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Aesthetic strategies of the criminalised: political subjectivity in Budhan Stories

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Abstract
This article reflects on a living archive of indigenous film and performance generated by a collective of artists and filmmakers from India's 'ex-criminal' De-notified Tribes (DNTs) in response to an aggressive erasure of their lives and stories in the mainstream imagination. Drawing on this archive, this article examines the making and circulation of films by DNT communities to consolidate a DNT political subject, and interrogates the challenges involved in doing so. Specifically, we interrogate the challenges of visibility for a political subject that is 'unsettled', not marked by a relationship to a (home)land but by a history of criminality. We argue that DNT's entry into citizenship has been predicated on an inbuilt tension between the celebration what makes the community distinct, and indeed criminalised; and a drive towards respectability. This tension articulates in the structure of, the content, the affective life and the aesthetic of their films, generating categories of things that can be said, and things that cannot be spoken. These elements, while in tension, are held together by the aesthetic – in the strategies of sublimation, hyper-realisation, inter-cutting at play in the films.

Keywords
Indigenous, film, aesthetic, DeNotified Tribes, political subjectivity

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Introduction

I was not born a criminal,
I was just a Bhantu,
I was Chhara and Sansi,
Kanjar, Daffer, Khamta and Madari.
Bajaniya, Saraniya, Choli and Kunvaliya
Bherkoot, Nut, Adodiya, Miyana
Here and there,
I was a Nomad roaming all around,
Our history starts in 1871,
When our ancestors were alive,
Behind the bars of our ancestors,
Britishers had such eyes on our ancestors that they locked them up,
All day they would make them do labour,
Torture all the Nomadic communities like us,
Make them their slaves by beating them,
It was like drinking poison everyday,

I was not born a criminal (4x)

They count the bars of prison when alive and even after death,
They studied while making alcohol at the same time,
They did thievery for living,
They did not hesitate to steal everything,
They would entertain people by doing plays,
People kept calling them 'THIEF'
They just dreamt of food,
Life became dark like coal,
The stigma of criminals was on us,
Gone through every bad time.
In prison, there was a whole community of our people.

I was not born a criminal (4x)

Then the whole of India got independence,
Our whole life got destroyed,
No work, No house, No rights.
Even the government made us helpless,
After many years we got independence,
We made a small community,
Police did their brutality even there,
We die fighting for our rights,
We won't lose until we are alive,
We will clean the stigma of criminals till our last breath.

Now sing with me,
All my loving partners,
Everyone lost when against us,
We told the whole society,

I was not born a criminal (4x)

These are lyrics to a song, *Hun Janmjat Chor Kada Tiya* ('I was not born a criminal'), released on the 31st of August 2020 to commemorate 'Vimukti Divas' the anniversary of the day in 1952 when the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871 was finally repealed. This date, 4 years after India itself gained independence from British rule, is now celebrated as the actual Independence Day by millions of people from India's De-Notified Tribes (DNTs). These are groups that were 'notified' as born criminals during British colonial rule, largely in relation to histories of movement, and to colonial policies of settlement. DNTs today comprise a large and heterogeneous collection of communities across India and according to official estimates there are around 198 distinct De-Notified and Nomadic Tribes (DNT and NT) spread across the country, (Renke Commission Report, 2008). In the absence of a singular geographical or tribal identity, many DNT communities share other markers of relatedness including language, performance traditions and specific ritual practices that often fall outside normative Hindu frameworks. What unites DNTs structurally, however, is a shared historical stigma: the colonial designation of being 'born criminals' under the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act (CTA), codified older caste-based anxieties about mobility and deviance into law, embedding a racialised logic of criminality that continues to shape state practice (Pilavsky 2015; Brown 2021). More than seventy years after the original act was repealed, DNTs continue to struggle with the inherited stigma of criminality, surveillance, and a de facto denial of citizenship rights.

Sung in the Bhantu language, one that is shared across different DNT communities in India, this song is an act of assertion. By bringing 'hidden' (little known, devalued, erased) histories into lyrical manifestation, the song traces the forced settlement of DNT communities, their enslavement as labourers, and the betrayal of post-colonial promises of citizenship. Bringing these 'hidden' histories into public discourse is, however, no simple act, and in the song, we also find ambivalence and refusal. The public transcript of respectability, as found in the refrain 'I was not born a criminal' clashes in fact with the hidden transcript that celebrates criminality itself, framing thievery as an art of resistance, and expressing anger at the failure of the state and the violence meted upon its people.

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Hun Janmjat Chor Kada Tiya is part of a living archive of indigenous film and performance that started in 2020 when, during Covid-19 pandemic, a collective of Chhara[1] DNT performing artists and filmmakers associated with Budhan Theatre began

[1] A community that has been settled in the neighbourhood of Chharanagar at the outskirts of Ahmedabad, in the state of Gujarat.

documenting and broadcasting the experiences of their communities that were being aggressively erased from the mainstream imagination. Under the umbrella of Budhan Stories [2]this collective produced a series of films in indigenous languages distributed through community social media platforms (especially WhatsApp) addressing the experiences of pain and loss, and providing information and entertainment in a time of crisis, through a blend of performances, poetry, songs, and documentary forms. This creative process has since developed into an ambitious program training young people from a range of indigenous and marginalised communities across the country, generating new filmmaking practices, methodologies and visual languages that address asymmetries in the public sphere. Drawing on this living archive, this article examines the making and circulation of films by DNT communities to consolidate a DNT political subject, and interrogates the challenges involved in doing so. Specifically, we interrogate the challenges of visibility for a political subject that is 'unsettled', not marked by a relationship to a (home)land but by a history of criminality.

To understand the challenges of the DNT political subject we engage critically with literature from indigenous media and migrant cinema. Literature on indigenous, migrant, and 'third cinema' has examined the use of media – including film, multi-modal art, mobile phones – as forms of cultural activism, that speak back to power asserting shared identities and setting in motion processes of reparation. Scholars of indigenous media have for example discussed the importance not only of territorial, but also visual and media sovereignty. These terms describe the complex practices of self-representation through which people exercise the right over their own images and their circulation (Rickard 2022; Raheja 2013); and through which they imagine futurity against notions of salvage and erasure (Ginsburg 2018). In the context of migrant cinema, scholars discuss 'guerrilla-style' filmmaking, where filmmaking is an act of resistance and films are laden with political meanings (Grassilli 2008). Key to these forms of visual activism is an active challenging of stereotypes, via the production of new visual languages; and the use of new aesthetic strategies to mobilise images, circumvent power, and intervene in political contexts.

The political subject in migrant films is one that is largely marked by a relationship of continuity / discontinuity with a homeland, and with the host society. This is clear in the themes of nostalgia and the creation of memory driven narratives on the one hand; and the focus on the production of hybridity or 'third culture,' on notions of diversity, transgression, and cultural participation on the other. In this genre of "accented cinema," as discussed by Naficy, the filmmaker is simultaneously located inside and outside and carries a specific 'accent,' a particular aesthetic, by virtue of being in between or in exile (Naficy 2001; Grassilli 2008). Home is often a reference, as an idealised place or a longing, found in the multisensorial dimensions of these films – via food, a sense of smell, taste. Many of these films also dismantle film categories mirroring the 'in between' situation of

[2] The link is to a website that will not be online for perpetuity. Materials from Season 1 and Season 2 of Budhan Stories that are discussed in this article can be accessed here (Season 1) https://doi.org/10.25392/leicester.data.c.7476474.v1 and here (Season 2) https://doi.org/10.25392/leicester.data.c.7478871.v1

migrants, using hybridity and a remix of styles; and blurring the categories of national cinema, genre, and authorship (Burgoyne and Bayrakdar 2022).

Closer to our case, scholars have asked how filmmakers employ new artistic and aesthetic strategies to represent the lives of those who are politically invisible – from the stateless, to the nomad or refugee (Demos 2013). These discussions show how media can challenge regimes of representation and the (in/hyper)visibility of communities, for example by creating images that are not simply oppositional but that dislocate the very basis of national identity. Or by creating images that question that expand the canons of realism, via the use of fiction as a key element to understanding and expressing traumatic events. In films focussed on the transient lives of stateless persons, those who inhabit "non-places" (Augé 1995), and whose lives are often characterised by a distinct temporality defined by waiting, standard narrative conventions such as agency, event, and temporal progression have often dissolved (Burgoyne and Bayrakdar 2022).

By contrast, the indigenous political subject is one that is marked by histories of dispossession, genocide and cultural erasure – often in relation to the alienation from an 'original' land or territory. While in some way similar to the subject of migrant films, the (home)land here is one that harks back in time, to a pre-colonial authenticity, and films often express a concern with establishing forms of presence and continuity. Scholars have in this respect identified relatedness as a key concern of indigenous media productions, referring to media's embeddedness in social relations (with ancestors, the land, the community past and present); and to the material practices that link past and present, different communities, and generations (Ginsburg 1994, 2018). Media can thus connect a shared past to an imagined future (Lempert 2018).

Survivance is also crucial to the aesthetic of indigenous films. Coined by Indigenous scholar Gerald Vizenor, the term refers to practices of active presence and resistance that go beyond survival to assert ongoing cultural and political agency (Vizenor 2008). Examining the media works produced by the Karrabing collective in Northern Australia, Biddle and Lea identify an "hyper-real of survivance" that uses art "to make the real more real", when the real is itself what is at risk, at stake" – this is Indigenous history, territory, language, presence as elements that have been routinely denied, silenced or erased (Biddle and Lea 2018: 6). This "hyperreal of survivance" involves conscious practices of "artificial intensification", "faking it with the truth", and "deliberate acts of revitalisation" in contexts of high crisis (Biddle and Lea 2018: 6). Ginsburg (2018) identifies the "indigenous uncanny" at play in indigenous films, as a blurring of boundaries between the real and the imaginary, between the world of the living and the world of the dead. Media may give visibility not only to unspoken histories but to less visible relations, with the dead featuring as a glimpse or a haunting, that unsettle the normality of settlers' presence on indigenous territory.

These sets of literature are useful to examine the challenges of the DNT political subject. However, unlike the diaspora's imagination of home or the indigenous claim to an original land, in case of DNTs we have a dispersed idea of home, a displacement that cannot be remembered. Settlement becomes the mode of entry into both citizenship and modernity. It is a forced process, that goes alongside the criminalisation of former

livelihoods and identities. The movement, in other words, is from a non-place to a place, that of the settlement camp. While in other dispersed communities subjectivity often centres on a homeland, for DNTs the sense of home is far more ambivalent. We have in fact a belonging to a place that was once a prison, with walls that have now been dismantled and yet remain a key structure of the societal system in which DNT children grow up. Alongside the issue of movement, we also have the prominent one of criminality, one that is crucial to the question of visibility, and that structures the very process of film production and distribution. [3]

In this article, we focus on the specific challenges of visuality in the making of a DNT political subject/s. We identify a particular dilemma or tension between the celebration of criminality and its histories, by turning names of injury into names of pride; and the desire for inclusion and recognition into the realms of citizenship, of respectability, via a denial of the same. In the films we examine, this translates as a constant play of light and shadows between that which can be said and made visible, and that which cannot be spoken, and must therefore remain hidden and unseen, including those things that are too painful to express, those elements of experiences that escape capture in words, those things that are too dangerous to say or too revolutionary in a time yet unripe. This tension takes on new dimensions in the context of digital expression and circulation. While literature on digital activism tends to celebrate the digital as a space for liberation that enables new forms of connectedness (Abidin and Zeng, 2021; Krutrök, 2021), we must be attentive to the ways in which digital materiality also creates new forms of (self)censorship. This is more so in the context of a community which, marked by the historical stigma of criminality, and continuously at risk of state violence, must carefully curate its intervention into the public image of itself, holding together a demand for respectability with the community's intricate affective and material reality.

This article is based on long-term collaboration and situated ethnographic work through a combination of on-site and long-distance engagements (the latter of which had to be innovated in the period of the Covid-19 pandemic), using filmmaking and theatre as elements of an arts-based method. One of the authors, Alice Tilche (AT) has lived and worked in India for many years, has worked with film herself and has collaborated with members of Budhan Theatre since 2010. The other author, akshay khanna (AK) is an anthropologist, theatre practitioner and activist based in India, who has worked with marginalised communities and social movements for over two decades. In this article, we begin by developing a notion of the DNT political subject historically and in relation to the political and artistic interventions of Budhan Theatre. We then dive into the analysis of this evolving archive with a focus on the political work of films in generating new forms of relatedness; and on the aesthetic strategies at play, especially in overcoming the tension between that which can be said, and that which cannot be spoken.

[3] The case is closer to the one of the Roma who, allegedly originating from India, and with links to DNT communities themselves, have travelled through countries without a sense of a homeland – with travelling being key to both a conception of freedom and to the criminalisation of identities.
https://romaniarts.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Beyond-the-Stereotypes.pdf

The DNT as a political subject

Unlike many forms of indigenous or migrant media shaped by relationships to an origin or homeland, the DNT political subject emerges not from memory of place but from the condition of forced settlement and enduring criminalisation. We draw our notion of the political subject from Ranabir Samaddar who, departing from European traditions that view the political subject as developing from self-consciousness (as in Hegel), examines "how politics creates its subject… who authors politics" (Samaddar 2010: xviii). Samaddar deprioritises metaphysical concerns and instead traces the subject's emergence through materiality, as a result of conflicting circumstances, or "situations," which create "positions." Studying the political subject means tracing these genealogies and conditions. It is in this vein that we consider the historical and contemporary emergence of the DNT political subject.

DNTs, estimated to comprise 110 million people in India today, were categorised as 'born criminals' under the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871. The Act institutionalised the belief that some populations were hereditarily criminal, enabling classification, surveillance and control without legal due process (Dandekar 2014). Those targeted tended to be oppressed castes, tribal or third gender (primarily the Hijra community that the Act wrongly named as 'eunuchs') who lived at the margins of society as nomads, surviving on petty trade, pastoralism, raiding, slash and burn cultivation, and as itinerant bards and performers – livelihoods that the colonial administration considered wasteful and close to the realm of animality. The CTA managed anxieties around ungovernability by enforcing settlement and taxation (Arnold 1985; Yang 1985), procuring labour (Gould and Lunt 2020), regulating sexuality (Hinchy 2019), and absorbing 'ungovernables' into the colonial order (Brown 2016). It is this attempt at 'bringing into the fold' that placed then Criminal Tribes at a threshold of modernity, between civilisation and the savage, between the subject and abject, between human and animal. While the colonial state codified the figure of the 'born criminal' into law, the notion of hereditary criminality was not entirely new (Piliavsky 2015) In this sense, colonial governance rearticulated older precolonial ideas of certain socially marginal groups as hereditary or professional thieves – caste-like communities with their own religious practices, moral codes, and transmission of skill – into racialised and juridical regimes of control.

In the early 20th century, many DNT groups, including the Chharas, were moved to settlement colonies where they worked as labourers on roads, railways, and agricultural or industrial projects. Camps such as the old criminal settlement at Chharanagar functioned as open prisons, with movement restricted through routinised activities and spatial controls (Johnston and Bajrange 2014; Pandian 2009; Radhakrishna 2008; Schwarz 2010), structured around the appropriation of labour. The CTA was repealed in 1949, and tribes were finally 'De-Notified' in 1952, five years after Indian independence. Yet the stigma of criminality endured through the simultaneous enactment of the Habitual Offenders Act (Bajrange et al. 2020; Devy 2006). Today, DNTs remain among the most precarious populations in the subcontinent, working in the informal economy as manual labourers, agricultural and construction workers, performers, and street entertainers. In

the absence of alternative livelihoods, communities like the Chharas are often tied to illegal occupations such as brewing and smuggling alcohol (prohibited in Gujarat, where Chharanagar is located). Their branding as criminals fuels systemic discrimination, reinforcing poverty, labour precarity, and exposing them to state violence. The stigma of criminality is thus a continuing social, economic, and political phenomenon granted continuity not least through the rearticulation of the CTA logic in contemporary law. In Chharanagar, now an urban ghetto of about 20,000 people, houses from the old settlement still exist, their architecture a testament to the history of incarceration. And although physical walls no longer demarcate the settlement from the rest of the city, Chharanagar remains excluded - autorickshaw drivers routinely refuse to go, and Amazon couriers refuse to deliver.

The DNT is a peculiar category jurisprudentially, legally, and politically. The postcolonial Constitution created affirmative-action categories to redress historical injustices for oppressed castes, tribes, classes, and religious minorities (e.g. as Scheduled Castes and Tribes), but 'Criminal Tribes' were left out – effectively denying the specific historical injury of criminalisation. Gandee (2018) traces this exclusion through the contestations surrounding the category of the 'depressed classes' and the emergence of caste and untouchability as the central political question for the new nation-state. She also highlights the prioritisation of maintenance of public order over recognition of past harm, and the pervasive view that these communities (seen as unruly, 'uncivilized,' and almost animal-like) required re-education before they could be granted entry into modern citizenship (Gandee 2020). Rather than a positive Constitutional or legal recognition, thus, the DNT is jurisprudentially constituted of a double negativity. The first is the active negation of rights, entitlements and public presence that continued into postcolonial citizenship. The second is temporal, as the law that criminalised DNTs no longer exists, and neither is the marginalisation legally recognised as anything beyond an act of the colonial administration. In the absence of Constitutional recognition, DNT communities have had to rely on localised political bargaining in the federal structure, with communities disparately accommodated within other protected categories in different states, and some not recognised in protected categories at all. This legal limbo, combined with a history of nomadism and displacement, undermines DNTs' potential to act as part of "political society" (Chatterjee 2011) and to unite as a political front with tangible goals, just as their exclusion from education prevents them from acting as "civil society" (ibid.). There is thus no structural position for the articulation of a DNT political subject within the schema of the Indian post-colonial nation. The emergence of a DNT political subject, therefore, requires creativity; in Samaddar's terms, it requires the subject to 'author' politics.

The political subject in Samaddar represents a collective modality of action. It emerges not through existing techniques for the exercise of power, but in resistance to them, thereby bearing an ethics of resistance and innovating a new set of practices (Samaddar 2010: xxiv-xxv). This aligns with the notion of "unruly politics": a refusal to speak the grammar of politics as defined by those in power, insisting instead on another language (Shankland et al. 2011, khanna 2012). This subject does not disengage from power; rather,

it engages the state on its own terms. It is this kind of insistence on new languages of politics, or new modes of political action, aesthetics and forms that challenge what is acceptable and intelligible to the state that characterises unruly politics (khanna 2012:165). In what follows, we trace this creativity in Budhan Stories and note the emergence of the DNT political subject as one that generates new languages, circulations, alliances, and modes of entry into public and political discourse.

Budhan Theatre and Budhan Stories

Budhan Theatre takes its name from Budhan Sabar, a person from the Kheria-Sabar DNT community in West Bengal who was killed in police custody in 1998. The group was founded the same year with the support of writer and activist Mahasweta Devi and linguist and literary scholar Ganesh Devy, as part of the DNT-Rights Action Group advocating for the rights of De-Notified Tribes. Based in the Chharanagar community library, they became a platform for collective experimentation, education, and political action. Their objective, as articulated in their best-known play *Budhan Bolta Hai* (Budhan Speaks), is to resist enforced silence and transform the historical stigma of criminality by turning attention to the multiverse arts of these communities: "born artists rather than born criminals" is their motto. It is also to offer an emotional and reparative outlet, for – as Artistic Director Dakxin Bajrange explains – performing others' pain helps to make sense of one's own.

Over the years, Budhan Theatre has become embedded in community struggles, with members mobilising around rights violations, legal cases, and offering support to affected groups. Since its start, the group has performed over a thousand plays addressing issues from police brutality to forced evictions and communal violence. Staged with minimal props, their plays adopt a raw and affectively charged aesthetic aligned with Grotowski's "poor theatre" but shaped by the urgency of real trauma. Budhan Theatre has also collaborated with academics, artists, and activists worldwide, receiving support from international funders and developing international visibility. However, its work continues to be rooted in precarity as funding is often unreliable, and much of the group's work continues to be sustained through informal voluntary labour by community members. In 2009, Bajrange set up Nomad Movies as a media unit of Budhan Theatre and as a platform for the struggle of different marginalised communities (Friedman 2011). While Bajrange considered this transition a continuation of their work, with media being "just a different space" to that of theatre, the shift from stage to screen transformed not only the technical process but also the dynamics of performance and spectatorship.

This transition gained renewed urgency during the COVID-19 pandemic, when digital media became an imperative for existence itself. For DNT communities, the crisis marked not only a deepening of material precarity, but also a form of re-criminalisation, as mobility, central to their livelihoods, was suddenly curtailed. The abrupt national lockdown, cordoning of informal settlements, and the absence of basic state support precipitated a collapse of survival systems. DNTs were among the millions of migrant workers who walked hundreds of miles to return home, many dying en-route, in one of the largest mass migrations in South Asia's recent history (Ellis-Petersen and Chaurasia,

2020; Misra, 2022). Several of the groups featured in Budhan Stories, including the Bahurupia, Nat and Madari, have long earned their living through itinerant theatre, acrobatics, and music. With movement criminalised, these performance practices became impossible, and begging (an activity that is also criminalised under Indian law) was often the only remaining option. The pandemic thus reinforced longstanding stigma, cast DNTs once again as outside the moral economy of the nation, and made digital circulation not only a creative turn but a necessary condition for survivance.

At the onset of the pandemic, Budhan Stories developed as a community-led project supported by long-standing academic partnerships. These collaborations were crucial for navigating funding, ethics protocols, and training and built on the networks and alliances created by Budhan Theatre over the years. While the project was made possible by academic funding, its creative direction remained firmly in the hands of the Budhan Theatre collective. The project also became a space for building wider solidarities: it involved new partnerships with other DNT and marginalised Dalit, Adivasi and Muslim communities, theatre and political groups across India, as well as institutional platforms such as art galleries of museums. In terms of the creative process, we, the academic collaborators, initially played a more active role in the making of the films, but this quickly became minimal, with artists taking the lead in shaping the creative direction and academics offering post-facto reflections. The process was shaped by mutual learning: while we supported research design, training, and infrastructure, it was the artists who determined the form and content. Collaboration, in this sense, became a way to reconfigure the structures of academic research, while preserving the autonomy of community knowledge production.

From the outset, the method of *Budhan Stories* was grounded in the artistic and political traditions of Budhan Theatre. Film production followed a collaborative, arts-based process in which theatre functioned not only as a mode of representation but also as a method of research. Scripts were developed through collective improvisation, memory work, and community discussion rooted in lived experience. While Budhan Theatre draws primarily from Indian traditions of social and political theatre, techniques from Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed were introduced during the project by AK, adding a new dimension to the group's practice by facilitating collective storytelling (see Sjoberg 2006). Theatre was thus not only a form of expression but a way of generating shared narratives. Similarly, film was not simply used as a tool for documentation but became part of the meaning-making process itself, a way of holding together different knowledges, generating connections across DNT communities.

At the time of writing, Budhan Stories is going into its fourth season, each representing a shift in focus, in the location, theme and the set of filmmakers themselves. Our focus in this article is specifically on the first two seasons, made at different points of the Covid-19 pandemic. While Season I was made during the first lockdown and was shot exclusively in Chharanagar, with a focus on the experience of the Chhara community itself, Season II travels to various locations, telling the stories of other DNT communities. Each of these films is 15-20 minutes long and tells a complex, gripping story that resists easy genre

categorisation. Blending documentary, fiction, music video, storytelling, and theatre, the films form a unique, polyvocal assemblage addressed to multiple audiences.

Rather than a documentary film, which typically presents a story that has already played out, Budhan Stories can be seen as a mechanism by which its members discover and come to terms with their own story as it unfolds. In this sense, the podcasts offer an "analytic of existence" as the process of making opens up avenues for exploring communities' own histories and present experiences (Lea and Povinelli, 2018). As McDougall explains, "corporeal images are not just the images of other bodies; they are also images of the body behind the camera and its relations with the world" (McDougall 2006: 3); with films conceived as an embodied form of looking. Film and life merge via the bodies of the makers, and via the material process of making. In this respect, the films must be understood not only in terms of the content but in relation to "the physical engagement on the part of crew and cast with the profilmic event; the near identity between the cast and their roles; real location shooting; and film's inherent indexical property" (Nagib 2020: 175). They are about capturing experiences, via active listening, and "speaking nearby" participants (Trinh T. Minh-ha, as cited in Chen 1992). Circulated through community social media networks, these films speak to one's own community in one's own language, as a community space in which to make sense of unprecedented suffering, as the precarity of centuries took on another dimension altogether.

Films of a given genre tend to share narrative elements, recurring themes, stylistic conventions, emotional registers, and aesthetic techniques. Even in its participatory mode, the documentary often assumes an outsideness of the gaze, creating a (sometimes productive) tension between filmmaker and subject. Ethnographic films, particularly in their reflexive modality, focus more explicitly on this relationship, favouring slow immersion in the everyday and arcs centred on particular characters. In this sense, genre shapes not only the structure and feel of a film but also the expectations of its audience, telling us something about the subject who produces the film, and the subject who consumes it. Budhan Stories is interesting precisely because it defies these categories. It draws on a range of genres – not only documentary or ethnographic styles, but also drama, horror, and Bollywood. There are reasons for this unique form, and these reasons relate to the "situations" and "positions" (Sammadar 2010) that shape the emergence of the DNT political subject.

The political work of films

In the context of ongoing histories, of displacement, settlement, and criminalisation, the films produced as part of Budhan Stories enable the consolidation of a DNT political subject at the margins. We look here at how this takes place in a context where claims to a (home)land are not the binding factor for collective identities.

The films generate, on the one hand, forms of vertical continuity with one's own community, by employing a politics of presence – via the mobilisation of language, the shared intimacy of pain, and by establishing forms of relatedness with ancestors. The first season of Budhan Stories was filmed between May and December 2020, during India's first national lockdown. At the time, the outer borders of Chharanagar were shut, police

patrolled movement, and the space resembled the open prison of 70 years earlier. From this space, the team produced episodes that provided accessible up-to-date information on the pandemic, alongside interviews and theatrical performances on themes like the experience of quarantine, the impact of lockdowns on livelihoods, the changes in death rituals, or the specific implications of the pandemic on women and children.

As well as providing information, the films are here an attempt by members of the Chhara community to make sense of their own experience. Shot during lockdown, when filming beyond the narrow streets of the neighbourhood was impossible, Season I is marked by both physical and psychic interiority. The episodes are mostly filmed indoors, with the camera focusing on physical details of hands, faces, objects. In a particular moment of fear, and of awareness that the crisis is serious, global, and unprecedented, here is a community speaking to itself, reflecting upon its own material, affective and metaphysical conditions of being. What we have then is an interiority that is not merely a metaphor, but a materiality.

Recorded in the Bhantu language shared by Chharas with several other DNT communities across India, this season addresses an "intimate community". As Bajrange explains in the opening episode: "we are an intimate community ... we live close together and have never had to be distant from each other". Inviting inputs and ideas, he explains that the podcasts are a space for the community to share experiences. Language brings together a community that is partly in a defined place, the ex-criminal settlement at Chharanagar, but also beyond a territory, by reaching out to historically connected Bhantu speaking groups in the ex-settlement colonies of western and eastern India. The making of films in Bhantu, and their circulation via social media, allows for the creation of an intimate community that is both local and scattered, with reference to a shared language rather than a shared sense of home or territory. This is a community that brought together by the shared intimacy of pain as episodes narrate the unprecedented loss of livelihood for the doubly marginalised, and the sudden and premature death of its members.

In addressing this "intimate community," Season I generates forms of continuity and connectedness not only with the living but also with the dead. The dead are powerfully present in the films, either as vivid images rupturing onto the screen, or as affect. Episode 3, for example, is entirely dedicated to how changes in death rituals during the pandemic disrupted the relationship between the realms of the dead and the living, and features close-ups of the dead, and the details of faces in mourning. Episode 5, featuring the adaptation and performance by Budhan Theatre actors of the Hindi short story "the village of the dead" (Murdon Ka Gaon, Bharti1956), reflects on the unprecedented suffering of the marginalised, the migrant labourer, during the pandemic. It features interviews with community members who recently lost their relatives and includes the WhatsApp video of a well-known member of the community gasping for his last breath in an ICU unit. These films re-establish continuity with the dead in a context of sudden death, when rituals were disrupted and the dead lingered as ghosts, troubling the lives of the living. This is in a community where the dead have a key role in enabling the continuity of the life of the living. Granting the dead a proper place is crucial for such continuity, and therefore the process through which the dead take on their new place in the community is not merely

about mourning, but about the struggles of life itself. This is precisely what Vizenor terms "survivance", that is an insistence on the importance of life; and simultaneously on historical and structural violence being remembered as a mode of continuity with one's past.

If Episodes of Season I are about generating intimacy with the community and vertical forms of connectedness with ancestors, Episodes of Season II move outwards, focussing on documenting the experiences of other DNT communities in between subsequent pandemic waves; and on generating horizontal forms of connectedness. These are established by examining the vulnerabilities of communities during the pandemic, identifying their commonalities, and relating them to shared histories of criminalisation in the past and in the present. This, in turn, generates common demands for recognition and the emergence of a political and eventually revolutionary voice.

In Season II we have a reconfiguration of the traditional distinction between the subaltern subject/object and the privileged (colonial, dominant caste) gaze, with one marginalised community documenting the experiences of other marginalised groups via a relation of intimate distance. If in the early episodes the audience was most explicitly the Chhara community itself, and the subject and the audience intermingled in ways that unsettled the mode of audienceship, in Season II the subject is more clearly demarcated with the audience seated outside the process of the film. If not an outside gaze, in a simple sense, the films are also no longer only speaking to one's own but address a more abstract audience constituted of diverse positionalities that include other DNT groups, civil society, the state and a more abstract superaddressee (Bakhtin 1981). The narrative voice (whether of the anchor, or of performers) is also one that is now familiar with the documentary form, introducing the audience to the community, their history and struggles. Season II was an instructive moment of political awakening for members of BT themselves who, by listening to the experiences of other communities learn about the histories of other groups, the conditions of their existence and struggle, reflecting back on commonalities with their own. It is also an instructive moment for other DNT groups who, by virtue of featuring in the films, learn about the experiences of other groups and connect to the political and artistic work of Budhan Theatre.

Episodes of Season II present an explicit political voice. There are clear demands being made, which are easier for the audience to identify as such. The actors and the interviewees are composed, their words well-chosen and addressed outwards. We hear of a shift to begging during the pandemic - an activity that fell largely on women and further criminalised the community. We learn about the deepening educational gap given by digital education, about living in poverty, about evictions and resettlements, and about the overall exclusion of these communities from the mechanisms through which humanitarian support was extended by state and civil society alike. These issues are all articulated as demands rather than expressions of pain. There is, in other words, a specificity to a political voice that makes demands, laying out frameworks of (in)justice and demanding the interlocution of the state.

The clearest political demands are made from the chair. These are plastic chairs placed outside of households, where interviewees speak holding onto the armrests projecting

their voices with clarity. The chair is a key symbol of authority, especially in rural India and in poor urban settings, where entire settlements may only have one chair available that is shared for important guests. Elevated from the floor, sitting on a chair also means not sitting on dirt, and is as such loaded with the political connotations of caste hierarchy and pollution. Demands made from the chair, with a few exceptions, are articulated by men. Other voices, largely those of women, speak instead from the floor: sitting or squatting on the mud floors of their kitchens. Their demands from the floor are more like laments: "what can we do sir", some conclude, addressing the interviewer behind the camera. The apparent helplessness of the lament is, like that of men, a political modality of address that should not be misread for passivity (see Das 2007). This is especially as many of the women we see on screen, ran entire households on their own during the pandemic, defying lockdown restrictions to beg, as men took on more passive roles for being easier targets of police retaliation, but also out of a sense of entitlement to 'better' work. Spoken from the chair or the floor, these monologues possess what Bakhtin calls the quality of dialogue, addressed to multiple audiences (1981).

The articulation of a DNT political subject is, however, not straightforward. Because of DNT's specific histories and ongoing stigma, not all demands can in fact be expressed directly. In Chharanagar, extortion and violence by the police is quotidian. A film featuring bootlegging, for instance, would inevitably invite a raid, if not something more serious. While Budhan Theatre's plays have always been political, with actors fearlessly performing in front of police stations and at sites of violence, with film, people and places became more directly exposed. Therefore, the film production process was, more than the traditional theatre format, subject to a local politics of what can be shared, while responding to external expectations. In some of the episodes, the more powerful statements relating to the failure of the state to address the vulnerabilities of communities were edited out for their potential to create problems for those who spoke. Filming issues of marginal livelihoods, and more controversial topics to do with the alcohol business, community quarrels, gender politics, restrictions on intimacies and marriage, was also subject to community censorship (as we will see, it is only in the final episode of Season II that alcohol, so central to the lives and livelihood of the community, features on screen). Censorship was not only towards the state, and as a community within a community, Budhan Theatre had to account for different sensitivities, with those who supported their documentation efforts, and others who resented any 'negative' portrayal of the community as further damaging to their reputation.

This dynamic echoes a wider tension in the politics of self-representation among other marginalised communities. Parry's analysis of the "Koli dilemma" (1972), for instance, shows how groups may alternately embrace or suppress aspects of their identity depending on context, in the pursuit of respectability or upward mobility. This politics of disclosure and concealment is well documented in Dalit contexts, where cultural forms such as beef-eating or drumming are both celebrated and hidden. Once associated with death, pollution and untouchability, the parai drum has for instance become a powerful symbol of assertion in political rallies and cultural festivals through processes of re-symbolisation (Mosse 2012). Yet this transformation is selective, and often incomplete.

Funerary drumming remains a lived reality in rural settings, as do the caste violence and humiliation that accompany it. Continuing to beat the drum, even in 'positive' contexts, may risk reinforcing stigma, which is why many performers now avoid rhythms tied to funerary practice (Gorringe 2016). In Adivasi activism, too, similar tensions surface: the transformation of rituals into 'tribal art', like the Pithora paintings of the Rathava, involve the stripping away of key elements such as intoxication, meat, sexual imagery, and possession traditionally associated with the painting, to reflect dominant caste expectations of purity and morality (Tilche 2022).

That which cannot be spoken, however, is ponderous beyond 'meaning', with structuring effects precisely for its absence. In this respect, in the films, it does not simply disappear. It insists, it rearticulates in other forms and places, within the body of the film itself, sometimes as silence, sometimes as affect, sometimes as aesthetic.

Aesthetic strategies

The films present a series of aesthetic strategies to say that which cannot be said and to articulate the political voice. To understand this, we need to interrogate the plays of light and opacities in the practice of film-making. This is not merely a metaphor, especially in the context of film, where the editorial choices are an explicit management of what can be made visible, and what must remain unseen, and what negated.

Episodes in both Season I and II feature an assemblage of key elements and a consistent bending of, and experimenting with, the boundary between reality and fiction. Drawing on Budhan Theatre's experience, the first key element is performance—adaptations of plays, stories, monologues—each referencing real experiences, deaths, and events. The hyper-realised melodrama of these performances speaks to a specific mode of feeling and performing emotions, and to the psychic moment in which the season was filmed, bringing individualised feelings of anger and helplessness into the collective, emergent public sphere. Alongside these are traditional-style interviews with community members, seated in plastic chairs at home, their words made palpably domestic through cutaways. Holding these together is the figure of the anchor, both guide and empath, who generates affective continuity between expression, experience, and information. Songs form the fourth element: composed in genres from folk to rap, filmed in rooftops and narrow community spaces, they are sung as a lament or as a call to resilience and hope.

In Season I we especially see the use of sublimation as an aesthetic strategy employed to render visible that which cannot be otherwise spoken, both in relation to the articulation of events that are too traumatic to directly express; and in relation to the articulation of a complex DNT political subject. For Freud, sublimation refers to the dispelling of the 'infantile erotic wish' in favour of socially acceptable behaviour (Freud 1905, Laplanche and Plantis 1988: 431-34); it is also a mechanism of transformation identified as the origin of artistic activity. Here we read sublimation as a mechanism through which an impulse that is too terrifying, or culturally 'inappropriate' to express, re-articulates in another form that is culturally acceptable – in this case via the aesthetic. Rather than sublimation as an evasion of the impulse, in the films we see otherwise 'hidden' elements rearticulating into forms that are legible and acceptable, while still carrying within them the kernel of what

was dangerous or forbidden. It is via the aesthetic, in the elements of music, dance and performance, that what is hidden and cannot be said articulates, complicating the 'public transcript' (Scott 1990) as spoken via interviews and more traditional documentary forms.

As a compelling example, is the absurdist adaptation and performance of the Hindi short story "the Village of the Dead" in Episode 5 of Season I. Shot in a dark room, four actors sit in a closed circle with their faces folded into shadows by a candle placed in the middle, the performance tells the story of a dog who ate a human heart, from the perspective of the dog itself. In the story, the dog wanders at night to find half-dead bodies, the bodies of migrant labourers, of slaves, of Covid-19 patients. These are people who are too helpless to love, and so hungry and thirsty that, as the dog bites into their flesh, they too begin to drink their own blood. Through the storytelling, we move from the stillness of the candlelit room through hallucinatory scenes of poverty, hunger, cannibalism, and slow death. The performance is simple and yet so vivid that what we do not see becomes powerfully present and, in this respect, the creative elements that stray from the observational canon serve to create closer, more emotive accounts of experiences that are otherwise too painful, or forbidden, to directly feature on camera. The scale of the horror that the story references is in fact so immense, that a documentary representation would have reduced it to individual or evidentiary matter. This is in any case, at a time when that story could not be told – with the state actively prohibiting testing for Covid-19 and using extraordinary laws to incarcerate journalists for reporting on the pandemic. Instead, the ekphrastic narration overrides not only the absence of the visual presence but also the limits of visual representation (DeSilva, 2021) creating the a/effect of the crisis.

Crucial to the articulation of pain, the category of that which cannot be spoken is also at play in the articulation of a DNT identity. The films, on the one hand, frame DNT communities as respectable citizens, demanding witness to their struggles for survival. This is the voice of dignified victimhood structurally expected in the documentary form, of the unfairly marginalised evoking a moral economy. It is worth noting, for example, that in Season I, alcohol makes no appearance on screen despite it being crucial to the local economy and to its shutdown during the pandemic, when alcohol became both more sought after and harder to procure, and its sale now not only associated with criminality but with the spread of the virus. The public transcript, however, pushes other experiences into the realm of the hidden transcript (Scott 1990). This is, on the other hand, the experience of the women who run the production side of the alcohol business, the young man who chooses to work in the business of bootlegging, or indeed of petty theft. Returning to the opening video, we find a striking disjuncture between spoken word and image, as the chorus "I am not a criminal" contrasts with the affect of the song, the anger in its choreography and the unapologetic 'bad boy' aesthetic: dancing inside cement structures, evoking incarceration, torn jeans, bandanas, reversed baseball hats and angry faces. Here we see the self that expresses pride in being able to feed one's people through the art of theft, which expresses anger at the failure and violence of the state, and a revolutionary impulse without being tamed into a policy negotiation. The hidden

transcript has ruptured onto the main stage, partly in words, but most effectively sublimated as aesthetic.

In Season II, a more overt articulation of the political voice reconfigures elements of the assemblage. As compared to the role of sublimation, for example, performances here highlight reality through hyper-real re-enactment and generate horizontal connections via juxtaposition. Episode 1 of Season II, for example, tells the stories of the Bahurupia community of itinerant performers whose livelihoods collapsed during the pandemic. The episode features two performances, the first from the community itself and the second from Budhan Theatre's actors, both of which are intercut with interviews. In the first, the community performance, we see actors dressed in a range of costumes, of gods, goddesses, and other characters from modern Hindu epics. These scenes are spliced with interviews of male community leaders describing the violence and struggles faced by their people. The frame is visually striking: the lead actor wears a white foundation with black moustache and sideburns, while another, painted with a bloodied eye, speaks solemnly to the camera. The second performance by Ruchika Kodekar, a lead actress from Budhan Theatre, is intercut with the interviews of women, who bore the brunt of feeding entire families through beggary during the pandemic. Dressed up as the mother goddess Kali with her face covered in blue makeup, her tongue sticking out, the actress paraphrases but also interprets the interviews, both for the community and the viewer. As women recount their struggles, walking miles to beg for food, and being beaten up by the police while pregnant for doing so, Kali Mata echoes:

I am mother
And I am hungry,
My children are also hungry,
My household is also hungry
Hunger and struggle have very old connections
When the pandemic came everything stopped,
There was no work
And no grains of food to eat
I was pregnant at the time
I was hungry
And with me, my children were hungry too
When I asked for food, then I received sticks
After falling down, I had to go back
You entertain yourself with TV and mobile phones
But I am a born artist
Yes, a born artist
Which you call Bahurupia
I feed my family by showing my art
But today I am receiving sticks instead of food.

The creative use of intercutting as a technique produces a rich ethnographic layer, which picks up, reinterprets, transforms, augments and hyper-realises the political voice. This exists in continuity with a longer tradition in Budhan Theatre's theatre practice, which

takes real-life stories and re-enacts them both to communities and to power. Differently from theatre, in film the interpretative work of Budhan Theatre is made more clearly evident: there is a reality to which the hyper-real performances directly refer. Through the intercut, these are made adjacent, creating continuity, in meaning and affect, between temporalities.

If in this first episode the political voice, although augmented via performances, remains composed, as we move through the series, we see a shift from a more respectable voice to an unruly one, one that, paying witness to the sheer dispossession of the participants eventually calls for a revolution. "They treat us like animals", is the title of episode 9 – a line echoed by several interviewees alongside accounts of chronic hunger, backbreaking work, and lives consigned to the most abject poverty, with no hope of redemption for themselves or the next generation. Focused on the Sindhi-Dafer DNT Muslim community, one of India's poorest, marked by both religious and historical marginalisation, the episode uses interviews and hyper-realised performances linked through intercutting. But here, the actors do not merely echo the interviewees; they rupture through the screen, demanding the attention of both audience and state. "Our children are not very smart," says one woman, seated on the mud floor of her home, "we have raised them on food every other day. We have to live under this oppression." Rather than mirroring these resigned voices, Budhan Theatre actors interject with a parallel dialogue that urges those with power to act. The shift in tone and addressivity (Bakhtin 1981) is striking: where the actress playing Kali once spoke *as* the interviewee, here she appears as herself, taking centre stage and speaking in her own voice, directly to the viewer: "Those who care about the weak should speak," she exhorts. "Would you be hungry and stay quiet? One must speak up." In doing so, the performers address Bakhtin's superaddressee: the imagined third party who listens sympathetically and understands justly.

Conclusion

Season II concludes with a rap song, sung in the streets of Chharanagar by the core team of Budhan Theatre actors-directors. The song, itself a mélange of music video and documentary styles, holds together a series of contradictions. For the first time, we see the illegal brewing of alcohol on screen, via vivid images of plastic containers bubbling with foam, and of the distilled liquor poured into old whiskey bottles. We also hear about its centrality to the community in terms of sustaining its livelihood, for which women are central. We see the celebration of Chharanagar as a "good place" alongside the acknowledgment of theft, bootlegging, gambling as the key economies of the community. If people like to fight, they also like to dance. The song is a hymn to the community, and an instance in which the 'injurious' and the 'respectable' come together, coexisting with tension yet not in contradiction. We have here the articulation of the Chhara/DNT political subject, one that is unlocated and yet rooted in the community, with Chharanagar (literally the place of the Chharas) itself referred as "my country" (mera desh); a subject that is criminal/ised and yet with an ethical element to the self, there is a sense of justice and importantly a sense of joy.

Produced in a context of high crisis, in the midst of a global pandemic in which DNT communities became even more evidently dispensable, the films of Budhan Stories are an instance of art as survivance (Biddle 2016), offering an insistence on life. The films enable the consolidation of a political subject and collectivity at the margins, by generating forms of connectedness, continuity and presence. This is first and foremost in the material process of making the films, as artists become aware of their own conditions of existence and experience and of that of other DNT communities, via the use of the Bhantu language, the identification of shared vulnerabilities rooted in common histories of marginalisation. The films establish forms of continuity within the community in the present: the sense of a collective self, of shared sorrow and joy, of what is in the very first episode evocatively called an 'intimate community'; and with the past, via the presence of ancestors and the dead. They enable the emergence of a political voice that makes specific demands and speak the language of justice, and ultimately a revolutionary voice that creates the imagination necessary for collective action.

The DNT political subject we have presented, is one that is not structured by a relationship to land, homeland or its absence, nor by a notion of pre-colonial authenticity to which it desires a return. Neither is it a subject that can simply be understood in terms of an oppositional frame of the self and other but is rather an unruly subject marked by (ongoing) histories of movement, settlement and by criminalisation. As the result of 'conflicting circumstances', this subject is not one that is idealised, but one that plays with its own illegibility, a politics of the oppressed that must hold together what seems from the outside as contradictory. In examining the making and mobilisation of films we identified a duality in the DNT political subject between the celebration of what makes DNT community distinct, and indeed criminalized, and a drive towards respectability. The films are carachterised by an interplay between this duality. There are categories of things which cannot be spoken, which must however find articulation. These elements, while in tension, are held together by the aesthetic – in the strategies of sublimation, hyper-realisation, inter-cutting at play in the films.

The creation of a sui generis assemblage in Budhan Stories, was a practical solution developed by the collective of artists to the shutting down of physical spaces for embodied performance creatively addressing the restrictions of filming during a pandemic. It was also an aesthetic-political strategy to circumvent issues of censorship and to give expression to an 'unsettled' political subject, with no clear position from which to speak. As an anathema to the project of modernity, this is a subject that is not easily absorbed within the forms of recognition offered by the postcolonial nation – of language, territory, caste, religion. It cannot, in other words occupy existent political forms of intelligibility. As such, this unruly subject emerging from ongoing histories of criminalisation must be creative, insist on its own language and generate a new grammar of politics.

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