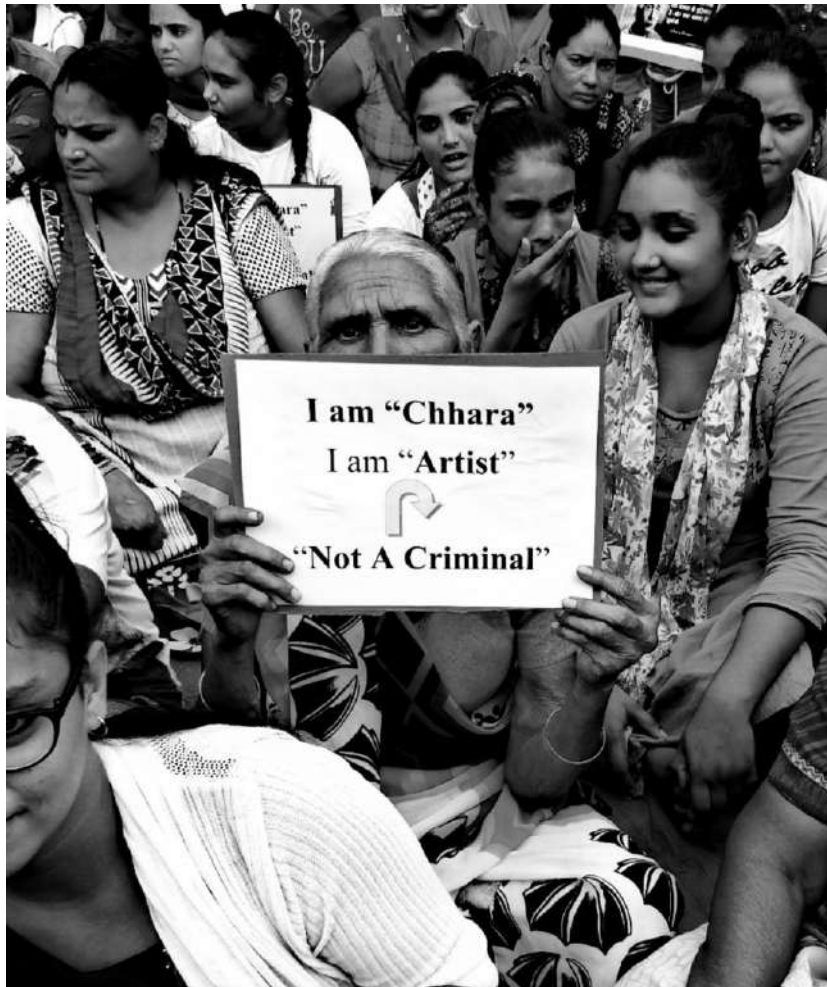


Figure 9. Chhara women at the protest after 26th July

Source: Abhishek Indrekar - Budhan Theatre member, 2018-19

As education levels increased in the community, many of the members began to grow more conscious of the stigmatisation and oppression they faced due to their Chhara identity. The members of Budhan Theatre became more aware of their rights and then realised, however, that this was not the case for other, less educated members of the community. Budhan Theatre played a major role in raising this awareness among its members and mainstream society. Dakxin tells us:

I feel that because of this creativity, the anger in me, that came from the discrimination I faced, my sister faced, from childhood, started coming out through the medium of theatre. We used our energy positively and constructively to bridge the gap between our community and the larger society. Through theatre

we create a dialogue with system and society so that they get to know what kind of a life we are living (D. Bajrange, personal communication, October 6, 2018).

In other words, Budhan Theatre gives its members the avenue to channel their anger into art and use it to stir change. By recreating their lived experiences in plays, members are given the space to think about these experiences and process them as a community, creating both awareness and solidarity among them. Moreover, audience members from the same community also become more conscious of the oppression they are facing by watching it being performed. The experience of watching atrocities and oppression faced by several communities on a daily basis, on stage, is an extremely impactful one, and keeps the audience gripped for days. Jayendra, a graphic designer, animator, and volunteer with Budhan Theatre for the last nine years, says:

We found out later, after doing the play, that people have not been able to sleep for two to three days, because they haven't been able to come out of the plays. People have called us, telling us that we performed in such an impactful manner that the play stayed with them. That is the impact of theatre. (J. Chhara, personal communication, October 4, 2018)

This, in itself, is a huge step towards mobilizing people within communities, and giving them the strength to speak out against the state. By making the audience recognize the urgency of the situation in such a powerful way, Budhan Theatre pushes people to bring about change within their own communities, and raise consciousness and solidarity among its members as well.

3.4.3 Impact of budhan theatre.

Over the course of its 20 years, Budhan Theatre has brought about immense change in not only the way Chharas perceive themselves, but also the way they are perceived by mainstream society. Among other things, there has been an increase in the education levels of the community, a reduced indulgence in criminal activities, and an increased understanding of what the "Chhara" identity entails. The resistance of Chharas against the state, and the consequent progress they have made so far can be attributed to the efforts of Budhan Theatre. Krishnakant Machharekar, an actor and volunteer of Budhan Theatre for nine years, and a crucial musician of the Budhan Theatre plays, tell us:

Before Budhan Theatre, the colleges here did not admit children from Chharanagar. Then when Budhan Theatre was established in 1998, the education

increased, Chharanagar developed. Then, after 1998, the same colleges that had refused to admit us, started inviting our senior actors, to teach as theatre practitioners. And every year in the youth festival that happens in Gujarat University, at least three to four students from Chharanagar perform and conduct theatre workshops in the very colleges that did not give us admission. This has been the biggest change (K. Machharekar, personal communication, October 4, 2018).

Budhan Theatre acts as a platform to bring about change and voice the plight of not only the Chhara community, but also other Denotified Tribes across the country. This is done through a process of engaging with members of other communities, understanding their problems, and eventually coming up with creative ways to incorporate and demonstrate them through theatre workshops, while also keeping in mind the culture of the community they are dealing with. Through this process, Budhan Theatre has equipped several communities with the ability to speak up for themselves, mobilize themselves, and fight against the state for their rights. They have even been invited by the United States Department of State in February 2019 to demonstrate how Budhan Theatre operates and interacts with different communities. As Atish says:

We give them the example of Chharanagar, show them our plays, and develop leadership through theatre, through workshops. Maninagar has developed a leadership, they will fight the police, the corporation even if we don't go there. Same with the Madaris.

We are going to teach theatre to the refugees of the American State Government. Dakxin bhai and I are going to teach them theatre around their own culture. And, to tell them what Budhan Theatre has done till now. That we have worked with the tribals. We are going to be guests of the state government (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 5, 2018).

Not only does Budhan Theatre work in terms of conducting theatre workshops, but it also takes the lead in all kinds of research being conducted on the Denotified Tribes, such as surveys or tests. This kind of work has brought numerous responsibilities upon them, with 192 communities having expectations from Budhan Theatre to help give them a voice, give guidance to them when their community is posed with a problem, and support them in their fight towards gaining justice (K. Machharekar, personal communication, October 4, 2018).

When we were on field, some members of the Madari tribe had come to seek Dakxin's advice about a recent instance of mob lynching against a member of the community. Post the death of his wife in the incident, a member of the tribe had been invited by a news channel for an interview to the site of the violence. Fearing a repeated instance of violence from the families of those arrested in relation to the case, some Madaris were seeking Dakxin's guidance and an assurance of protection and justice.

There have been numerous such instances of violence against other marginalised communities, such as the Dalits and Rajbohi community, who come to Budhan Theatre seeking advice and in search of solutions to their problems. This has, in turn, aided in establishing a certain level of credibility for Budhan Theatre across communities, while also boosting the level of respectability for the nature of work being done by Budhan Theatre leaders. While in conversation with Krishnakant, he says:

They [other communities] think that no one will listen to us, the police or the court will not listen to us if we go to them just like that, so if we include Budhan Theatre, and if they try to convey our message through a play, only then will the issue reach the mainstream, the police or the court (K. Machharekar, personal communication, October 4, 2018).

The increased respectability of Budhan Theatre as a platform to end the stigmatisation of various marginalised communities in the eyes of mainstream society, has in turn also led to an increase in the individual dignity and respectability of the leaders of Budhan Theatre themselves. The kind of transformation that Budhan Theatre has caused in their lives, has resulted in a change in the way they are perceived, both within and outside their community. Atish tells us:

A lot has changed in my life because of theatre. I got an identity in my life. This is Atish and he does plays. This is Atish, he lives in Chharanagar, but he is not involved in thieving or brewing liquor, he is involved in theatre. So, I received an identity. I received a face, a space in Budhan Theatre, that people started recognizing me as an actor for Budhan Theatre. If I go somewhere, they know I perform for Budhan Theatre. So I received this identity. (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 5, 2018)

Budhan Theatre has also changed the trajectory of lives of many of the members involved. It has provided them with an alternative for activities like thievery and alcohol brewing, and thus, transformed their perception as a "bad Chhara", who indulges in activities of criminality, to a "good Chhara" with a meaningful purpose and dignity. It has

also exposed its members to new areas of interest, such as filmmaking. For instance, Abhishek Indrekar, a 23 year old independent filmmaker and theatre activist, who has been with Budhan Theatre since his 10th grade, tells us:

I wanted to know what exactly they [Budhan Theatre members] were doing, playing this type of characters. I got very fascinated by their rehearsals, and the kind of theatre they are doing. So I wanted to explore what they are doing. And after 10th I finally wanted to go into films and theatre. After 10th I did my first play, and got into documentary filmmaking with Dakxin. So I got into filmmaking because of that. Earlier I wanted to become an astrophysicist. (Abhishek Indrekar, personal communication, October 4, 2018)

Through exposure to the political and cultural movement of Budhan Theatre, members have been educated about the kind of problems existing around the world, and were made to realise the importance and urgency of such a movement. In the same interview, Abhishek said:

I had been watching them [Budhan Theatre plays] because of my mum, Dakxin and all...so I had been watching them, but I didn't give a shit about them. Then I understood the things that were happening in Jangar at that time. I understood why they were doing this, why theatre, and why in Chharanagar right now for instance. That made me think a lot. (Abhishek Indrekar, personal communication, October 4, 2018)

At the same time, Budhan Theatre gives them immense strength to fight and resist unfair treatment. Atish tells us:

We consider ourselves fortunate that we found Budhan Theatre. At least Budhan Theatre has given us an energy to fight - we don't break easily, we have the energy to take console and comfort others. And this energy we received through theatre. (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 5, 2018)

While the community leaders develop themselves through the platform of Budhan Theatre, there is a parallel increase in their visibility to the state. The very aim of Budhan Theatre is to start a revolution, and therefore, repression and interference from the state is inevitable and expected, as the state views them as a "nuisance." In the context of 26th July, we ask Atish why many Chharas were specifically attacked by the police, even though none of them had a criminal record. He responds:

Because we speak out! They know that Manoj is a lawyer, and that Pravin is a photographer [Manoj and Pravin are two very well respected members of the

Chhara community who were beaten and arrested by the police on 26th July]. The DCP [Deputy Commissioner of Police] knows me very well. But they targeted us because they knew if we continue our work the revolution will come—and it has! Everyone is anti-police now. (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 2, 2018)

The members of Chharanagar, and particularly the members of Budhan Theatre, are thus, under the constant gaze of the police, to ensure that they don't "get out of hand," and it is likely that this mentality led to the brutal police violence of 26th July.

3.4.4 Challenges faced by budhan theatre.

Budhan Theatre has seen several challenges in its journey, and the group struggles even today to overcome many of them. Like any group that tries to deviate from its "place" in society, Budhan Theatre, too, has been subject to extreme criticism, from within its community, mainstream society, and the state. The situation has only worsened since 2014 when Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) came to power. When asked about his thoughts about the Modi government and upcoming elections, Atish says:

They've [BJP] enforced the UAPA [Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act] act, arrested journalists and activists. They're saying that the people who read and work for the community are urban naxals. Am I an urban Naxal for working with the Madaris? For reading Marx? Mob lynching! They've started killing people in large crowds... All these things which have begun now—the mobs, mass lynching, assaulting communities, urban Naxals, police encounters, *notebandhi kanoon* [demonetisation], the scams—it's going to get worse. (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 5, 2018)

Leaders of Budhan Theatre thus have to endure the struggle of being drivers of a political movement as large as theirs, amidst the environment of the current government. In addition to this, they also have to struggle with the criticisms they face from within their own community. With a very heavy heart, but a hint of hope in his eyes, Atish tells us:

We never received support from the community. They sometimes said that by showing us brewing liquor, you are criticizing us in public. Some say we are doing the right thing. So your biggest battle is against the community itself. Your struggle begins with your own community. It takes several years to make the community understand. (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 5, 2018)

It can thus be seen that, in spite of the lack of support, Budhan Theatre continues to work with the community to continue the process of building the capacity of individual and collective consciousness of the community through its art, rather than a final product that stagnates.

The members of Budhan Theatre, however, and particularly the community leaders, are always torn between the responsibility they feel towards their community and the responsibility and expectations they have to live up to within their families. Budhan Theatre has adopted as their mission, not only to help the current generation fight the struggle against marginalisation, but also to ensure that they create enough impact such that the future generations don't have to battle the kind of injustices that they are struggling with today. Coming from large families, however, most male members of Budhan Theatre are expected to find a job—or some source of monetary reward—in order to support other members of their families. Over the years, it has become increasingly difficult for the leaders of Budhan Theatre to sustain their practice along with earning money, as there has been a reduction in the funds they receive. Jayendra tell us:

At first Budhan used to get funding through Bhasha and Ford Foundation, so we used to get a stipend of Rupees 500 per person... As we started working full time we started receiving Rupees 4000 as salary. However, for the past couple of years Budhan hasn't had any funding. So money for newspapers, travelling, etc. we have to pay from our own pockets. (J. Chhara, personal communication, October 4, 2018)

Owing to the fact that they do not receive any remuneration in return for the work they do, it becomes extremely difficult to be the “good” son of the house and to fulfill this expectation, particularly when traditions of early age marriage and dowry are still widely prevalent. Atish tells us:

My family is huge... So in my house there is a wedding every year... In November this year, there are two weddings in my family. So, now we need to arrange for money for that. Because here, in weddings the entire family collects in one place. I have four uncles, 10-12 sisters, 10-15 brothers. So if there is a wedding in the family, we have to follow the ritual of giving dowry, we have to give some money, that is the ritual. It has been going on for very long. (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 5, 2018)

Thus, they face constant pressure from their family to engage in brewing alcohol or thieving, which are viewed as more liable means of income (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 5, 2018). As a result, members of Budhan Theatre are constantly grappling with the guilt of being unable to provide for their family, and the self doubt that comes from not having taken the easy way out and doing a job instead. We ask them whether they ever feel like leaving Budhan Theatre for these reasons, and Atish narrates an incident to us:

I cursed myself a lot. I went somewhere and cried bitterly. I cursed myself, and thought, what kind of a life have I made for myself? I needed one lakh rupees actually, for two years, but I didn't have the money. I wrote to a lot of people, but no one helped me. So I cursed myself a lot. I thought I should have left Budhan Theatre, should have found a job, should have given up on this community crap. Even after working for the community I had to listen to people cursing me – what was the point of it? What did I get out of it? (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 5, 2018)

When in conversation with Dakxin, along the same lines, he says:

I'm never burdened but, sometimes, tired. Very badly. I don't know what to do. If you're not fulfilling the needs of your family, and you're voicing the concerns of others, you feel very confused. What are you doing? If you can't help your family, how can you help others? This thought comes out. (D. Bajrange, personal communication, October 6, 2018)

A major reason as to why there is minimal response from the community in return for the work of Budhan Theatre is because the members of Budhan Theatre are not doing what they are “supposed” to do (i.e., earning money and looking after the family), thus rendering the perception of their work as not being respectable enough. The general idea is that, if one can't make a livelihood which is not only sustainable but also at par with the general economic standard of others within the community, then their work is deemed worthless. Atish tells us:

[Talking about what families of Budhan Theatre leaders tell them] How long are you going to do this kind of work? Do a job somewhere, earn some money. Everyone else has cars, two cars, four-wheelers, their own bungalows. How will you survive in this society? People all over the world will listen to me, but I will never be able to explain it to my family. No one listens to us because in our

families everyone expects that we should provide them with a home, a car... everyone around us has cars and big houses.

Another thing that happened was that I lost some friends after joining Budhan Theatre. Some of my friends said, “What will you do there, this dance-drama etc... Why don’t you earn some money, do some business.” (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 5, 2018)

The leaders of Budhan Theatre thus take constant efforts to gain recognition and create a respectable image of themselves in front of their community. However, at the same time, people view them as leaders in times of crises, and seek their help in matters of receiving justice. Amidst such conflicts, the leaders of Budhan Theatre use art as their medium of solace.

3.4.5 Resolution through art.



Figure 10. Budhan Theatre members (from left to right: Shubham, Atish, Kushal, Sahil, and Krishnakant) practicing their songs

Source: Discover India Program, 2018-19

The challenges that members of Budhan Theatre experience undoubtedly leave them having second thoughts about their work and their commitment to Budhan Theatre. Being a product of a longstanding study of influential authors and poets however, members of Budhan Theatre continue to build and rebuild themselves every time their efforts are broken down by society. Atish tells us:

This happened multiple times - this feeling that I should leave Budhan Theatre. But then, from inside, there is a positive energy. Inside we have positive and negative energy, but it is positive because I have read so many books, so many writers. So I have read all these positive things somewhere or the other. So these positive things support me, they tell me to leave the other things, to not do them (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 5, 2018).

Art thus plays an extremely important role in their lives, as it keeps up their spirits and gives them hope. The connection Budhan Theatre members feel with the literature they read, resonates very closely to the connection they feel and bring out in the audience when they perform their plays. It gives them strength knowing that they're not alone, and paves the way for their mobilization. There is thus, an inevitable connection between the literature they read and the plays they perform. Krishnakant says in his interview:

From somewhere or the other, the poems starts joining with the play. We give it a lot of importance because poetry relates with the plays and the plays relate with poetry. Dhumil, Badal dada, Pash, Mahasweta Devi ji-their poems, extracts, slogans and quotes can be connected to our plays. Their [Paash and Dushyant Kumar] poems, or Dhumil's poems connect with my life, and it gives me the zeal to fight and removes any fear in my mind. Every line of Pash's poems talks about protest, it talks about resistance, about an oppressed class. So our work is attached to theirs (K. Machharekar, personal communication, October 4, 2018).

At the end of the day, their love for theatre, the satisfaction from the work they do, combined with their commitment towards the community stands above all, and they learn to manoeuvre their way around all obstacles that come their way. Dakxin tells us:

I think even if you've given more of yourself to the social cause than your family, it's fine because it is just as important. So, maybe the needs of your home could be shifted to someone else, like a brother, but for the political cause there is no secondary leadership, making it more important than home. Of course, you question yourself, what you're doing - you're a criminal for your family, but a God for the cause. This is difficult because when you need to put your family

before the cause, some situations makes you prioritise the cause, or even the other way around. But I have never let the cause take over my home (D. Bajrange, personal communication, October 6, 2018).

Unlike the general lack of respect and response to the work of Budhan Theatre from the Chhara community, after the incident of 26th July, there has been an immense surge in the trust and realisation of the faith the community has in Budhan Theatre. Jayendra says:

After 26th July, we realised how much the people of this community trust in Budhan, and then we learnt of the expectation they have for us. After 26th July we saw what Budhan really is and how many people's voices are attached to it. The police made a mistake with it. They united the community and made it one. They instigated a movement for the Chharas (J. Chhara, personal communication, October 4, 2018).

The feeling of having been wronged has brought the whole of Chharanagar together in solidarity, and finally, made the mission of Budhan Theatre come true. Krishnakant says:

They've [the police] solved the issue of starting a fire, because 26th July started it for us (K. Machharekar, personal communication, October 4, 2018).

The increased trust in Budhan Theatre is accompanied with increased expectations and responsibilities from the members of Budhan Theatre. There is a redefined sense of leadership and onus, that they have to take as community leaders, and it now becomes their responsibility to not only ensure that justice is served, but also sustain the unity that has been created amongst the members of the Chhara community. There is also an added challenge to fulfil the expectations of the community, because it's not an easy job when they're facing the government. Atish says:

They have expectations from us. So we improvise with them, tell them that we will do something...but we can't do anything. This is a very long struggle...these 29 people say, this is Atish, he will finish the case. But finishing the case is not that easy. They think I am educated, so I'll be able to do it, but so what if I am educated? I am facing the government. (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 5, 2018)

In art, the members of Budhan Theatre have not only found answers to their personal struggles, but have also found a way to inculcate leadership and resistance in

their own, and other marginalized communities. Owing to the central role of art in their political movement, it won't be long before there is a play on the police violence of 26th July.

3.4.6 Women in budhan theatre.

Before going on field we had a general sense of the lacking number of women present in Budhan Theatre. Through our fieldwork however, we understood the deeper sociological reasons underlying the inadequate participation and involvement of women. Most Budhan members we interviewed were conscious of this shortfall - they recognised early marriage, and the anxiety surrounding it as one of the main reasons women are restricted from joining the group. Dakxin said:

Girls are kept in a very restricted manner after they turn 11-12 years old, they want to get rid of them by getting them married, that is the kind of mentality that parents in Chharanagar have. People are scared that their daughter does not have an affair with anyone else, which keeps happening, because that is a natural process. Because then no one will come to take their daughters, because they only get married within the community, so anyway there are very few boys, very few girls, so they are very scared of these things (D. Bajrange, personal communication, October 6, 2018)

From actively encouraging women to participate, to centering plays on the issue, Budhan members have taken multiple initiatives to involve more women, however they recognise the unsatisfactory effects these initiatives have had. Even Kalpana, a prominent actor in not only Budhan Theatre but also Gujarati theatre and television, has not been able to draw many young women to pursue theatre as their livelihoods by means of setting an example (K. Gagdekar, personal communication, October 3, 2018). Thus, while the group recognises the need to take active steps to encourage the participation of women, it also sees the deeply embedded patriarchal forces at play which require time and persistence to weaken, let alone completely destroy. Although attempting to find solutions to the problem, Budhan is conscious of its own limitations against patriarchy, which finds a reflection in various ways in the Chhara community. Moreover, the lack of fundings over the past years has made it even more difficult for the members of Budhan Theatre to take initiatives to include more women.

3.4.7 Growing into a political movement.

Having joined Budhan Theatre at a young age, mostly out of an interest for theatre, and an admiration for the older members, the current leaders of Budhan Theatre are now finding themselves at the centre of a rapidly growing political and cultural movement. With art being at the centre of their resistance, they have endured mainstream society's longstanding perception of them as "born criminals," and transformed the consciousness they have gained, through the medium of theatre, into viewing themselves as "born artists". Budhan Theatre has emerged as a form of political theatre, carrying out a process of bridging the gap between their own community and mainstream society, while also taking the members of its own community through a process of realizing what it means to be a Chhara, and spreading the awareness that they *can* fight back against their marginalization. At the same time, they are also engaging members of other marginalised communities in the creative process, and giving them the strength to inculcate leadership, and thereby, uplifting their community through resistance. However, the absence of women leaders gives the movement certain disadvantages, and how and when this challenge will be overcome remains uncertain.

With consistent commitment and devotion to the cause of being recognized as respectable rightful citizens, Budhan Theatre has challenged the state, and caused an increased visibility in front of the state. This has induced a certain level of cautiousness amongst the police, while at the same time, has agitated them, as their subjects of oppression try to break the status quo. The Chharas experienced a complete collapse of their dignity, and explicitly realized the extent of their homogenization in the eyes of the state, for the first time in their history, through the incidences of police violence that unfolded on 26th July.

Outburst of Police Violence: The 26th July Incident



4. Outburst of Police Violence: The 26th July Incident

Sixty-six years have elapsed since the repeal of the Criminal Tribes Act, but it remains unclear whether or not the status of the Chhara community has improved by significant measure. Basing ourselves on the gaps in literature we came across during our pre-field research, we had primarily decided to focus our research around the position and status of women of the Chhara community. Though our initial research enabled us to have a fairly clear notion of the constant stigma faced by members of the community, the unprecedented acts of police violence and brutality against Chharas on the 26th of July, 2018, gave a whole new dimension to our understanding of the degree of stigma faced by them. We realised, despite awareness raised by Budhan Theatre and the scholarly work about the community, Chharas' historical stigmatisation continues to result in callous and ongoing violence, demonstrating the extreme urgency of their situation. Consequently, we had to bring about an alteration in our research, which could not overlook these happenings.

Although we spent ample time doing background research on the incident, through Facebook posts of leading Budhan Theatre members and newspaper articles, we had a limited understanding of the level of violence undertaken by the police. When we went on-field, community leaders, Dakxin and Roxy gave us a detailed description on the intensity of stress the entire community was under owing to physical injuries sustained by the victims, the damage to property, and the ongoing cases against the police that could possibly help them procure justice. It was only then that we fathomed how taxing the situation of the community was, as a result of that incident.

We often observe that instances of state violence, particularly against marginalised communities, are often forgotten by the public. However, this time, the community could not permit its plight to be suppressed as it has always been. What the community needed was a permanent record of its testimonies before there was a chance for anyone to forget the intensity and unjust nature of the incident. Dakxin and Roxy thereby suggested that we record and collect the narratives of each of the victims, people who were beaten up and arrested ruthlessly, of the 26th July incident. With the help of Budhan Theatre members, we identified all the victims of the incident and interviewed the 21 victims accessible during our time on-field. We then transcribed the interviews into Gujarati so that they could be given back to the community leaders. The end goal of this

undertaking is the eventual publication of the victims' testimonies into a booklet meant to be distributed to the police stations, in an attempt to hold the police accountable for their unlawful actions, while also drawing attention to the stigma faced by the community.

4.1 The Incident

On the night of 26th July, after a conflict between a police officer and few members of the Chhara community, Joint Commissioner Ashok Yadav ordered around 500 officers to storm Chharanagar, resulting in violent clashes that lasted more than four hours. Police were recorded on film indiscriminately beating Chharas, including women and children, with *lathis* and fists, pelting stones, and vandalizing homes and vehicles.

4.1.1 Accounts of the origin: how it began.

On 28th July 2018, an article was released by *Times of India* concerning the 26th July incident. According to the article:

The PSI of Sardarnagar police station, identified as D K Mori [sic], stopped 2 youths of the Chhara community, suspecting them to be carrying liquor. The PSI alleged that the youths called about 100 members of the community and the mob pelted them with stones and beat them with batons. Reinforcements were then deployed in Chharanagar (TNN, July 28, 2018).

Out of the 21 interviews we conducted, every victim had varying reports of the sequence of events that initiated police backlash. However, what is worth noting is that none of these reports exonerated the police. This drove us to look into the various accounts of the original incident.

According to Nitesh Minekar, a victim who assists his brothers at a D.J. shop, at around 11 p.m. two to three members involved in brewing liquor were in a disagreement with a customer when the Police Sub Inspector (PSI), D.K. Mori, came and verbally abused them. Not knowing that he was a police officer, since he was not in his uniform, the bootleggers beat him up. This then escalated into police violence. Nitesh also mentioned that the police officer was patrolling the area alone and drunk with his chest covered solely by a vest, in his personal car, instead of the cars that are allotted to police officers by the Government specifically for patrolling:

The PSI of this area, Mori *sahab*, was patrolling the area in his personal Swift car. Think about the benefits given to him by the Government which allowed him to

patrol the area in his personal car, and that too alone. The Government has given PCR vans, Bolero cars to perform patrolling. Even if I agree to the fact that you are using your personal car, you cannot patrol the area alone. Patrolling, wearing a vest, is also not right. Mori Sahab was also drunk (N. Minekar, personal communication, October 1, 2018).

Pravin Indrekar, a journalist and a victim of 26th July, gave an account of what happened with the police that night. According to him, D.K. Mori triggered the police atrocity against the Chhara community. While the media stated that a member of the Chhara community provoked D.K. Mori, the Chhara who was accused had nothing to do with bootlegging or any sort of criminal activity, and therefore had no reason to be around a police officer. Pravin said:

The individual who was affected by the incident is not even a bootlegger. He has a business of daily collection at his fabrication shop. He was checking the accounts for some collection for the fabrication he had received from the collector at night. He had switched off the lights outside and was working under a tiny light inside. Then, the police officer, DK Mori, arrived there and summoned him. His wife was sitting beside him, calling him to come for dinner since his house is nearby (P. Indrekar, personal communication, October 2, 2018).

D.K. Mori arrived at the shop and asked the young owner several irrelevant questions regarding his Activa, his car, and his licence documents. When the young man asked Mori why he was interrogating him, Mori didn't respond and instead started asking him about who the woman with him was, after which things escalated to verbal and physical abuse between the Chhara and police officer. Pravin gives a detailed account:

Then, the police asked him who was the woman sitting beside him. He asked him: "Why Sir, what happened?" He said that she was his wife. The police uttered such an insulting word, saying that he has used so many of such women and you are still calling her as your wife. The husband got extremely angry and told the police not to speak wrong of his wife. The police then pushed him and grabbed him by the collar. The husband could not take it any more and lost his temper. So, he pushed the police as well and there was verbal abuse (P. Indrekar, personal communication, October 2, 2018).

The women present on the scene at that time noticed that there was a bottle of alcohol present in the private car that Mori had brought along with him, and started

recording it on video. This action of theirs caused the wrath of Mori, after which he summoned a police force to beat up the Chhara man, as revenge.

Mori sir got frustrated as to why did the ladies take a shooting of the car with the alcohol in it, and was scared of what would happen of his job if the video went viral. This is why Mori brought a police force along with him in order to beat the man up. The people then ran away, after which the police attacked the people of Chharanagar. This is the word-to-word description of the incident to me by that man; this is what had really happened because of which the fight began (P. Indrekar, personal communication, October 2, 2018).

Pritosh, a manual laborer and another victim of that night, had yet another understanding of the original incident:

On the road, there was some disturbance involving Jigar [Chhara]. There was some boy who was talking on the phone, they told him to go back inside his house and talk but he didn't listen. So, the PI (police inspector) slapped him and then the boy slapped the PI back. Then the boy called his three or four brothers and removed the clothes and beat the PI. After which, the PI called everyone up and told them to come here (Pritosh, personal communication, October 1, 2018).

While these interviews serve as stark evidence regarding the severity of the brawl between the victims and the police, they also depict the disparity of understanding within the members of the Chhara community themselves, and therefore the asymmetry of information between them and the police. The denial of information to Chharas thus, acted as a way for the police to hold and maintain their power over them.

4.1.2 Disproportionate response: storming of Chharanagar.

Approximately one hour after the conflict between the young shop owner and D.K. Mori, Joint Commissioners, Ashok Yadav, ordered around 500 police officers from Sardarnagar police station and other nearby police stations to storm Chharanagar in police vans, at a time when most of the members of Chharanagar were asleep. Shopkeepers, auto-rickshaw drivers, lawyers, photojournalists, all uninvolved in the original incident, were woken up and dragged out of their houses, and verbally as well as physically abused by the officers. A total of 29 people were arrested and many more were beaten. These 29 victims were innocent and had nothing to do with the apparent incident that led to the retaliation of the police officials. All the victims of the incident mentioned that the police officers were drunk: "All of them were drunk. There were police officers from

Sardarnagar and also from nearby police stations” (N. Minekar, personal communication, October 1, 2018). “All of them had drunk alcohol” (A. Tamayche, personal communication, October 1, 2018). “We could tell from the way they were beating us and the way they were walking” (P. Batunge, personal communication, October 1, 2018).

The police officers destroyed people’s 2-wheeler and 4-wheeler vehicles parked outside their houses with *lathis* and stones. Atish Indrekar, an activist and filmmaker, said, “Some police officers were in their cars while some were walking, and they were pelting stones at our houses while swearing at us” (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 2, 2018). The commotion woke several people up and brought them outside their houses to see what was going on. As soon as they stepped out of their houses, each of them was attacked by at least 15-20 police officers, who began thrashing them with “lathis, iron rods, and whatever weapon was available to them at that instant” (N. Minekar, personal communication, October 1, 2018). Some police officers made use of other methods of violence: “They pulled out one of my nails too. They had used a cutter” (N. Minekar, personal communication, October 1, 2018). “The police removed three of my toe nails by jumping on them, they had me lie down on the road and were jumping on me” (S. Batunge, personal communication, October 1, 2018). The police also broke into Chharas’ homes by breaking open their doors and destroying equipment within their homes. “They broke my TV, cooler and washing machine” (H. Tamanche, personal communication, October 2, 2018). According to Atish, and Manoj Tamanche, a prominent lawyer from the community and another victim of 26th July, all the senior police officers of the area- Joint Commissioner Ashok Yadav, DCP Shweta Shrimali and Police Inspector Mr. Virani- were present when the incident occurred. They witnessed what was happening as quiet bystanders, and were also involved in some instances of physical confrontation against the members of the community.

4.1.3 Indiscriminate attack: all Chharas are fair game.

When beating up the members of the community, the police thrashed anyone they could get their hands on, thereby engaging in violent homogenization of Chharas. “So, in our house they hit both my mother and my sister-in-law” (H. Tamanche, personal communication, October 2, 2018). “They were insulting as well as hitting everyone including the senior citizens. They were not taking these factors into consideration” (S. Batunge, personal communication, October 1, 2018). “They hit my daughter, my niece and also pushed my mother in law, who, after that day, has been bed-ridden.” (V.

Sisodiya, personal communication, October 5, 2018). In addition to these victims, a diabetic woman with a paralysed hand was hit with a belt until she fell unconscious, a blind woman was beaten, and a man with heart disease and a diabetic were stripped in front of everyone.

Imploring the police to let him go, Vinod Sisodiya, another victim, involved in a hotel business, tried proving his innocence by showing that he had gone out of town that evening and therefore could not have been involved in the clash, “I even showed them proof that I wasn’t involved in it and that I had gone for a wedding. But they did not listen to me” (V. Sisodiya, personal communication, October 5, 2018).

4.1.4 Aggressive assertion of authority: violence against those who questioned it.

The more the people questioned the police, the harder the police thrashed and abused them, without providing any answers. “I asked them for the reason behind them insulting me. Was I caught selling liquor or doing some illegal job?” (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 2, 2018). “We were constantly telling them that we are lawyers and we had nothing to do in that incident, why are you hitting innocent people?” (M. Tamanche, personal communication, October 1, 2018).

They threatened me to keep my mouth shut or else they would rip my clothes off and hit me. I kept arguing against them, telling them that I was innocent and that they had no reason for hitting me. They did not listen and kept beating me up badly (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 2, 2018).

Some of the victims who tried to document what was going on at that moment were also brutally beaten up. Manoj Tamanche reveals that:

Pravin Indrekar, who is a photojournalist, was also beaten up very badly along with his nephew. He was shooting the entire incident and the police officers asked him why he was doing so. He told them that was his job. So, they hit him too (M. Tamanche, personal communication, October 1, 2018).

4.2 Abuse Against Women

The police particularly abused, beat up, and insulted the women of Chharanagar in an attempt to “show them their place”. When in conversation with Atish, he told us that when the police broke into his house, his sisters immediately ran to a room and locked themselves inside. The police officers ran after them and tried to break the door of the

room, while repeatedly saying, “Come out, I’ll show you what the police can really do” (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 2, 2018). The elder daughter of Atul Gagdekar, a victim of 26th July, and owner of a textile business, was slapped, and Nilesh Rathod’s, a manual labourer and another victim, daughter was pushed against the wall: “They had pushed her so she got hurt on her head” (N. Rathod, personal communication, October 1, 2018). Middle-aged women were beaten till their arms were fractured and injured, and the bleeding wounds were not treated until the next morning. Sasikala Tamayche, wife of Anip Lagji Tamayche, a 61-year-old manual labourer and a victim of 26th July, said:

They started grabbing women’s hair, dragging them out, stripping them and beating them. Who gave them the authority? Did they get permission to do this? How is it okay for them to beat women, to strip them? Do we not have any dignity? If we are poor, we have no dignity? This does not work (S. Tamayche, personal communication, October 1, 2018).

Atish and Nitesh both revealed to us the manner in which Sangita Tamanche, one of the two women who were arrested that night, was abused by the police:

There was one lady with us, called Sangita. She was in a gown at that time. She wasn’t even allowed to change her clothes. She was brought to the police station in a gown. I’m not sure about this but I’ve heard that law says that a female police officer should be present to arrest a lady. But Sangita was arrested by a male. There’s a video recording of that. She is involved in bootlegging. The way she was beaten up was terrible. If you were present at that time, you would have been shocked (N. Minekar, personal communication, October 1, 2018).

Atish was in the police van with her that night and recalled how she was treated:

The police brought Sangita, made her sit down and hit her on the private part with a stick. I asked the police what were they doing. They insulted her a lot and called her a “bitch”. When I intervened to ask them where the female officer was, they silenced me, hit me with a stick and I fell down. They insulted me as well (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 2, 2018).

While the duty of the police is to protect citizens of the state and enforce the law, what happened that night was a complete violation of those duties. This is a clear indication of the fact that the police view all Chharas as criminals, and not as citizens. Moreover, even within the Chhara community, the police view women as the group with the least dignity, and 26th July is a clear manifestation of this. Atish says:

This is not policing. Police officers are meant to protect us, but in this case, it is the police who is thrashing us. You yourself can imagine how many females have been beaten up, and that too by male officers, not female ones. They have been touched in private places. What kind of policing is this? (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 2, 2018)

4.3 In The Lock-up

After dragging them out of their homes and beating them up, the police took the 29 victims to Sardarnagar police station at around 3 a.m. in their vans. While in the vans, they threatened the lives of the victims with menacing remarks about drowning and dumping them in Kotarpur, an area where encounters usually take place (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 2, 2018). Upon reaching the police station, they beat up some of the victims: “They hit us there as well” (S. J. Bajrange, personal communication, October 1, 2018). “They even brought us outside the police station, away from the cameras, and hit us” (H. Tamanche, personal communication, October 2, 2018). “They beat me in Sardarnagar too, and then filed a case” (A. Tamayche, personal communication, October 1, 2018). “They beat us, put us in the vehicle and took us directly to Sardarnagar. In the middle, they beat us again. They made us stand and beat us” (A. Tamayche, personal communication, October 1, 2018). The victims were then kept in the lock-up of Sardarnagar police station for one day.

Several members who were injured that night called for an ambulance to take them to the civil hospital. However, the police officers blocked its entry. Pravin said:

The police officials told the ambulance driver that there is some issue going on with the Chhara community members and that they are pelting stones, so it is advisable not to go inside otherwise their ambulance would be damaged. I clarified with the driver telling him that there's no such issue and that I am a journalist and need to go to the civil hospital for treatment (P. Indrekar, personal communication, October 2, 2018).

The ambulance managed to enter Chharanagar, but could not get to Pravin's house. He, along with six others then walked to where the ambulance was waiting, after deciding to take another route to avoid the police (P. Indrekar, personal communication, October 2, 2018). The following morning, the police went to the civil hospital and took them to police station: “At the police station, they put several fake charges such as robbery, stone pelting, and hitting a police officer, against us and put us in the lockup” (P.

Indrekar, personal communication, October 2, 2018). Kushal Tamanche, another victim who was a lawyer, as well as his mother, Anita Tamanche, a housewife, were both arrested from the civil hospital; they said: “They took away most of our medicines, but I was in a lot of pain” (K. Tamanche, personal communication, October 1, 2018). “We were given medicines in Civil, but at the main gate, the constable collected all our medicines, they didn’t even give me medicines” (A. Tamanche, personal communication, October 1, 2018).

When the police brought the seven back to the lockup from the civil hospital, a total of 29 victims were in the lockup. The victims had to endure extremely horrific conditions while they were in there. Atul, who is diabetic, says, “When I asked them for water, they told me that I would have to drink water from the toilet. We even drank that” (A. Gagdekar, personal communication, October 1, 2018). Atish, along similar lines, said:

I was feeling very thirsty, so I asked the constable for water. He responded saying there was no water and he warned me to sit quietly otherwise he would beat me up. I could not control anymore, so I went to the toilet and drank water from there. I washed my face, drank water, and came out. (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 2, 2018)

Even though they sustained severe injuries, the police denied the Chharanagar victims basic human rights such as water. This left them with no choice but to forego hygiene and, more importantly, their dignity, and resort to drinking water from the toilet. When the family of advocates, Manoj Tamanche, Kunal Tamanche, and Kushal Tamanche, who were among the 29 victims arrested, tried to file a case at the police station, they were allegedly not allowed to do so because no senior officer was present at that time. Sunny Tamanche, one of the victims and previously a manager at a pharmaceutical company, says, “We wanted to file an official FIR complaint at the station from our side but the constables did not permit us to do so” (S. Tamanche, personal communication, October 1, 2018). Kushal also claims:

We told them we wanted to do an FIR, but they said we can’t take it because the *Bade Saab* wasn’t there. We asked them why the police officer in charge couldn’t take it, as lawfully there is no need for permission from a higher ranking policeman, but they brushed it off, and said they’ll do it later. (K. Tamanche, personal communication, October 1, 2018)

With the mechanism in place to make sure justice is turned against them, we can see the Chharas’ state of powerlessness before the state. Moreover, because of the

excuses and attempts aimed at denying victims the right to file an FIR against the police, we wonder if the police were trying to buy themselves time to figure out how to manoeuvre their way around their actions from the previous night.

On the morning of 30th July, a group of advocates arrived at the police station to protest against the unlawful treatment of the 29 victims. In fear of the repercussions, the police officers agreed to make a deal with the family of advocates and release them, in an attempt to save themselves from the consequences of their actions: “After beating them up so badly, the police was expecting to butter them” (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 2, 2018). The family of advocates, however, was not ready to leave unless all the victims were released. Sunny, a member of that family says, “We wanted to stay united as a community” (S. Tamanche, personal communication, October 1, 2018). The police didn’t agree to releasing everyone, and the 29 victims remained in the lockup, after which they were taken to the Civil hospital.

4.4 To The Civil Hospital And Judge’s Bungalow

Since the cases of these victims were related to police abuse, they could only be taken to a government hospital. This, however, felt nothing less than an extension of prison to the victims. Atish said:

Once we entered the hospital, the police had us sit on the ground. We asked them why they were making us sit on the floor. We were not some terrorists who had murdered individuals. They refused to listen and had us sit cross-legged (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 2, 2018).

After enduring hours of struggle, pain and immense blood loss, the victims had to sit and wait until a medical team finally approached them, depicting just how inappropriate the behavior of the hospital staff members towards them was. Manoj, who was ruthlessly beaten and whose nail was pulled out by the police, said:

We tolerated their behaviour because we were anyway in a bad situation and the entire system is bad. But this system needs to improve. The ministers just want to win the elections and don’t really care about anything else. They do not focus on the issues which require attention. Nobody cares about what happens inside the hospital. (M. Tamanche, personal communication, October 1, 2018)

The doctors’ disregard towards the victims was so blatant that Atul did not seek any further of medical treatment from them. He says:

We got our check-up and x-ray done and the doctors told me that I needed an operation and I should get admitted. They were not even giving us proper care and attention during our medical check-up. How could I possibly get my operation done from there? So, I refused. I told them I would get my operation done from a private hospital. I will incur the expenses (A. Gagdekar, personal communication, October 1, 2018).

Moreover, the lack of attention provided by the hospital was such that, despite the horrific conditions the victims were in, they had to find their way to the appropriate department themselves. Kushal tells us, “We had to constantly run around, alone, taking our own case papers, doing our own x-rays, and treating ourselves”(K. Tamanche, personal communication, October 1, 2018). The police had total control over the documentation and the medical forms, and not the victims.

During the medical examination, the doctors asked the victims why they had hit the police. Atish defensively said:

The police took the documents related to our case and brought us to the medical officers. When they took us there, the medical officers asked what happened and why had we beaten the police officers up. I retorted saying that the police officers had hit me, and not the other way round (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 2, 2018).

While performing a checkup, one would normally expect the doctors to conduct a thorough and accurate examination in order to provide relief to the suffering patients. However, in the case of Chharas, the doctors made the victims strip naked in a room so dimly lit that the injuries were barely visible, making any possible examination of their wounds extremely difficult. Moreover, the x-rays of the victims were conducted with inadequately equipment. Kushal said:

At first, the main x-ray office was closed. When we went to the other one, it took a long time, and they threw it at us with no respect. Then, we went to the upper floor to give the x-ray. After walking around the hospital for nearly half an hour (K. Tamanche, personal communication, October 1, 2018).

The victims were forced into positions of humiliation and vulnerability: “We were made to stand naked in the presence of women. I was forced to remove my clothes. I was extremely frustrated, but could not do anything about it” (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 2, 2018). While the victims were in severe pain, they were being thrown around from one medical examination to the next without it translating to any

worthwhile treatment. To make things worse, the ward doctors did not appear to be medical professionals and lacked proficiency in the field, having much less awareness of the appropriate way to interact with the victims. Atish tells us:

The thing is that I do not know how educated the doctors who work at the Civil hospital are. There is a basic etiquette that doctors must follow in communicating with the patients, irrespective of whether or not they are involved in criminal activities. If a patient is in pain, you are supposed to be treating her. You cannot just ask the patients to get naked and observe where they have been hurt when they require immediate treatment. The doctors were reckless even while examining the injuries of the victims, breaching all human rights that the people are entitled to. (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 2, 2018)

After their check-up and temporary treatment, in which some victims were given stitches while others were found to have fractures, they were taken to the Magistrate's house for examination. Their family and friends, along with the media, waiting to cover the episode, were already present there.

The victims had to individually present themselves in front of the judge such that their statements could be heard and recorded, and then another full body check-up was done to properly examine their injuries. Female judges were brought in to examine the female victims. Since the police officers had previously refused to file a complaint at the station, the victims filed one via the court. The law, however, denies the judge the power to grant bail, so the victims were taken to the Central jail through judicial custody.

4.5 To The Central Jail

As soon as the victims reached the Central jail, the police took away their personal belongings for verification, and organized them into pairs. Mehul Bajrange, an auto driver, says, "First, we had a body check-up. Our clothes were taken off and we were made to sit in the open for 3 hours" (M. Bajrange, personal communication, October 2, 2018). Despite the availability of a body scanner, the police made the victims take off their clothes and kneel down naked for around 10 minutes, after which they were taken to the "after barrack" (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October, 2, 2018). Around 40 prisoners were already there, and the arrival of the 29 victims increased the shortage of space. During their time in jail, the police beat the victims up if they didn't pay heed to what the police officers were saying. They had to sleep on the floor, and the meals were inedible; "Food was very bad. Even dogs would not be able to eat that food. Our situation

was very bad”, Mehul said. (M. Bajrange, personal communication, October 2, 2018). Over the 11 days that they were in jail, they survived on the food their family members brought them.

In addition to the victims’ injuries that were not given immediate attention, the authorities in the Central Jail also failed to take into account the serious health conditions of the victims, that could deteriorate, if neglected. Anita, one of two women who were arrested, was given her medicines only after 3 days:

They gave them [medicines] to me after three days. I complained to the policemen that had come saying “I am in a lot of pain, can you at least give me my medicines”. They said, “we will give you medicines, you don’t have to tell us what to do.” (A. Tamanche, personal communication, October 2, 2018)

Atul, who is diabetic and could have ended up in a serious medical condition without his medicines, said,

“They didn’t even give me my medicines for diabetes. They gave the tablets to me after four days when I am supposed to take them regularly.” (A. Gagdekar, personal communication, October, 1, 2018).

There were thus, no mechanisms in place to ensure that the health of the victims were well maintained in jail.

Kushal said, “We had told them we were advocates, so some respect should have been present, but they acted like we were criminals” (K. Tamanche, personal communication, October 1, 2018). Most of the victims were in jail for the first time, and felt trapped in the fixed routine that they were compelled to follow. Siddharth and Atul claimed that they were frequently engulfed by suicidal thoughts: “We felt like committing suicide” (S. Batunge, personal communication, October 1, 2018), “I felt like hanging myself. I just wanted to die. I did not want a life like that” (A. Gagdekar, personal communication, October 1, 2018).

The police kept the 29 victims in the same barrack for three to four days and then separated them. Many felt as if their only solace was taken away with the removal of this support system and the victim’s willpower weakened, especially in the case of the younger ones. . Nitesh says, “While we were together, we were relatively strong but upon being separated, we cried a lot” (N. Minekar, personal communication, October 1, 2018). Mehul tells us that they “just could not get their mind off their families”, but because of the severity of the charges they were under, they were not allowed to make phone calls, which intensified feelings of agitation and isolation (M. Bajrange, personal

communication, October 2, 2018). The victims were booked under charges that called for long imprisonment sentences and harsh punishment, and so they felt that a release would be unlikely. Atish told us, “We were being scared inside jail that we would have to stay here forever and that we would not get bailed since we had committed a huge crime and loot” (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October, 2, 2018). Atul and Hitu also spoke about their fear, “The Sections we’ve been accused under would have caused us to stay in jail for at least 3 months. We’ve been accused of crimes we haven’t committed. Each person has been accused under around 12 Sections, for which we do not even know the punishment” (A. Gagdekar, personal communication, October, 1, 2018), “When there were 2 days left for us to be released, we all started worrying and crying thinking that we might not be released today or tomorrow. We had been told that we would be released in 6 days, but it had been 9 days and we were receiving messages from outside that we might not be released for 4 or 5 years. We cried and my elder brother said that he would commit suicide and die if they don’t release him in 2 days” (H. Tamanche, personal communication, October 2, 2018).

In jail, the police weren’t the only ones who harassed the victims. In fact, they were rarely present. Instead, the prisoners who had been sentenced to life predominantly ran the jail, and they tried to establish their authority over the 26th July victims since they were new. They treated the victims with hostility, and made them sweep the floor and clean toilets. Vikas mentions that whenever they asked for buckets to shower with, the other prisoners yelled at them: “People used to talk rudely to us even upon asking for a bucket” (V. Malkiya, personal communication, October 1, 2018). Meanwhile, the police shifted Atish to a barrack consisting of murderers, where they forced him to sleep right next to the toilets. From his time there, he realised that the stigma attached to Chharas was entrenched even in the prisoners, who refused to believe that the Chhara victims were innocent. They were referred to as “Chharanagar *Kaandwale*,” (committees of misdeed) and were thus naturally assumed to have bashed the police (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 2, 2018).

As the victims suffered through their individual experiences of injustice and stigmatization while they were in jail, their feeling of having been wronged grew in intensity by the day. Anita, with infuriation, said:

We had never committed a crime in our lives: we don’t brew liquor, nor do any other kind of criminal activity. We had never thought that we would be put in jail. But after going to jail, I kept feeling that the people who stay in jail, how do they

do it? Even animals are treated well, but prisoners are not. We were under a lot of emotional stress, we would think of home, we wanted to cry, we didn't know what would happen. We had never even imagined we would be in jail- this was the first time in many generations, that my family had to visit jail. It wasn't even our fault. They broke our cars, lodged a false case against us, and then imprisoned us (A. Tamanche, personal communication, October 1, 2018).

Thus, the incident of 26th July emerged as an extreme case of violence, after which Chharas gauged even more clearly, the actual implications of what their identity could be reduced to in front of the State. While the victims were suffering through the ordeals in jail, their fellow Chharas came out in solidarity with them, to oppose the brutality they were made to endure. In response to the 500 police officers that stormed Chharanagar that night, 4000 Chharas peacefully marched to the police station.

4.6 Community Responses



Figure 11. The *Besna* rally conducted on 27th July

Source: Abhishek Indrekar - Budhan Theatre member, 2018-19

4.6 Community Responses To 26th July

Date (2018)	Event
28th July	Jignesh Mevani (Member of Gujarat Legislative Assembly) visited Chharanagar
29th July	Rally conducted as a <i>besna</i> (funeral) for Law and Order
30th July	Protest by Chharanagar lawyers at Metropolitan Court
1st August	Chharanagar children protest at Kubernagar Police <i>Chowki</i>
7th August	Cultural event in Chharanagar in solidarity - also attended by Jignesh Mevani and the victims of the brutality
8th August	Public discussion with theatre artists and activists in Delhi - conducted by Constitution Club of India (attended by Dakxin and Atish - Budhan Theatre Leaders)

Table 1: Timeline of the community responses to the 26th July incident

The obnoxious behaviour of the police on 26th July led to a non-violent retaliation from members of the Chhara community. They did this by organising multiple rallies and protests over the next few days, listed in Table 1. On 27th of July, Dakxin publicly called on Jignesh Mevani- a Dalit MLA, and an old friend of the Budhan Theatre leaders who is currently in the spotlight all over the country as a strong opposition leader- to come and support the Chhara community in their hour of need. Jignesh arrived in Chharanagar the very next day, extended full advocacy to the community, and discussed the steps that were going to be taken to deal with the situation in the future. This showcased the solidarity that exists between the DNT community and the Dalit community, while also portraying a relationship of interdependence between the two communities.

Among the chain of protests organised was a student rally, a ‘funeral for law and order’, and a protest by the Chharanagar lawyers. For the student rally, the children of Chharanagar showed up in their uniforms to the Kubernagar police *chowki* and presented the police with flowers. The lawyers of Chharanagar conducted a protest at their workplace, the Metropolitan Court, against the blatant violation of the law that occurred

on the night of 26th July. However, the principal rally was conducted by the community leaders and Budhan theatre members, immediately after the incident, on 29th July (invitation post shown in Figure 12). As a *besna* (funeral) for law and order, more than 4000 people, dressed in white, gathered, performed *marshi* (a ritual performed at funerals) and silently marched through the streets, from Chharanagar to the Sardarnagar police station. Many carried signs with slogans such as, “I am a ‘Chhara,’ I am ‘artist,’ ‘Not a criminal.’” At the end, participants went up to the police, gave them roses and recited, “You give us lathi, we’ll give you roses” (Laul, 2018). The Chhara community also organized a cultural programme, which Jignesh and the victims of 26th July attended. Jignesh publicly showed his support for the Chhara community and was seen hugging and talking to each of the victims. The Constitution Club of India, conducted a public discussion with theatre artists and activists in Delhi the next day, and Dakxin and Atish attended it.

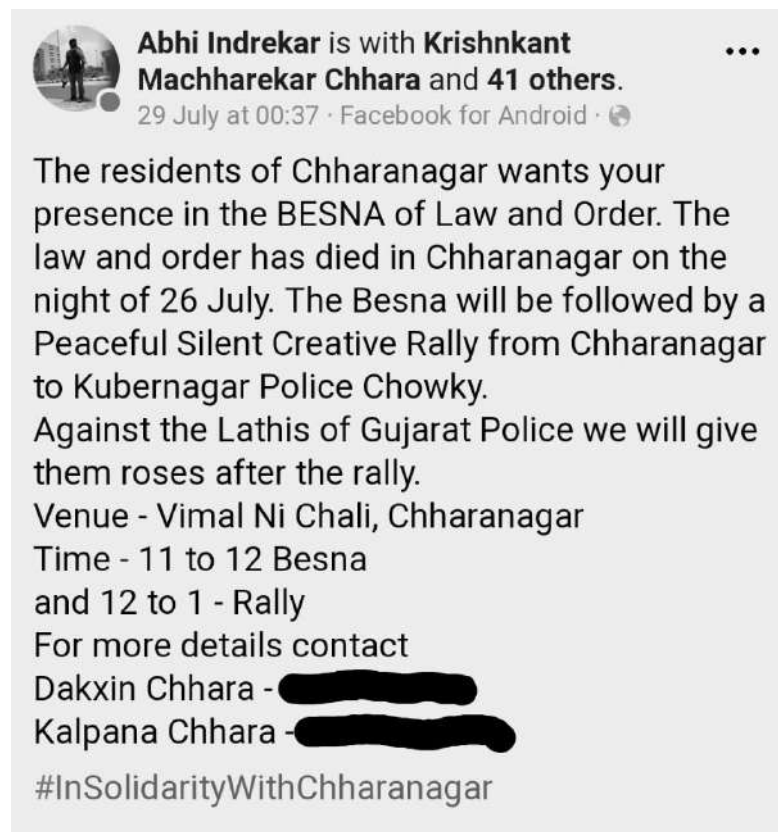


Figure 12. Abhishek Indrekar’s Facebook Post
(Indrekar, Abhishek, 2018)

The community's response to the events of 26th July, specifically the unlawful and violent behaviour of police that night, was immediate and well thought out. None of the protests showed even a hint of violence or aggression, and were planned in such a way that they accurately portrayed the innocence of Chharas in the atrocities committed against them. This was displayed through actions like Chharas giving flowers to the very people who had abused them.

The victims all responded positively when asked about the protests and rallies. They believed that these responses had been of great benefit to them as well as the community as a whole: "They did all that for the benefit of our community" (A. Gagdekar, personal communication, October 1, 2018). "We gained a lot from it, because we were jailed without doing any crime. The people who jailed us should also be aware" (S. Bhogekar, personal communication, October 1, 2018).

Another important point to note was the constant, and often live documentation of each and every event that occurred. Right from the night of 26th July till the cultural event that took place on August 7, Abhishek Indrekar and Kushal Batunge, who are filmmakers and Budhan Theatre members, among others, continuously documented the events and immediately shared them on social media platforms. To convey their side of the discussion and build up support from outside the Chhara community, community leaders such as Dakxin, Roxy and Kalpana, used their resources and contacts to get in touch with the media and activists. They also motivated people to file complaints against the police and even contacted the secretary of the Chief Minister of Gujarat to get his support or, if nothing else, to have a conversation with him.

Two short films were made on this incident by filmmakers from the Chhara community. Dakxin's son, Shubham Bajrange's film is about the above mentioned protests conducted by Chharas, while Abhishek's film is mainly based on the events of 26th July and the arrests of activists in India, but also focuses on Atish's experience and perspective as an activist himself.

4.7 Media And External Support

The unforeseeable turn of events on the night of 26th July undoubtedly bred feelings of fright, desecration, disgust and shock among the victims and their family

members, but the unfaltering amount of support received during and after the incident was something Chharanagar has never witnessed or experienced in years. During the time spent in jail, the 29 victims were informed about what was happening in the community at that time, via newspapers, and the few times that they were allowed to meet their family members. The TV in the police station also acted as a medium through which the victims were able to witness the large-scale rally conducted as a means of protest by their community members (A. Tamanche, personal communication, October 1, 2018). According to two of the victims, Kushal Tamanche and Pravin Indrekar, the media played a tremendous role in portraying the actualities of the incident. At first, however, influential statements by the police had the media publish negative news about the Chhara community. It was only after visiting Chharanagar and hearing the testimonies of community members about the false news spread by the inspectors that the media began reporting authentic information. Pravin states that the media perfectly brought out the innocence of the imprisoned community members, and Chharanagar “will forever be grateful” to them (P. Indrekar, personal communication, October 2, 2018). He also claims that prior to this incident, the community had “only been portrayed through one perspective in the headlines: Chharanagar and bootlegging” (P. Indrekar, personal communication, October 2, 2018). Due to the great work done by the media, a positive side to Chharanagar has been revealed, making people realise that its inhabitants have much more to them than just the tag of “bootleggers” or “born criminals” and that they deserve to be treated fairly.

The greatest assets of the community, as expressed by most, if not all, of the victims we interviewed, are its leaders and also vital members of Budhan Theatre, Dakxin Bajrange and Roxy Gagdekar. They were the main organisers of the protest held by all the Budhan Theatre actors, in which the local community members participated. During our conversation with Pravin, he added that he was very impressed with the manner in which information about Dakxin and the entire group of Budhan Theatre, concerning the protest, was scripted in the newspaper *Ahmedabad Mirror*:

For 5 consecutive days we were reading three-four newspapers daily. So when Dakxin and the entire group of Budhan Theatre carried out the protest, there was a lot written about it in the media, especially in The Mirror which I had read, and it was very well written. Dimple Ma'am [a reporter] had herself come to do the coverage. (P. Indrekar, personal communication, October 2, 2018)

The very fact that all the inhabitants of Chharanagar came together and stood up for the procurement of justice for their people indicated that no matter how tough a situation arose, solidarity and moral support would always be their strongest defence mechanism.

Another victim, Hitu Tamanche , emphasizes that nothing would have been possible without the support of the lawyers “who shut down the courts...since the police was [sic] not willing to release them” (H. Tamanche, personal communication, October 2, 2018). Had the members not supported the victims by means of the rally and the court closure, the former would have to face “allegations worth 5 to 10 years of sentence”, which would thus render their release from jail almost impossible (H. Tamanche, personal communication, October 2, 2018). The police had no idea that the 29 victims were being backed by “judges, lawyers, press members, media members, Dakxin Chhara, journalists, people from the TV industry, ministers”, all of whom held meetings and had the protest organised (H. Tamanche, personal communication, October 2, 2018).

Another vital political leader who was involved in helping the victims get released from jail was Jignesh Mevani, the respect for whom was apparent during our interviews with the victims. While a minority of them had no clue of his identity, due to the isolation from the outside world while in jail, a majority of them did convey their gratefulness towards him. They had learnt from their family members, the media, and the community at large, that he was the one providing the members with constant reassurance and ensuring that there was unity within the community. According to Aakash¹¹, a victim, Jignesh Mevani was the only one who stood by their side at all times, and he even came to meet the victims the day after they were released, where he affirmed that he would work in close association with the victims and Chharanagar as a whole in order to address any problems that arose. The victim also voiced out that other political leaders had labeled Chharas “as dirt and did not interfere in the matter” (Aakash, personal communication, October 1, 2018). Sonu, a Budhan Theatre member, who spoke up during our interview with one of the victims, Abhishek Dasarath Bhogekar, mentions that the corporate of the area, who had won the elections, did not bother paying the victims a visit, but rather horribly insulted them. No other BJP official rendered them a visit, which does demonstrate the recklessness of the government officials regarding the severity of such an incident:

¹¹ Name changed on request

Dakxin sir and Roxy sir were here. They checked what was happening and planned the protest. They had called Jignesh Mevani. Other than that, no BJP official came. The corporate of our area horribly insulted us. A Congress politician also came, even though he had lost Sonu (A. Bhogekar, personal communication, October 1, 2018).

4.8 Aftermath And Ongoing Struggle

The traumatic night of 26th July, followed by the 10 arduous days the 29 victims spent in jail, led to an upsurge of emotions and questions in their minds after they were released. Most of the victims felt the burning need to rebel against the injustice perpetrated by the police, by filing an FIR against them. They felt frustrated at the authorities for making them go through such atrocities and unbearable pain without valid reason. Along with this frustration arose feelings of resilience and bravery within the victims, who expressed the pressing need to respond to and assert the injustice of the incident, while holding the police accountable for their unlawful actions. Atul Gagdekar states, “I will never be able to forget the 10-12 days I spent in jail. We just want to get them punished. We need to send them to jail for at least 10 hours” (A. Gagdekar, personal communication, October 1, 2018). Another of the victims, Hitu Tamanche, expresses his wrath towards the police, “we feel frustrated whenever we see the police, especially the ones who had beaten us up, and we feel like hitting them” (H. Tamanche, personal communication, October 2, 2018). However, the fear that the police officers will once again bring a group of colleagues with them and beat him up often crops up in his mind and prevents him from taking such action.

The amount of distress that the victims had to go through during those 10 days developed a sense of fearlessness within some of the victims since they believed to have already experienced the worst days of their life in jail, and they would no longer fear imprisonment since they had already seen it all. Aakash blatantly states that:

All the fear I had of the police is gone after living in jail. I feel like I have become stronger and I know for a fact that my community is always there for me no matter what. People over here say that once a person has visited jail, he will no longer fear going to jail and neither will he fear the police. (Aakash, personal communication, October 1, 2018)

When asked if he was scared of the police, Atul Gagdekar retorted by saying that there was no need for Chharas to be scared of them since the victims had done nothing

wrong. He believes that it is absolutely necessary for him to take a stand against the police:

We do not want our kids to go through the same situation. If we don't do anything, the police will feel that we don't fight back. We accept all the atrocities they commit on us, but we need to show them that we can also do something (A. Gagdekar, personal communication, October 1, 2018).

Amongst those who were resilient enough to express their views about the police was Manoj Tamanche, who was certain of the fact that the police would never dare to hurt them again: "Nobody dares to hurt us. We are lawyers and can defend ourselves. We just do not want this kind of incident to happen ever again with anyone. The police needs to amend their behaviour" (M. Tamanche, personal communication, October 1, 2018).

Another victim, Nitesh, who had always dreamt of becoming a police officer and wished the same for his kids, is now overwhelmed by an amalgamation of anger and fear and has altered his views: "First of all, I really wanted to become a police officer and I also wanted my kids to become police officers. After seeing their behaviour, I have decided to never let my kids become police officers" (N. Minekar, personal communication, October 1, 2018).

While most of the victims expressed their anger towards the inspectors, Nilesh Rathod, on the other hand, felt neutral about the whole situation and preferred staying in the background since he did not believe in breeding enmity against the police. He believed that filing a case against them was a strong enough action on his part and that he would now follow the steps of his community, "Whatever it is, we will follow what our society does" (N. Rathod, personal communication, October 1, 2018).

In certain cases, the impact of the incident has been so severe that some victims remain locked in their houses, even when 2 months have elapsed since the ordeal. One of them, Siddharth Bajrange, states:

We still feel scared that it might happen again. I stay at home for safety. I did not get out of the house for 15 days. We fear that even if the police will see us on the streets, they will catch us and take us away. It is better to get back from work and stay at home. We fear the police, they have the power (S. Batunge, personal communication, October 1, 2018).

In spite of everything that has happened, Pravin Indrekar places immense amount of trust in the law. He shows his concern regarding the police's behaviour towards the

next generation, but is firm on the fact that the community members will never compromise with the police:

Look, they [the police] will hold a bias against us, but we trust the law. If they know the rules, we are educated as well, we know the rules as well. It is said that the law belongs to no one. If they are officers, we are not second-class citizens either. We are the same citizens. Citizenship knows no class in India. The law is the same for them as well as for us. We also have many educated children and lawyers, so let us see what happens next. We have made it a point to never compromise with them. These incidents usually keep happening, but this time people felt that if such a horrible thing can happen with innocent people, what will happen with their children in the future. The new generation's kids are firm on the fact that they are not going to be engaging in illicit activities, so why would they arrest them? After this incident, even the new generation is scared (P. Indrekar, personal communication, October 2, 2018).

Being put in jail for 10 days without any prior notice or possible hope of being released certainly did affect the work of many of the victims, who agreed to share their experiences and thoughts with us during our interviews with them. Sunny Bhogekar, an auto-rickshaw driver, expressed that the police prevented him from doing his business for approximately a month after the incident: "We were told to wait 10-15 days before resuming work. Police did not let us do our business, did not let me drive my auto-rickshaw. My work was stopped for a month" (S. Bhogekar, October 1, 2018). The trauma of losing his job was huge for Sunny Tamanche, who shared:

I did not have my phone for all those days. I was very scared that I would be taken out of my job and lose my entire salary. When people came to visit me in jail, I told them to ask my wife to inform my boss about what had happened. When I went back to work the next day, they gave me a resignation and I never cried as much as I did that day when I heard that. My dad called at that time and asked if everything was okay. I was so tensed that I lied to him and told him that my job was all well. So I'm supposed to deliver medicine orders to pharmacies and companies but since I wasn't available, work did not happen and I was removed. They gave me 15-20 days to look for a new job but no place was offering me a pay like the job I was taken out of. So I'm applying to new jobs now (S. Tamanche, personal communication, October 1, 2018).

Nitesh, on the other hand, did not experience any trouble regarding his job, but did indeed face huge monetary losses due to the damage to his property during the incident, “Not really, because it [his job] was anyway off-season. But I incurred a lot of losses; my car, lighting board which was worth Rupees 50000, my bike and Bolero” (N. Minekar, personal communication, October 1, 2018).

While some victims faced rejection at the workplace, a few of them did not go through any problems due to the supportive stance of their employers who believed that they were not at fault. Aakash claims that, “Not really. My work resumed. They [his employers] accepted me and I rejoined the next day. They also knew that I was not at fault, so they did not have an option to ask me to leave” (Aakash, personal communication, October 1, 2018).

The entire episode of 26th July has its aftermath rooted in the lives of not only the victims, but also their families and the entire Chhara community. Their most significant fight, now, is to attain justice, using non-violence as a means to appeal to their oppressors - the police. While the police has already attempted their luck by inciting victims to withdraw their cases in return for being set free of the legal hassle, the victims refused to accept any such offer because their goal as a community is justice (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 2, 2018). The victims meet regularly as a group with Dakxin and other leaders to synthesize their plan of action which includes preparing to appeal in court for their hearings, collecting evidence against the police such as CCTV footage from the night of the riot, using Budhan Theatre as a medium of drawing attention to the unjust nature of their situation, and even attaining media’s support. The unity of the community and their drive for justice has somewhat quietened the police, whereby they maintain a distance and are reluctant when it comes to interacting closely with the community. They have drastically reduced their entry into Chharanagar and even if they do enter, the commotion caused by the raids is not as harsh as it earlier used to be. They have remained silent so far out of fear of the repercussions they will have to face for the injustice they have inflicted. As for the lives of the victims, most of them have been deeply impacted by the incident, either in terms of lasting physical damage to their bodies or vandalization of their property and careers. Those who earlier placed trust in the police, now seem to have lost most, if not all, of their faith in them. Throughout the community there is a sense of solidarity in facing the future together, and determination to make sure nothing like this ever happens again. Possibly, this has been the only positive outcome of

the 26th July incident. Many of the victims are certain about the fact that this sense of camaraderie will continue to exist, and may even grow, in the future.

We concluded our interviews by asking the victims if they had anything in particular to add about the incident or any particular message they wished to pass on to the police and following are a few of their responses.

“ *Victims' messages* ”

I would tell them [the police] that they can arrest those who are guilty but they cannot do this to innocent people. Crime is not in our blood (A. Gagdekar, personal communication, October 1, 2018).

“The Chhara community is not criminal. Everybody works hard to earn a living” (M. Bajrange, personal communication, October 2, 2018).

I want to pass on this message to Gujarat’s CM and other high-ranked officials that if any such incident happens, they need to carry out a complete investigation before coming to any sort of decision. They did a lathi charge here and left this place at around 5 or 6 a.m and, went back home and slept. They were very proud of the job they had performed... They did not know that CCTV cameras are present in most of the houses. They had no idea. If we did not have these cameras, we would not have been able to prove anything in the court...The law does not permit police officials to misuse the power they possess... They’ve been given the power to maintain law and order but they should stay in their limits. (M. Tamanche, personal communication, October 1, 2018)

“They [the police] are there to support us and keep us from danger. But they shouldn’t be the danger for us” (S. Tamaiche, personal communication, October 2, 2018).

“I am old, what legacy will this incident leave behind for our children? How will this affect my daughter’s marriage?” (A. Tamanche, personal communication, October 1, 2018).

“We used to be goons but now we’ve changed ourselves and these people [the police] are now forcing us to go back to where we came from” (A. Gagdekar, personal communication, October 1, 2018).

I would like to say this: In incidents like these, the people who are guilty are never punished. They get away scot free. This shouldn’t happen. The people who do this to the innocent - the police department or the civil hospitals that give them support, or the jails - all of them should be punished, not just the police, because all of them are working in unity and are complicit. I’ve also noticed that the police tend to be very scared, but they are given moral support from the politicians. So they do anything they want. They ruined the careers of my entire family. I also want to talk about Human Rights. We have no Human Rights Court here. (K. Tamanche, personal communication, October 1, 2018)

They [the police] just accused us of stealing their chain, but no one stole anything, no one pelted them with stones. The police have now been caught in trap. Whatever case is being lodged, only their crimes are evident. You can’t see our faults at all. If we had done anything wrong, it would have been on some record, right? But it’s nowhere. We would have been caught on camera, right? But it’s nowhere. They have accused us wrongly of stealing the chain and pelting them with stones. (A. Tamanche, personal communication, October 1, 2018)

In our community, if someone tries to intervene in a fight to try to solve the matter, then his/her name also gets reported to the police station. This has happened to me too. The police does not carry out any investigation. If your name has been given by someone, they will just arrest you. (A. Gagdekar, personal communication, October 1, 2018)

No community is free from guilt, not one. No Chhara will ever commit murders, rapes, subversion, take a bank loan, cheat the bank, or cheat another individual...So many other communities are involved in liquor business, english liquor. It often comes out in the newspapers: such and such people have been caught in other communities. But only Chharanagar is targeted. Also, all the kids belonging to the generation after mine, are all studying in English-medium schools. There are some who are in America, London, gone to study medicine. There are renowned singers, for example,

Vishwanath Batunge, who has also participated in Sa Re Ga Ma Pa contest and has visited and performed in around 25-30 countries. So, people never see the good side of the community...Who has power at the present date? Gujarat Government. All these trucks carrying English liquor, where are they coming from? They are coming from the border right?...Why don't they stop it? If they stop it, where will the liquor come from? They do not stop it and why? Because they want money... If you really want to put an end to this liquor business, why don't you stop it from there? People from your Government, the liquor which is being sold in Rajasthan, why is it coming here, despite the fact that

Gujarat has been declared as a dry state? How is it even dry? And why only Chharanagar?...The Chharas are brewing liquor as a means of making ends meet but there are others who are involved in such businesses because they want to become millionaires, billionaires. But nobody pays attention to them...The local in-charges cannot differentiate between the good and the bad. They need to understand who is good and who isn't. Don't they have a list? A list with the names of all those who are involved in bootlegging? They know which houses sell liquor and which don't, right? And what they did on the 26th of July was extremely bad, really, really bad. Even terrorist attacks cannot be done in this way. (M. Tamanche, personal communication, October 1, 2018)

So now, it seems like it is prescribed in our destiny that if we are Chharas and this stigma is prevalent, we will have to go to jail at some point or the other, even if we are some big officer or anything else. The police will arrest you. They have a strong practice here. If they see that a boy is studying or doing something constructive, he becomes their center of attention, and they will find ways and means to trap him. They do not want us to succeed. It hurts them to see or even think about our progress.... If they are going to be handing over their earned money to the police, what will we do? I have claimed in front of the entire media that there are certain kinds of officers who used to hold a meeting with the bootleggers saying, "you have to pay me this much of money every week." (P. Indrekar, personal communication, October 2, 2018)

Conclusion



5. Conclusion

The title of this report is *Chharanagar in the Era of Budhan Theatre*. While violence and stigma were present in Chharanagar before the inception of Budhan Theatre, the community struggles against these forces even today, despite the work of the group. However, one cannot deny the impact made by the group not only on the community but also on other oppressed and marginalised communities across the country. Therefore, any study of Chharanagar cannot solely depend upon the story of Budhan Theatre. At the same time, no story of Chharanagar since 1998 can deny the presence, influence, and labour of Budhan Theatre and its leaders.

Our review of the existing literature on the Chhara community shows a glaring absence of women's narratives and scholarship investigating the lives of Chhara women. Accordingly, we went into the current project hoping to begin to address this gap. In the common imagination, Chharanagar is notorious for two activities: brewing liquor and Budhan Theatre. We therefore went on field asking how women participated in or were affected by either of these activities. Consistent with our assumptions before entering the field, we found that many women still participate in brewing liquor and fewer women participate in Budhan Theatre. We also realised that there would be a section of women who are directly involved in neither activity, however, we did not anticipate that it would be as large or diverse as it was.

After talking to women who brew liquor, it was found that almost all of them began brewing liquor primarily due to three reasons- brewing liquor as a result of isolation faced due to stigma, availability and commonness of brewing liquor, and it being a traditionally accepted domestic role for women. Due to the work they do, it is often seen that it becomes difficult for these women to seek dignity under other models of morality and respectability. One of these being Budhan Theatre through which many women seek dignity, confidence and conviction. In spite of this, their participation is limited by the societal expectations from them to get married. For women who neither participate in theatre nor brew liquor, this struggle for respectability in the community drives them into diverse professional and domestic spaces.

Each subgroup shows that, in Chharanagar, as in the rest of society, patriarchy works differently in women's lives and consistently intersects with other forms of privilege and oppression. This challenges the accepted notion that the women of

Chharanagar, like Chharanagar itself, can be looked at, understood, and acted upon as a singular, homogenized unit. Chharanagar and its women come with the same number of complexities as any other society. Our findings emphasize this heterogeneity and point to the ways in which this violent homogenization ingrained in the minds of the police, government officials, and the general public has caused and justified perpetual violence, since 1871 when the colonial government termed all DNTs as “born criminals”. The mass police violence of 26th July, 2018, as described in our final chapter, is yet further evidence of this homogenization in the minds of the oppressors still existing 20 years after Budhan Theatre’s inception and 66 years after the repeal of the Criminal Tribes Act.

Budhan Bolta Hai: “Building Bridges to the Mainstream”



6. Budhan Bolta Hai: “Building Bridges to the Mainstream”

6.1 Theatre And Empathy

On the very first day of the theatre workshop we climbed up a narrow flight of stairs to a large, open area, overlooking the main road of Chharanagar. This was Dakxin’s terrace: the place where Budhan Theatre rehearsed all its plays. We stood in a circle and did some warm up exercises and group activities, which included making animal sounds and pretending to laugh, cry, and be terrified. All of these are common theatre activities, to help with voice modulation and bodily movement, and wasn’t unlike any other practice session. But then, during our discussion, Atish said to us, “When four, five police officers were holding my hands and legs apart, swearing at me, and hitting me with rods, my mind was on the way they were moving around me, what they were saying to me, and how they were hitting me, so that I can play that role in our play” (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 1, 2018). This was the point where we realised that Budhan Theatre is more than just acting. It brings Chharanagar, its people, and its police to the onlooker. As Atish said, “Budhan Theatre is a bridge that connects to the mainstream” (Atish Indrekar, personal communication, October 1, 2018).

6.1.1 Theatre for the audience.

It was the third day of our theatre workshop, when Kalpana Gagdekar talked to us about improvisation in plays, under the dim light on Dakxin’s terrace. She says:

Whenever you are meant to play a real-life character, their behaviour, the way they talk, the way they interact with others around them, are your interpretations of the character. These interpretations come from memory, from what you know of that character (K. Gagdekar, personal communication, October 3, 2018).

Memory plays a vital role in Budhan Theatre’s purpose of representing their community. Kalpana switched between different types of *chaiwalas* and beggars and Krishnakant enacted different types of police officers they had seen in Chharanagar. One police officer walks into the scene casually, with a sarcastic attitude towards a liquor brewing woman (played by Kalpana), while another shouts at her, and threatens to hit her with a stick. At one point during the session, Kalpana, while explaining how to play such a character, abruptly turned into a police officer. She got up from her place and, with a raised voice and glaring eyes, came storming toward us. From our reactions it was clear

that Kalpana instigated fear with that character. On the night of 26th July hundreds from Chharanagar faced this character and would have experienced this fear in their real lives.

Being realistic in the context of Budhan Theatre, is not just about making the actions and emotions as close to real life. It is also about showing the truth about what happens to oppressed communities in India. Many stories portrayed in the plays are taken from real incidents. The actors playing the role of these individuals react physically and emotionally, in the way that the real individual would have done when the actual incident occurred. Dakxin said to us, “When you perform an issue, you have to absorb it, imbibe it. You have to get into the character. You have to be a killer - you have to kill yourself” (D. Bajrange, October 6, 2018). This kind of embodiment of an individual, brings out the true emotions in the play, through the actor.

A characteristic of Budhan Theatre, which many of its members told us, is that they have minimal prop use, no costumes, and no background setting, as seen in proscenium theatre . They wear the clothes that they normally wear. While portraying violence, the actors don’t just enact it. Instead, they are actually beaten up or attacked. For a privileged audience, reality is brought right in front of their eyes in a way which traditional theatre formats would not allow. The lack of performativity takes it out of the sphere of entertainment. It becomes clear to the audience that the pain that they see is a pain that is felt. It decentres their relationship with the performance, and instead lays emphasis on the experience of the communities facing this oppression. Thus, because of Budhan’s use of realistic tools, the audience is able to empathise with the oppressed community in a way that other forms of theatre don’t allow.

6.1.2 Theatre for the actor.

Many of the Budhan Theatre members talked about how every ten steps in Chharanagar will have a new story. We saw this while interviewing different people in Chharanagar. Even while talking about the night of 26th July, everyone we talked to had different stories about where they were and what they were doing. On Kalpana’s workshop on improvisation, we utilised this to perform the stories of the victims.

The next evening, Dakxin took a writing session for our workshop in the library, in which we were divided into three groups, and had to develop our own narratives. By the next morning, we had to prepare a play in our respective groups, and perform in front of Dakxin. He told us to write the narrative from whatever we had experienced in all those days in Chharanagar. This is essentially the way Budhan Theatre creates new plays.



Figure 13. Theatre Workshop - One of our plays being performed in the library

Source: Discover India Program, 2018-19

5th October was the day we had to put what we learned to the test. Our designated groups assembled early in the morning, to rehearse the skits we had created. At about 11 in the morning, we came together in the library to perform. All the three plays had different stories to tell, all of which were based on whatever we had seen and heard about in Chharanagar. There were performances which impacted many of us, including the performers, emotionally. Seeing tears in our group leader's eyes, while she played her part in the play, moved us all. That evening, while talking about directing a play, Dakxin explained to us the importance of this emotional impact:

Getting tears out of your audience's eyes is the work of the director and the actor. If you succeed in doing so, I am talking about this in at least an Indian context, then you are a winner. You have reached your audience's hearts. If you have reached your audience's hearts, you have started the process to change (D. Bajrange, personal communication, October 5, 2018).

Before going on field, when we were analysing the literature, we were aware of the issues faced by the people of Chharanagar. However, it was still research/academic content for us. It was when we had to show anger, pain, sorrow in our theatre workshop, that we understood why theatre is such a powerful way, by which the voice of the Chhara community can be raised. With these three performances of ours, we ended our theatre workshop.

On our last day at the Chharanagar library, our whole group sat on the floor, set up two cameras, and prepared to interview Dakxin Bajrange. For almost two hours, we sat and listened to what Dakxin had to say. He talked about various topics like his life, and what the work of Budhan Theatre means to him. When we asked Dakxin why he thought it was important for us to learn theatre, he told us that he believes that theatre must be taught in every school, and to every child. He believed that through this, people would be desensitised (D. Bajrange, personal communication, October 6, 2018). The workshop put all of us in a place where we could understand the feelings of people in Chharanagar. We were emotionally invested in learning about how Chharanagar can battle the atrocities that it faces. Because we had an emotional understanding about the situation, we all wanted to put more effort in our work regarding the topic.

We realised then, that at the core of Budhan Theatre's revolution is this empathy. Actors in traditional theatre are told to "get out of their heads" when on stage, and they are given the help of props and costumes to be able to do so. However, this does not change the fact that the actor remains protected when on stage. The fear, vulnerability, and the pain that they feel, is a facade - a mask that disappears as soon the curtain goes down. To them, the characters remain as characters to be performed. The reality of the situation is an experience they do not ever suffer. This is not to say that they do not have a relationship with their character at all, but they remain a fictional being separated from the real world, whose pain only exists as far as it can be viewed, but not felt. This is not the case for the actors of Budhan Theatre. Siddharth spoke of how the actor playing Ashok Roy would beat him with a *lathi* until it broke into pieces, making him profusely bleed (S. Garange, October 4, 2018). Later, Dakxin also told us that the actor playing the sickly and hungry *Bhoma* fasts for days before the final performance (D. Bajrange, October 6, 2018). In the moment that an actor is thrashed as their character, the pain that they feel becomes shared.

6.1.3 Conclusion.

Budhan Theatre has used its artform to share the feelings of DNT communities with the audience. It puts the audience right in front of the situation that members of DNT communities are battling, leading to a more impactful transfer of emotions. That is why the empathy created by Budhan Theatre plays a part in bringing about social awareness, not just in an academic context, but emotionally as well. Empathy, in the context of Budhan Theatre, has two sides. On one hand, there is the empathy of the actors in the play towards the individuals or community that they depict. On the other hand, empathy is shared by these actors with the audience of the play. Budhan Theatre generates a real understanding of the struggles of different communities by deeply empathising with them through theatre. That was why Dakxin was insistent about our doing the theatre workshop. Putting ourselves in the shoes of those who were oppressed, and bringing out their feelings through our performance, created a greater emotional understanding in us about the individuals in the Chhara community. Therefore, the importance of the “empathy” factor in spreading social awareness is to realise that they, too, are people. The atrocities they face take a physical, mental, and emotional toll on them. This came out as a major aim of Budhan Theatre, and we could realise this only when we got the chance to perform our skits under its members’ guidance.

6.2 Theatre and Resistance

The theatre workshop was undoubtedly the most unexpected and powerful means for understanding what defines Chharanagar and Budhan Theatre. From reciting poems, to singing various prose, all the people who were there with us—Dakxin, Atish, Kalpana, Krishnakant, Jayendra, Kushal, Abhishek, Siddharth, Sonu and many others—made us experience the life of a born artist in Chharanagar. An important prose in the philosophy of Budhan Theatre is the poem “Sabse Khatarnak”, by Paash. We started and ended our theatre workshop by reciting this poem on Dakxin's terrace. Dakxin and Atish did not just make us recite it, but truly feel it. At times, we were screaming the words out loud into the open air! At others, we were whispering it to one another while moving around. Dakxin ran towards us, his eyes gaping, with a pang of warning ringing in his voice. Atish prowled around us, like a predator, while saying the words. It was pure chaos, and it caused the poem to leave a long-lasting mark on us. We felt what the poem said and what it meant to them, with the highlighted words being, “*Sabse khatarnak hota hai, humare sapno ka mar jana*” (The most dangerous thing is the death of our dreams) (Paash, n.d.).

From the first time we met these born artists, we started learning more and more about what they stand for and their purpose of seeking dignity for their community, as well as for other such marginalised communities, through their artform. Like the poem *Sabse Khatarnak*, they are fighting to keep their dream alive. Roxy Gagdekar had said to us that the purpose of Budhan Theatre is for it to shut down:

We want a time when there will be no need to perform a play against the prejudice. We want a time when there will be no need to perform a play against police atrocities. When these police atrocities, discriminations, atrocities against Chharas, when all these things will stop, we will close down Budhan Theatre and then there will be no need of a library. (R. Gagdekar, personal communication, September 9, 2018)

In search of this time, Budhan Theatre has been relentlessly performing different stories around India. Its members are not afraid to show brutality, and ill-treatment, on the streets. They travel to different places around India to share the views of communities whose voices have not been heard. They do not hesitate from speaking out in public, considering that these plays raise questions against the police and even the government. They are very bleak about different topics in their plays—not just those about their community, but also other plays like *Girgit*, the adaptation of Anton Chekhov's short story, “The Chameleon”. With the knowledge that they have gained from their art of performance, Budhan Theatre has become the means of seeing DNT communities in a new light.

Faces of Budhan Theatre



“Through theatre we create a dialogue with system and society so that they get to know what kind of a life we are living”
- Dakxin Bajrange



“I got an identity in my life. This is Atish and he does plays. This is Atish, he lives in Chharanagar, but he is not involved in thieving or brewing liquor, he is involved in theatre. So, I received an identity”
- Atish Indrekar



“Before Budhan, the colleges here did not admit children from Chharanagar. Then when Budhan was established in '98, the education increased, Chharanagar developed. Then, after '98, the same colleges that had refused to admit us, started inviting our senior actors, to teach as theatre practitioners”
- Krishnakant Machharekar



“We created a bridge to connect us to the mainstream, using theatre as a medium, to reach people's minds, to change the way people thought about us”
- Kalpana Gagdekar



“BT is taking you to places where struggle is taking place, where people are struggling, so that is how Budhan is helping you”

- Kushal Batunge



“When we work in BT we don't receive any money. We have to work on our own as well, but inside us we have a passion to work for the community. We've lived our life, but we're concerned with the life that the upcoming generation will live. We're afraid that they will have to live a life of oppression”

- Jayendra Chhara



“It has been a challenge for filmmakers to be full time filmmakers, and to come from a tribe called Chhara, being a Chhara”

- Abhishek Indrekar



“For me Budhan is a means to make people's issues reach people. If you can't make your issues heard by the people, you come to us, and we will help you”

- Snehal Chhara



“According to me Budhan is a place that teaches people to fight, fights the fear that is present in everyone, and teaches us how to get rid of that fear through performance. Our goal is to destroy the perception people view us with. We will fight until that happens”

- Siddharth Garange

7. References

- Anandan, S. (2018, April 14). Chhara theatre activists fight social stigma, censorship. Retrieved from <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/kerala/chhara-theatre-activists-fight-social-stigma-censorship/article23535257.ece>
- Bajrange, D. (2010). *Liberation Drama: The history, philosophy and practice of the Budhan Theatre in India* (Unpublished doctoral dissertation). University of Leeds.
- Bhagwat, H. (2016). *Politics of Gender: Women and Theatre*. Solapur: Laxmi Book Publication.
- Bhan, R. (2009, July 14). Women bootleggers in Gandhi's land. NDTV. Retrieved from <https://www.ndtv.com/india-news/women-bootleggers-in-gandhis-land-397887>
- Bhatia, N. (2004). *Acts of Authority, Acts of Resistance: Theater and Politics in Colonial and Postcolonial India*. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/mdp.39015061324128>
- Bokil, M. (2002). De-Notified and Nomadic Tribes: A Perspective. *Economic and Political Weekly*, 37(2), 148-154. Retrieved from <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4411599>
- Bokil, M., & Raghavan, V. (2016). The Case of De-Notified Tribes in India. In *Women and Children as Victims and Offenders* (Vol. 1, pp. 755-790). Springer, Cham. doi: https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-08398-8_27
- Burman, J. J. R. (2010). *Ethnography of a denotified tribe: The Laman Banjara*. New Delhi: Mittal Publications.
- Chharanagar, Kuber Nagar, Ahmedabad, Gujarat [Map]. (2018). In *Google Maps*. Retrieved from <https://www.google.com/maps/place/Chharanagar,+Kuber+Nagar,+Ahmedabad,+Gujarat>
- Crenshaw, K. W. (n.d.). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence Against Women of Color [PDF]. Retrieved from <https://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/mapping-margins.pdf>
- Da Costa, D. (2016). The Good Women of Chharanagar. In *Politicizing Creative Economy: Activism and a Hunger Called Theater*. Champaign, IL: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.
- Delhi High Court. (n.d.). *Chapter 23: Habitual Offenders* [PDF]. Retrieved from http://delhihighcourt.nic.in/writereaddata/upload/CourtRules/CourtRuleFile_ZS0TN8C4.PDF

- Director, Developing Castes Welfare. (2018, November 20). List of O.B.C. Communities meant for Central Government reservation. Retrieved November 22, 2018, from <https://sje.gujarat.gov.in/ddcw/showpage.aspx?contentid=1738&lang=english>
- Friedman, P. K. (2011). From Thugs to Victims: Dakxin Bajrange Chhara's Cinema of Justice. *Visual Anthropology*, 24(4), 364-383.
doi:10.1080/08949468.2011.583571
- Gandee, S. (2016, August 30). Why India's persecuted tribes are marking their alternative independence day. Retrieved July 4, 2018, from <https://theconversation.com/why-indias-persecuted-tribes-are-marking-their-alternative-independence-day-63465>
- Given, L. M. (2008). *The SAGE encyclopedia of qualitative research methods* (Vols. 1-0). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc. doi: 10.4135/9781412963909
- Heredia, R. C. (2007, March). Denotified and Nomadic Tribes: The Challenge of Free and Equal Citizenship. Retrieved July 15, 2018, from http://www.unipune.ac.in/snc/cssh/HistorySociology/A DOCUMENTS ON HISTORY OF SOCIOLOGY IN INDIA/A 7 Documents on Department of Sociology _ University of Pune/A 7 17.pdf
- India Dramatic Performances Act, 1876. (n.d.). Retrieved from <http://www.wipo.int/wipolex/en/details.jsp?id=15817>
- India Relief and Education Fund (IREF). (2007, March 9). Denotified & Nomadic Tribes Rights Action Group. Retrieved July 4, 2018, from <http://iref.homestead.com/dntrag.htm>
- Indrekar, A. [Abhishek]. (2018, July 29). The residents of Chharanagar wants [sic] your presence in the BESNA of Law and Order. The law and order has died in Chharanagar on the night of 26 July. The Besna will be followed by a Silent Creative Rally from [Facebook status update]. Retrieved from https://m.facebook.com/story.php?story_fbid=10204294075987445&id=1695101826
- Johnston, C., & Bajrange, D. (2013). Street Theatre as Democratic Politics in Ahmedabad. *Antipode*, 46(2), 455-476. doi:10.1111/anti.12053
- Katakam, A. (2009, August). Chharas and their breweries. *Frontline*, 26(16). Retrieved from <https://www.frontline.in/static/html/fl2616/stories/20090814261602600.htm>
- Laul, R. (2018, August 1). 150 years of solitude — and a funeral in Gujarat to end it. *The Quint*. Retrieved from <https://www.thequint.com/news/india/gujarat-chhara-criminal-tribes-act-protest-police-atrocity>

- Nair, S. (2018, May 1). Denotified nomadic tribes may come under SC/ST Act. *The Indian Express*. Retrieved July 13, 2018, from <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/denotified-nomadic-tribes-may-come-under-sc-st-act-dalit-5157803/>
- National Alliance Group for Semi-nomadic, Nomadic and De-notified Tribes. (n.d.). Background. Retrieved July 4, 2018, from <http://nagdnt.org/about-us/background/>
- Oberg, C. M. (2008). Performance Ethnography: Scholarly inquiry in the here and now. *Transformative Dialogues: Teaching & Learning Journal*, 2(1), 1-4. Retrieved from [https://www.kpu.ca/sites/default/files/Teaching and Learning/TD.2.1_Oberg_Performance_Ethnography.pdf](https://www.kpu.ca/sites/default/files/Teaching_and_Learning/TD.2.1_Oberg_Performance_Ethnography.pdf)
- Pawar, K., Batunge, K., & Indrekar, A. (Directors). (2014, August 23). *The Widow's Home* [Video file]. Retrieved November 17, 2018, from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q785d-djoJE>
- Rao, R. (2008, August 21). Panel favours reservation for nomadic tribes. *The Indian Express*. Retrieved July 13, 2018, from <http://archive.indianexpress.com/news/panel-favours-reservation-for-nomadic-tribes/351413/>
- Reddy, P. A. (2017, July 11). Prohibition of Beggary Acts: Criminalizing a Way of Life and the Need to Amend These Laws [Web log post]. Retrieved from <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/humanrights/2017/07/11/prohibition-of-beggary-acts-criminalizing-a-way-of-life-and-the-need-to-amend-these-laws/>
- Sarthak. (n.d.). *Socio-Economic Status of Women of Denotified & Nomadic Communities in Delhi* (pp. 1-130, Rep.). Retrieved from http://ncw.nic.in/pdfReports/Socio_Economic_Status_of_Women_of_Denotified_and_Nomadic_Communities_in_Delhi13012017.pdf
- Schwarz, H. (2010). *From Aesthetics of Survival to the Politics of Liberation*. Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell.
- Selman, J., & Heather, J. (2015). *Theatre, Teens, Sex Ed: Are We There Yet? (The Play)*. Edmonton, AB: University of Alberta.
- Sharma, S. (2017, November 5). India must scrap the law that tags some tribes as hereditary criminals. *Hindustan Times*. Retrieved July 14, 2018, from <https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/india-must-scrap-the-law-that-tags-some-tribes-as-hereditary-criminals/story-WqdykvPdFNUPXEW7zBO8O.html>

- TNN. (2018, January 5). Govt for relief to denotified nomadic tribes. *The Times of India*. Retrieved July 14, 2018, from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/govt-for-relief-to-denotified-nomadic-tribes/articleshow/62373600.cms>
- TNN. (2018, July 28). 36, including 3 cops, injured in violence at Chharanagar. *The Times of India*. Retrieved from <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/ahmedabad/36-including-3-cops-injured-in-violence-at-chharanagar/articleshow/65170754.cms>
- UN General Assembly. (1948). "Universal declaration of human rights" (217 [III] A). Paris. Retrieved from <http://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/>
- Van Erven, E. (1992). *The Playful Revolution: Theatre and Liberation in Asia*. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press.

8. Appendix

8.1 Glossary

Bhoma – Character in Budhan Theatre’s plays

BJP – Bharatiya Janata Party

Caste Panchayat – Caste-specific juries, usually comprised of elders

Chaiwala – Person who sells tea

Chutak majuri – Manual labour

CM – Chief Minister

CTA – Criminal Tribes Act

Daaru – Local Indian term for liquor

DCP – Deputy Commissioner of Police

DNT – De-Notified Tribe

FIR – First Information Report

Girgit – Chameleon

IPC – Indian Penal Code

IPS – Indian Police Service

Lathi – Heavy pole or stick, often used to beat people

Madari – DNT community from parts of Gujarat and Rajasthan who are traditionally identified to be snake-charmers

Proscenium theatre – “Conventional” theatre, which uses a stage

PCR – Police Control Room

PSI – Police Sub Inspector

Sahab – Term used to address a person of higher authority

8.2 List Of Acts And Laws

2.1 Criminal Tribes Act (1871)

People or communities who repeatedly committed non bailable offences came under the Act. Restriction of movement were imposed on these communities and the male adults of the groups were obliged to report to the police every week (Robbes, 1997).

2.2 Dramatic Performances Act (DPA)

In 1876, the DPA was enacted for “better control of public dramatic performances” and enabled the Indian Government to prohibit public dramatic performances that were scandalous, defamatory, obscene and/or seditious. This often allowed the local Government to prohibit the performance of a play or any such dramatic act which could arouse feelings of disaffection towards the British Government.

2.3 Habitual Offenders Act (1952)

The Criminal Tribes Act was repealed and replaced by the Habitual Offenders Act in 1952. The act defines a Habitual Offender as “one who has been a victim of subjective and objective influences and has manifested a set practice in crime, and also presents a danger to the society in which they lives”. It mainly includes people who have spent several lives in prison after committing several crimes. The offender is required to restrict his/her movement and is obligated to report anytime, anywhere as prescribed by the government (Delhi High Court, n.d.).

2.4 The Bombay Prevention of Begging Act (1959)

This was enforced as a way of criminalizing the act of begging in India. This hindered the freedom of people to choose the work they wanted to engage in.

A beggar was defined as “ anyone who solicits or receives alms in a public place whether or not under any pretence such as singing, dancing, fortune telling, performing tricks or selling articles.” Hence, both individuals and groups were thus prohibited to earn a livelihood by performing in public spaces (Reddy, 2017). The laws were enacted mainly to suppress thugs and instead, the laws focused on criminalizing a large number of communities to which the thugs belonged (Reddy, 2017).

2.5 Thuggee and Dacoity Committee

An organ of the East India Company, the Thuggee and Dacoity Department was established in 1830 with the main mission of addressing dacoity, highway robbery and the existence a 'cult of robbers'. The department was replaced by the Central Criminal Intelligence Department (Reddy, 2017).

8.3 Questionnaires

8.3.1 Community leaders.

History

1. Can you tell us a little bit about the Chhara community and what it has been through over the years?
2. Did the Chhara community always live in Ahmedabad? Or was there a shift because of them British settlements?
3. What is the socioeconomic status of the members across the Chhara community?

Budhan Theatre

1. What is Budhan Theatre and how did it start?
2. According to you, what is the aim of Budhan and how has it expanded over the years?
3. How do you choose which medium to use for a project? Like film, theatre, protest, etc? Does each medium have a different meaning to the community?
4. How do you choose where to stage your plays?
5. Have Budhan activities resulted directly in material or policy changes?
6. What are the difficulties that Budhan Theatre faces on a daily basis?
7. Are there any financial restraints that Budhan is currently facing?
8. What is Budhan currently working on?
9. Budhan has attracted a lot of attention from outside the community. Has the
10. response been positive?
11. Is the whole process for creating, developing, rehearsing and then performing instrumental in bringing about change?
12. Why did you decide to be involved in Budhan theatre? Did you choose it for the process or for the performance?
13. How is filmmaking related to Budhan Theatre?
14. How do you decide the audience for your films?

15. How do you choose the space in which you present your films?
16. What is the relationship between the use of film and theatre and the police? Do
17. you think the police are more threatened by one or the other?
18. Do you think the use of film promotes a feeling of solidarity within the community as well as in the larger DNT community?
19. How do you see film and theatre to be connected to the protests, the community?

26th July

1. We heard about the 26th July incident. If you don't mind, can you tell us what happened?
2. Was the 26th July incident more extreme than other police encounters you have faced? How?
3. What was your response to the incident?
4. How was it different from the other protests you've done before?
5. How did you come up with the idea?
6. Did you face any struggles when mobilizing the community for the protest?
7. Has the level of fear in the community increased after the 26th July incident?

Media + Social Media

1. How was this incident received by the media?
2. Can you tell us a little about the media coverage during the incident and the protest?
3. Were journalists from the Chhara community also involved in covering the incident? Which media outlets do you see as your allies? Did they respond the way you expected?
4. Do you feel the media coverage had significant effects?
5. How important was the use of social media during and after this incident? How

Women

1. Who participated in the protest? Was it across all age groups?
2. In what way did women participate in this incident?
3. In what ways do men participate in the community?
4. Do Chhara women also participate in community activities? In what ways?
5. How often do women involve themselves in Budhan Theatre? How has it changed over the years?
6. What roles do women play in Budhan Theatre - are they actors, directors, involved in writing, etc.?

7. How does the community respond to women's involvement in Budhan Theatre?
8. What is the relationship between bootlegging and women of the community?
9. What is the relationship between the bootleggers and the police?

Police

1. What are the existing concerns of the Chharas with the police officers?
2. Have the interactions with the police changed after the incident? Have there been any legal/policy changes to protect the community?

Leader

1. You are recognized as one of the Chhara community leaders. What do you feel your role is?
2. What kind of support have you received from other members of the Chhara community?
3. What changes do you expect from both inside and outside the Chhara community?
4. What support did you get from other sources/ areas/ groups or DNT's? How did that come about?
5. We read that several representatives went to Delhi recently. Did you hold any other events?
6. What happened there and how was the response?
7. What response have you received from the government after the incident?

Larger DNT movement

53. What is the larger DNT movement and how does it affect the Chhara community?

54. How does the role of the chhara community place within the larger DNT movement?

8.3.2 Victims of 26th July.

1. What is your name?
2. How old are you?
3. What do you do?
4. Have you always lived in Chharanagar?
5. We heard about the incident online. Can you tell us about what happened?
6. What do you remember before, during and after the incident? (depending on their answer)

OR

7. How did you get involved in it?
8. Was this like any previous encounters? How was it different?
9. What was the police justification for your arrest?
10. Can you tell us what happened when you were in custody?
11. What did you do after your release? What is the current status?
12. What is the current status like with the police?
13. The protest and response to the incident seemed extremely well planned and thoughtful. Were you involved in it? (If not, what did you think was the impact of it?/how did you feel when you heard about the response)
14. Do you think after the protest an incident like this will happen again?
15. Are you afraid now?

8.3.3 Women in theatre.

I. Initiation into Theatre

1. How did you first get into it? What motivated you?
2. Did you look up to the women who were in Budhan before you? Were there any key influences? Any women?
3. Were people around you supportive of your decision to join? How about your mother? Your father?
4. What kind of things are usually expected of women your age? What kind of things are considered respectable? Does theatre have an impact on women's respectability?
5. What aspects of being involved in Budhan do you think lead to these questions?

II. Experience in Budhan, and changes over the years

1. In what ways has Budhan changed since you joined? Have more women joined? If yes, why do you think so?
2. Are you more involved now than you were in the beginning? Do you get a chance to write or direct? If yes, do you think the plays written nowadays are different from the ones you performed in the beginning?
3. Are there women you work with? What kind of roles do you usually play? What kind of work do you usually do in the group (direction, acting, etc)

4. How has being a part of Budhan impacted your life outside of it, in good or bad ways?
5. Is there any difference in the kind of work done by women in Budhan as compared to men?
6. Do you usually work with more women or men? What kind of relationship do you share with them? Is it easier to work with either?
7. If people had objected to you joining Budhan earlier, have their opinions changed?
8. Did you always want to join theatre? If not, what did you want to do and what made you think of theatre?
9. Where do you see yourself in 10 years? Would theatre find a place in your life at that time as well? Why or why not?
10. Have you ever worked under a woman in Budhan? How is it different?
11. What kind of encounters have you had with the police here? Do you think being a part of Budhan has an influence on your relationship with them?
12. Did you have any challenging experiences while working in Budhan- any big or difficult decisions that you had to take? Any important performances that you had to manage?
13. Have any of the plays you've worked on had a strong personal impact on you? Or is there any play that you hold close to your heart? Why? What was it about?
14. Have you strongly identified with any of the characters you've played or any stories you've acted in? Why do you think you did?

III. Gender differences in theatre, and its role in activism

1. How do you position yourself and your role in the history and activism of your community? Has theatre influenced the way you think about this?
2. Have you formed meaningful relationships or found any strong support systems through your involvement in theatre? How has that affected your life as a woman living in Chharanagar?
3. Have you noticed any changes in the way young women think about theatre now compared to when you had first joined? Do any young girls approach you or tell you about their interest in joining?
4. Do you think that being a woman makes it difficult to be a part of Budhan, to have your work appreciated as an artist, to take on challenging artistic choices, to do

fulfilling work as an artist? Have you ever had to do anything you were not keen on or not comfortable with?

5. Is it difficult to balance working in theatre with the other things that are expected of you? How do you think other people, both men and women, manage?
6. Have you been able to express your own experiences in the theatre that you have performed? What were they? Who wrote about them?
7. Have you ever performed outside Chharanagar? What kind of plays are usually performed outside? What are they usually about? Were any of the plays that you personally liked/identified with performed outside?

8.3.4 Women who brew liquor.

I. Initiation and Early Family Life

1. Are you the first person in your family to be in bootlegging?
2. If not, which members of your family were involved in bootlegging? Growing up, did you think you'd have to do it too? What kind of perception did you have of bootlegging when you saw your family members do it?
3. Do you remember your family members having anything else as an occupation before bootlegging? What led to the change?
4. By whom were you taught how to do it? At that point, did you want to do it? What do you remember about the first time you did it?
5. Did anyone have to convince you to do bootlegging? Why or how did it become your occupation?
6. Right now, what do the rest of the people in your family do? Is there any reason why they don't do bootlegging? Have people in your family ever discussed this, even when you were small, or is it seen as something natural?

II. Process of Bootlegging

1. Can you explain the entire process of obtaining ingredients, selling, distributing, etc? When do you sell? How much time do you put into it? Where do you sell from? How do people know to approach you? Who are the people you have to pay? How often do you pay the police? Is the payment standard at all times? Could you give an estimate of the amount you usually receive?

2. Do you sell through middlemen? What kind of people do you usually sell to? Do you prefer to sell it to certain people?

3. Are there any times or situations that are very good or very bad for business?

4. Are the men in your family also a part of the process? If yes, what do they help in? If not, what are the other jobs they do? Who earns the most in your family?

III. Relationship with the Police

1. How often do the police visit your bootlegging spots? What do they do when they come? Have you had any particularly bad experience with the police when they came? If not, do you know of any such stories?

2. How do you negotiate with them? Do the police usually threaten you? If yes, what kind of threats do they give?

3. Is there anyone you can go to for help (especially in case of police violence or misbehaviour)?

4. Do the men intervene in dealing with the problems concerning the police?

5. Has there been any bribe collection from the women who don't bootleg?

6. How do the police find out if there is a new bootlegger?

7. Have you ever been arrested due to bootlegging? If yes, what has happened while you were in jail? How do you get released? If not, have you heard of any stories?

1. Would you go to the police if someone from your community misbehaved with you?

2. Have any NGOs ever intervened? Have they helped you, especially with economic aid? Younger girls? Grandmothers?

3. Have you ever sought other occupations? What was the reaction of the police (if they take bribes)?

8.3.5 Women with other occupations.

I. Early Life

1. Growing up, whom did you look up to the most? Any women? What about them did you like? How have they influenced you?

2. What are your earliest memories of realising what being a 'Chhara' means?

3. What are your earliest memories of realising what being a woman means?

4. Have there been any events in your early life that you think have shaped who you are?

II. Current Life

1. How would you describe a typical day in your life? Which are the activities that keep you busy? In what way? What is your occupation/source of income in the family?
2. Have you always wanted to do this? What were the key influences or circumstances under which you took up this occupation?
3. Do the men in your family help you in your daily chores? Is there a segregation in terms of the roles men and women in your family have? What are the activities that keep the males preoccupied? How close are you with other Chhara women in your locality?

III. Aspirations, Relationship with community

1. Where do you see yourself in five years?
2. What are you most passionate about? Is there anything you feel very strongly about?
3. Do you find it easier to voice out your opinions to the male members or the female members of your family/Chharanagar? Why so?
4. Are you involved in community events and activities? What kind of role do you usually have?
5. Who are the women you are closest to? What is your relationship with them?
6. Who would you say makes up support system or would, if you needed one?
7. Do you feel like there any aspects of your life you are dissatisfied about? Any aspects that you feel very content with? Has it always been that way?

IV. Relationship with other women in the community

1. What is your perception of the women participating in Budhan Theatre/? Do any women from your family take part in Budhan Theatre? If yes, what are their experiences as a member? Are there any particular stories that you feel are important to your history as a Chhara member?
2. Do you think Budhan Theatre has impacted your life in a way or made you aware about certain things that the community is going through as a whole?
3. Do you have daughters? If yes, are they enrolled in school? Do they know about Budhan Theatre and its aim? Do you encourage them to engage in Budhan Theatre in the future?

4. Have you also been targeted by the Police in spite of not being involved in bootlegging? If yes, tell us about your experience/relationship with the Police?

8.3.5 Kalpana.

1. Do you think women play an important role in the Chhara community? If yes, how?
2. What is the view of the community as a whole, on educating young girls and how often does marriage come in the way of this education?
3. Are girls in the Chhara community encouraged to take up theatre while they are young?
4. What is the role and position of women in the protests organized by the community? Specifically, in relation to the 26th July incident?
5. How is the representation and involvement of women different in the Budhan theatre as opposed to that of men?
6. Why do think that in plays like *Choli ke Peeche Kya hain*, men were given the role of women, and women actors weren't given roles instead? What implications do you think such portrayals have in directing the way the community looks at men versus how they look at women?
7. How does the marriage of a woman affect their role and status in the Chhara community?
8. How does being married and having children affect the ability of a woman to enter and perform in theatre after they are married? If they are allowed to be a part of theatre, are they given a significant role and voice?
9. Considering you yourself got into theatre 'by accident' after jokingly auditioning for a play which was also being directed by Dakxin, and still had to face so many hardships from your community members when you decided to commit to it, what do you think is the way forward for other women, who might not have as many resources, as much much knowledge and courage as you did, in terms of participating in theatre and other forms of activism?
1. How has the group Shyamli, the all-girls' theatre group, helped the incorporation of girls in theatre? Has it improved the mindset of the community towards girls participating in theatre in any way?
2. What is a woman's relationship with bootlegging?

3. Does being educated influence whether or not she will be made to do bootlegging for the rest of her life?
4. Why is it that men don't participate in bootlegging?
5. How do women cope with the danger of being arrested by the police while they are involved in bootlegging?
6. Do women become more vulnerable to sexual harassment and custodial rape by the police because of their involvement in bootlegging? How many such instances have there been in the past?
7. Are Chhara women vulnerable to sexual harassment and marital rape in the home as well?
8. What are the mechanisms in place to file complaints against such incidences and provide justice to the victim, if such a thing were to happen?
9. If women are allowed to participate in bootlegging and interact with the police (who are men), then why do you think women are looked down upon and prevented from interacting with other men when they participate in theatre? (needs to be framed differently)
10. How do you think women can move away from bootlegging?
11. How do you think moving away from bootlegging will help, or not help, the position of women in the community?
12. How do you think women moving away from bootlegging will affect the functioning and earning of the Chhara community as a whole?
13. What are the alternatives to bootlegging available to women today?
14. What is the relationship of the police with the profession of bootlegging?
15. Are there any other prominent female voices like yourself in the Chhara community?
16. Why do you think there aren't as many prominent female voices?
17. Do you think there will ever come a time when Budhan Theatre makes a play specifically on the issues Chhara women have to face and how there aren't enough women voices in the community? Are you or any other women working on making such plays or similar projects in the near future? How and what kind of changes do you think need to be made, in order to get the Budhan Theatre to make such a play?
18. How do you think girls can be appropriately incorporated into theatre from the time they're young, and made to look beyond theft and liquor brewing?

19. Which other women do you think will be helpful for us to talk to for the purpose of our research?

8.4 List of Interviewees

Budhan Members	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Abhishek Indrekar, October 4, 2018 2. Atish Indrekar, October 5, 2018 3. Dakxin Bajrange, September 9, October 5, October 6, 2018 4. Jayendra Chhara, October 4, 2018 5. Krishnakant Machharekar, October 4, 2018 6. Kushal Bajrange, October 4, 2018 7. Roxy Gagdekar, September 9, 2018 8. Siddharth Garange, October 4, 2018 9. Snehal Chhara, October 4, 2018 10. Kalpana Gagdekar, October 3, 2018
Budhan Women	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Bhumika Bajrange, October 5, 2018 2. Chetna Rathore, October 4, 2018 3. Hardika Kodekar, October 5, 2018 4. Kalpana Gagdekar, October 3, 2018 5. Poonam, October 3, 2018 6. Ruchika Chhara, October 4, 2018 7. Urvashi Chhara, October 3, 2018
Women who brew liquor	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Aarti, October 4, 2018 2. Amita, October 4, 2018 3. Bhavana, October 5, 2018 4. Dhruv, October 4, 2018 (Aarti's son) 5. Janvi, October 3, 2018 6. Nandini, October 5, 2018 7. Tanvi, October 4, 2018
Women with other occupations	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Dimple Kodekar, October 4, 2018 2. Ganga Ghansi, October 4, 2018 3. Kamla Bajarange, October 3, 2018 4. Maya Bajrange, October 1, 2018 5. Neelam Indrekar, October 4, 2018

	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Pooja, October 3, 2018 7. Rajkumari Batunge, October 3, 2018 8. Ravindra Kodekar, October 4, 2018 (Dimple's father) 9. Shefali Tamanche, October 5, 2018 10. Varsha Garange, October 5, 2018
<p>26th July- Victims and their Family Members</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Aakash, October 1, 2018 2. Abhishek Bajendra, October 1, 2018 3. Anip Tamayche, October 1, 2018 4. Anita Tamanche, October 2, 2018 5. Atish Indrekar, October 2, 2018 6. Atul Gagdekar, October 1, 2018 7. Dhiraj Gagdekar, October 1, 2018 8. Dipali Jitendra, October 2, 2018 9. Hitu Tamanche, October 2, 2018 10. Kunal Tamanche, October 2, 2018 11. Kushal Tamanche, October 2, 2018 12. Manoj Tamanche, October 2, 2018 13. Mehul Bajrange, October 2, 2018 14. Nilesh Rathod, October 1, 2018 15. Nitesh Indrekar, October 4, 2018 16. Nitesh Minekar, October 1, 2018 17. Parag Tamayche, October 2, 2018 18. Pravin Indrekar, October 2, 2018 19. Pritosh Tamayche, October 2, 2018 20. Ravindra Batunge, October 3, 2018 21. Ravindra Tamanche, October 2, 2018 22. Sasikala Tamayche, October 1, 2018 (Anip's wife) 23. Sunny Bhogekar, October 1, 2018 24. Sunny Tamachay, October 2, 2018 25. Vikas Mlakia, October 1, 2018

	26. Vinod Sisodiya, October 5, 2018
Older Members of Chharanagar - Oral History	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Gopichand, October 6, 2018 2. Sushila Rathore, October 6, 2018 3. Rahil, October 5, 2018

Table 2: List of Interviewees

