Historical Research as an Advocacy Tool in India

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Chapter Nine

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Introduction

Exploring approaches to history in two community film projects related to the Gujarat-based 'Theatre for Community Development' project, this chapter suggests that historical methodologies allow new filmmakers to critically interrogate the relationship between the individual and the state and the problems of social alienation and exclusion. It looks at how historical research has been employed as a means of personalising and publicising differences and inequalities in resource allocation, and the ways in which communities confront violence. The first section of the chapter sets out the formation of Budhan Theatre and the activist organisation the Denotified Tribes Rights Action Group (DNT RAG), and the ways in which researchers and academics have typically worked with the organisation. Budhan has been proactive in locating and developing long-term collaborations with academic researchers — something which links back, partly, to its initial mobilisation in connection with the work of its founder, literary critic and activist Ganesh Devy. In the case of their recent historical themes, this has also been about the generation of content for participatory arts and filmmaking. The second part of the chapter sets out the key historical contexts for exploring Denotified Tribes (DNT) histories and the alternative themes that have been taken up in particular by community organisations. Most importantly, it sets out the pivotal importance of the phase of decolonisation and the role of colonialism (and the

regimes of independent India) in defining forms of 'criminality' (a contested term in the context of DNT communities, also sometimes termed 'Criminal Tribes'). The third part of the chapter shows how processes of historical work by community organisations have been both innovative and internally critical. It argues that community engagement with history through the arts is not simply a means for the group to find material or to represent community problems: it has become a means for changing the way in which such community histories might be done — specifically looking at new methods for uncovering what historians of India since the mid 1980s have described as the 'subaltern voice'. In this, new ideas about the nature of archives and the process of historical representation suggest that the formal archive for 'Criminal Tribe' history needs to be critiqued in new ways, and that memory and orality have specific roles in this endeavour.

Background and the Formation of DNT RAG

Budhan Theatre was established in 1998 by Ganesh Devy, literary critic and activist, who in 1998 founded the Denotified Tribes Rights Action Group, with the acclaimed Bengali writer Mahasweta Devi (D'Souza 1999). The formation and work of Budhan relates to the complex predicament of an extensive array of communities across India, who were defined in the late colonial period as 'Criminal Tribes', or hereditary criminals under a specific legislative enactment — the Criminal Tribes Act. The Act was first passed in 1871, but subsequently amended through the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries to institute an increasingly elaborate structure of penal administration for

ethnographically defined criminal communities. This resulted in a range of restrictions on movement and collective incarceration, even after India's independence in 1947, following their 'denotification' and the end of formal 'Criminal Tribe' status (Radhakrishna 2007). The initial motivation for the creation of the group related to the occurrence of custodial deaths and violence at the hands of the police. As we will see below, these forms of violence have been historicised in important ways over the last 25 years in the recreation of past events that channel the relationship between postcolonial and colonial violence. The name 'Budhan' itself largely epitomises this: the figure of Budhan Sabar, a member of the denotified Kheria Sabar community in West Bengal, was murdered on 17 February 1998 in police custody, following several days of interrogation and torture (D'Souza 1999). This event presaged the formation of the theatre group itself, as well as the performance over a period of a number of years of the play *Budhan*. The latter dramatizes the events of Budhan's custodial death and is always performed in street theatre form (Schwarz 2010, p.2). By 2010, the group had performed 25 major works in tours across India: *Budhan* (Budhan) (1998), *Pinya Hari Kale Ki Maut* (1999) (Death of Pinya Hari Kale), *Encounter* (Encounter) (2001), *Majhab Hamein Sikhata Aapas Mein Bair Rakhna (Religion Teaches Us to Hate Each Other)* (2002), *Ulgulan* (A continuous fight) (2006), *Mujhe Mat Maro… Saab* (Please don't beat me, Sir) (2006), *Bhukh* (Hunger) (2007), *Bhagawa Barrack* (Saffron Barrack) (2007), *Bhoma (Bhoma)* (2004), *Khoj (Search)* (2005), *Ek Chhoti Si Ladai* (A small conflict) (2005), *Choli Ke Picche Kya Hai?* (What is behind the bra) (2007), *Ek Aur Balcony) (One more Balcony)* (2008), *Ek Chhoti Si Asha, (A Little hope) Sangharsh Aur Siddhi (Struggle and*

Achievement), Hamari Zindagi (Our Life) Hamare Gaun (Our villages) (Malelkar 2009).

Theatre, as an organisation, has two specific functions, which have a wider and more important resonance in challenging existing paradigms of citizenship in India. Firstly, it seeks to develop the artistic careers of young actors and performers in Chharanagar, a settlement on the outskirts of Ahmedabad in the Northwestern Indian state of Gujarat. Since its beginning, Budhan has cultivated promising performers from Chharanagar as part of a larger community education project. Alongside the theatre, Budhan has developed a small library containing Hindi, Gujarati and English books and a small archive of newspaper cuttings about the group's activities. In more recent times, Budhan has also branched into film documentary-making with its members. Secondly, it has become a base for collaboration with a number of lobbying organisations, from the DNT RAG to specific community organisations such as Sansmul Bhantu Samaj (an organisation dedicated to the community interests of the wider pan-Indian Bhantu communities of which Chharas are a part). With these organisations, it has successfully advocated for the improved human rights of the DNTs, seeing participatory theatre and film as particularly powerful tools to mobilise their community to action. Over the last 25 years, Budhan has worked with a number of agencies, and particularly academics to use research to inform its practice, highlighting both the potential of art informed by detailed archival research, and the challenges of producing politically informed work that must negotiate the nuanced image of the past invariably produced by such research.

Work on Budhan as a form of community-based arts activism has acknowledged the larger significance of these groups for the promotion of citizenship rights in India and in general. Budhan has shown a persistent desire to connect with researchers and scholars, both in terms of developing practice methodologies, but also for gathering content for productions. For one scholar, Budhan's work promotes strategies for everyday survival, respectability, non-discriminatory living and education, to counter 'stigmatized life, untimely death and hollow citizenship'. The work of Budhan, according to Dia DaCosta is also a means of countering the hollowness of neoliberal creative spheres and the majoritarianism of the political mainstream in India, and in the case of Gujarat in particular, the party of the state government on the Hindu right — the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). (DaCosta 2017, p.242)

Since at least the mid 1990s, a number of external collaborators — mostly academics and researchers both in India and further afield — have begun to explore the nature of research-based advocacy with DNT communities in India, and most prominently with the Chharas in Ahmedabad. In most cases, this advocacy has taken the form of co-production in the arts — something which directly plays on the traditions of Chharas as historic street performers (Schwarz 2010, p.113-4). The most obvious and extensive academic interest in the activities of Budhan Theatre, and the groups it represents, has arisen in the first instance from the extensive work of Ganesh Devy. Devy's connections with the denotified tribes, and his role in forming the DNT RAG came out of a longer-term interest in the problems of dying languages — a

large-scale research commitment to the recovery of India's vast array of lesser-spoken adiviasi tongues (Devy 2012). This project led him to set up the People's Linguist Survey of India and the associated publication organisation: Bhasha Research and Publication Centre, based in Baroda. One of Devy's overarching aims has been to recover what he sees as the vulnerable or lost cultural archives of India's tribal (*adivasi*) communities, which are not only remote, but actively obscured and distorted by official or mainstream archiving practices (Devy 2006).

Most of the further collaboration with Budhan has focussed on the role of theatre and the performing arts in rights movements. Henry Schwarz was one of the first non-Indian academics to carry out extensive co-produced work with Budhan Theatre, working with its main director, Dakxin Chhara in 1998, encouraged by Mahasveta Devi. His work explores a number of plays performed by the group, including *Budhan* itself (Schwarz 2010). Since that point, like most of the academics involved in the DNT movement, he has directly engaged in cultural and political activism for the DNTs, setting up a US-based foundation 'Vimukti', which helps to fundraise for its projects. In 1998, Schwarz documented the first performance of the play *Budhan* and has since used it as a cultural means to publicise atrocities on DNTs. In 2004-5, Schwarz collaborated with another anthropologist, Kerim Friedman, and independent filmmaker Shashwati Talukdar as co-producer to make a short film about the arrest of Dakxin Chhara, *Acting like a Thief* in 2004-5. As a co-producer with Friedman and Shahswati, he also made the longer film *Please, Don't Beat me Sir* which was the result of footage taken between 2005 and

2009 (Schwarz 2010). This film has been used in pedagogy, particularly Anthropology, around the themes of arts in activism. In the vein of Devy's work, Schwarz has focussed on the recovery of community-specific histories — the archive of ex-Criminal Tribes, with a specific focus on texts from the arts — literature, scripts and documented street performances.

Other more recent external collaborators and co-producers with Budhan have explored the role of spatiality in the marginalisation of Chharas in Ahmedabad (Johnston and Bajrange 2014), and the development of alternative forms of creative economy among street performers in the city. In this latter area, the Canada based academic in Educational Policy Studies, Dia DaCosta has worked with Budhan Theatre since 2008, conducting research on the socio-economic and political challenges faced by Chharas. She has, in particular, explored what might be described as the political aspects of the 'creative economy' in India and, in collaboration with Budhan Theatre, published a monograph in this area, located in the work of the organisation (DaCosta 2017). As well as examining the specifically gendered nature of work in Chharanagar, DaCosta's political economy of performance examines alternative forms of creative economy that seek to explain the generational shift from petty crime to the arts. Perhaps most persuasively, DaCosta's work frames these changes in the creative economy in the context of on-going and routine displacement, political marginalisation and violence on/among communities such as the DNTs in western India.

Implicit in much of this work is reference to historical narratives and forms of historical memory, and in some cases, the nature of the archive itself. The latter, as the work of Devy and Schwarz argue, are pivotal to the processes of social marginalisation experienced by Chharas and denotified tribes more broadly: the official archive has largely fixed communities as objects of the state's control — appearing only as targets of penal policy or legal reform. So far however, there have been relatively few attempts — largely because of these limitations of the formal archive itself — to connect the contemporary arts practices of DNT communities to either formal archival historical studies, or the generation of historical memory studies. Yet, as the following section argues, the process of historical recovery has become central to the advocacy politics of Chharas and other DNT groups, especially as a means of navigating the complex identity politics (and its associated economies) of early Twenty-First-Century India.

The Ex-Criminal Tribes and Alternative Histories

Perhaps two of the most important historical themes for organisations such as Budhan Theatre and its wider associations have been: firstly, deeper community histories and the 'origins' of collective criminality; and secondly, the historical phase of independence and political freedom, characteristically described as the 'freedom movement'. In both cases, Budhan presents a deliberate critique of mainstream national histories, in an attempt to valorise the political importance of the broader Sansi and Bhantu communities.[i] Each historical phase — the first representing the struggle of the Rajput kingdoms (specifically Rana Pratap) against the Mughals and the second the end of

British power in India — captures the beginning and end points of what community activists (drawing on long-standing anthropological work) have commonly depicted as the fall into 'social degradation' (Bhargava 1949). Communities describe their support for (and, in some cases, descent from) the Rajput king, Rana Pratap, as a means of explaining the decision to adopt a nomadic lifestyle following his military defeat in the late Sixteenth Century. In other accounts, Sansis and Kanjars (specific caste/tribe communities, many nomadic, in the north west of India) were hired informants for Rana Pratap, cutlers or soldiers, providing invaluable military service to a Hindu ruler of north-western India (Parihar 2006). After the defeat of Pratap by the Mughal emperor Akbar, these communities, collectively descended from a clan of Suryavanshi Rajputs, dispersed into the forests to take up a life of dacoity (gang robbery) and theft (Hasan, Rizvi and Das 2005, pp.263-267). Evoking their history as military bondsmen (Kolff 2002, p.18), these communities projected trust and loyalty to a ruler. At the same time, their movement across boundaries (both social and physical) was also a means of asserting modern civic rights (Gould, Chhara and Gandee 2018). Despite recent research suggesting that criminal occupations predated it (Piliavsky 2015), the turn to formal criminality has, by most organisations, been attributed to changes brought by colonial law in its new definitions of criminality, eventually defined by culture and heredity. The key representation of the history of criminality then, has largely followed the themes set out by Ganesh Devy in his work on the longer-term marginalisation of tribal communities in India: the state and majoritarian society have been pivotal in the marginalisation and (by extension) criminalisation of these communities (Radhakrishna 2001).

Given the centrality of colonialism and the state more broadly to these historical configurations of criminality, Budhan Theatre has both directly and indirectly made reference to the role of the Criminal Tribes in India's freedom movement or struggle for independence. The overarching motif of this work has been reference to the idea of a delayed independence, or an alternative freedom struggle, centred on the experiences of tribesmen and women in the open prisons or 'settlements'.[ii] There are three strands to this narrative that cut across mainstream histories of anti-colonial nationalism. First is the lost 'contribution' of Criminal Tribes to the freedom struggle itself, or the attempts by tribesmen and women to take part in a range of mass movements. Here the histories of community members' criminality has been harnessed in a different way: 'law breaking' is represented as a means of combating an illegitimate (in this case colonial) state. The reference point of Sultan Dhaku, at the height of Gandhian nationalism, is important here: the latter carried out dacoities (robberies) in the United Provinces during the early 1920s' mass movements around Gandhi's 'Non-Cooperation' policy and was aided in his activities both by local tribes-people and the general population. In addition, he used the settlements themselves (in typical narratives, the north Indian open prisons in Moradabad) as a base for his operations. More directly, ex-Criminal Tribes have entered the official archive as industrial workers involved in labour disputes in western India (particularly around the large industrial city of Sholapur), and as participants in the largest anti-colonial movement of the 1940s, Quit India in 1942 (Gould, Chhara and Gandee 2018).

The second theme in these alternative narratives of anti-colonialism is the idea of a delayed release from the settlements, which resulted from what is seen by communities themselves as the continued post-colonial state's neglect of ex-Criminal Tribes. Here, a common narrative is that the initial forms of proto-welfare, reform and employment brought by the settlement regimes in the late colonial period were withdrawn on independence and not replaced by any substantive alternative reliefs. This narrative is coupled with the idea of 'delayed' release from settlements in 1952, which led to the creation of an alternative 'independence day' on 31 August (given the name today of *Vimukti Diwas*), to mark the overall repeal of the Criminal Tribes Act. Perhaps most importantly, this historical theme draws on the notion that ex-Criminal Tribes had no central advocate for their politics and welfare, unlike Dalit (ex-untouchable) groups who, over the late colonial and early independence period, were able to draw on the leadership of India's first Law Minister, B.R. Ambedkar. As a result the DNT movement as a whole, and Budhan Theatre in particular, hold a complex relationship with the politics of Ambedkar. On the one hand, he is feted as a hero of marginalised communities, and protector of Dalits via their status as 'Scheduled Castes'. A number of ex-Criminal Tribes fall within that official category, particularly in parts of north-western and western India (Gandee 2018). A life-size cardboard cut-out of Ambedkar, in traditional pose holding India's constitution, stands in the corner of the Chharanagar library to mark this recognition. On the other hand, the Ambedkarite movements have noticeably excluded or marginalised ex-Criminal Tribes and the latter have argued that their inability to leverage constitutional protections relates to the absence of their own 'Ambedkar'-like

figure (Gould and Chhara 2014). The historical sensibility, then, around the early post-independence period, independence and political leadership is strongly informed by contemporary debates about the possible requirements of DNTs in different parts of India for a separate schedule of caste reservations.

The third theme is the continued criminalisation of DNTs by post-colonial regimes, despite the existence of formal constitutional protections. The central aspect of this narrative is the replacement of the Criminal Tribes Act with a Habitual Offender's Bill, which in its substance largely replicates some of the key aspects of the Criminal Tribes Act Amendment of 1924 (Gandee 2018). Since the 1950s, the decade in which most of the state and central leglisation was finalised, communities of ex-Criminal Tribes have reported the sense in which they have faced continued police scrutiny, extreme and unfair penalties for repeat crimes, and continued social ostracism. This is epitomised in the continued use of the notion of Criminal Tribes in policing manuals. But it is also connected to the means by which DNTs, particularly in western and north-western India, have been co-opted into caste and communal violence (Devy 2006; DaCosta 2017). This particular historical sensibility has its reflection in the powerful predicament faced by these communities in the present, which is popularly connected to longer-term practices of group criminalisation (Radhakrishna 2001, pp.146-156).

All three of these areas linking to the histories of the late colonial period and its pre-history in early colonial or pre-colonial times have been naturally

coloured by the archive itself. It is perhaps no surprise that the nature of the archive has produced its own cultural orthodoxy in recent times. In many respects it becomes a thing that morphs into whatever a person wants to find within it. Thus, Antoinette Burton highlights the Greek word 'arkheion', or house of the superior magistrate, as indicative of the liminal areas of private and public in the archive (Burton 2003, pp.5-7). Burton draws on Derrida's 'Archive Fever', which focuses on the email archive, a form of writing preserving the past and embodying the promise of the present to the future. For Derrida too, the force of the archive is that events are themselves structured by the technologies of archiving or 'archivization' (Derrida 1998, p.11). Dovetailing with Foucault's treatment of the historical archive in *Archaeology of Knowledge,* this is a repository then that is not a collection, but a *system,* as Foucault puts it, the 'general system of the formulation and transformation of statements' (Foucault 1982, p.146). This does not stop us from thinking, however, about the voices that come through statements in the archive, and as we will rather suggest, lead to contrary voices; subversions and challenges to what appear as the hegemonic forms set out by Derrida. For Ann Laura Stoler, colonial archives set out anxieties around the control over information. Rather than a relentless pursuit for knowledge as power, the archive produces the often arbitrary and messy exercise of colonial authority. Stoler describes this as the psychic and affective spaces of imperial dispositions, or the 'well tended conditions of disregard' (Stoler 2010, p.256). Drawing on Spivak's idea of 'sanctioned ignorance', this asks the question of what lies behind the ignorance — the messier, unsettled space between knowing and not knowing.

As with many other marginalised communities in India, it is the limitations of the archive itself that have in many respects determined the kinds of questions asked by both the historian and the community activist. The relative lack of direct formal archival material in which tribesmen and women appear as active subjects has foregrounded the theme of subaltern voice, the recovery of historical subjectivity and questions of social and political representation. These themes are, of course, pivotal to the very basis of DNT identity politics, since claims for recognition have been largely based on the idea of a critique of state-driven or externally determined ethnic markers. The central political questions for most activists within the DNT movement or among similar ex-Criminal tribe movements concern how far those external markers, given they are related to state notions of criminality, should or should not be strategically mobilised. In other respects, there are more straightforward problems in this lack of a formal archive, which relate to enumeration. Given that the most effective means of promoting DNT rights persists in political and administrative recognition in the state-driven systems of caste reservations, mapping the social condition, occupations and demographic characteristics of DNT communities has been a key concern. However, the latter project is hindered by the very politics of marginality and archival omission noted above: a function of DNTs social exclusion and criminalisation relates to their spatial and social marginality, which militates against the positivist social science analyses favoured by governments at all levels. The irony here is that, from the early years of the Criminal Tribes Act's enforcement in the early Twentieth Century, acknowledged inaccuracies in

population recording, ambiguities around caste or tribe identities, or changes in status continually undermined the operation of the Act itself (Gandee 2018).

History, filmmaking and political advocacy

These questions of identity, representation, methods of political advocacy and enumeration suggest that historical research is key to both internal community activities and to state-driven projects of welfare. This is especially the case, since typical quantitative social science methodologies have tended to reinforce status ambiguities, silences and omissions, recreating the very bases of marginality that the DNTs seek to redress. The final section of this chapter explores two filmmaking projects which examined how historical research (as documentary) can promote community advocacy by unpacking the nuances of DNT identity politics. The first relates to a film researched, shot and edited between 2011 and 2013 in a collaboration between Budhan (directed by Dakxin Chhara) and the University of Leeds, resulting in the historical documentary *Birth 1871* (2014), which explores the experiences of settlement (open-prison) life for ex-Criminal Tribes in western India, and their concepts of political independence in the late 1940s. The second resulted in a short community-based film, *Who Am I Mom?* (2017)*,* directed and produced by two leading figures in Budhan — Abhishek Indrekar and Atish Indrekar. This short fiction film was shot on the location of a DNT settlement on the outskirts of Ahmedabad, and examines the experiences of a local community child around history and discrimination. In different ways, each film explores the limits (and potentialities) of archival research and historical memory as a basis for community mobilisation.

Birth 1871 was based in a combination of archival and field work, bringing together the official archives around the penal administration of the Criminal Tribes Act, colonial ethnographies and settlement reports, with the everyday experiences of community members in the late colonial and early independence periods. Among the central scenes in the film are the direct testimonies of elderly male and female detainees in the Ahmedabad and other settlements in present day Gujarat and Maharashtra, such as Sholapur — and in particular, the narratives of Ladho Bhen and Bhimrao Jadav who remembered the 1940s. The film intermixes the documentary archive with talking-head interviews that both explicate and complicate the official archive. Whereas, for example, the paper archive sets out the structured demographic and behavioural characteristics of communities in settlements, the older interviewees set out the forms of resistance to these regimes, which manifested themselves through movement (Ladho Behn relates her travelling experiences between different regions and settlements and the importance of her knowledge to the settlement regime itself) and political participation. In the latter area, Jadav sets out the ways in which, despite the reformist attempts of the settlement administration to control communities, the latter involved themselves in labour politics and anti-colonial protest. These short interviews are interspersed with tabulated data from shots of the archive, including (in the case of the Salvation Army Centre at William Booth College, London) the archival repository itself. The latter presents a picture of order, control and reform, which contrasts sharply with the interviewees' accounts. In the latter, the settlement becomes a base for further criminality, or political mobilisation. Yet at the same time, interviewees make reference to the archive's

ethnographic descriptions — Jadav described the key community names that corresponded to the tabulated data in the Settlement Reports. The film shows how, despite the archive omitting the experiences of those subject to official control, it is nevertheless constituted by those very experiences, which, in a manner suggested by Ann Laura Stoler, slip through the official narratives. In this sense, *Birth 1871* offers a potential means for reading archives as a way of locating subaltern voices, that moves beyond traditional or limited approaches of simply 'reading across the grain' of the formal archives, or atomising larger political processes (Washbrook and O'Hanlon 2000). As a result, as we shall discuss further below, it potentially allows the archive to be used more fruitfully as a tool of advocacy.

Birth 1871 also presents two government servants who engage with the official archive in a different way — a police officer from the Uttar Pradesh (north Indian state) cadre who discusses the policing around the Criminal Tribes Act and its continued pertinence in the post-independence period; and an officer who worked in Criminal Tribe Settlements under the auspices of the Salvation Army in India. Here the juxtaposition between oral accounts and the paper archive is much more direct — the words of the Salvation Army officer are replicated in late colonial texts, suggesting a direct line between the official narratives of supposed criminality and the views of interviewees. In one section, the officer relates a story of how, when being offered work through the Settlement, a particular community argued: 'Work? We don't work!' — words that are then directly replicated in personal paper accounts in a Salvation Army record. Similarly, the police officer discusses the detailed

modus operandi of particular communities in talking about his work in the 1950s and 1960s. Again, the narrative corresponds to the text of late colonial police ethnographies, such as that of Michael Kennedy and Edward Gunthorpe (Kennedy 1908; Gunthorpe 1882). The line between the official archive and the views of officers involved in the administration of the Criminal Tribes Act is perhaps not surprising. But the film juxtaposes the two sets of archival comparisons — those of the community members and those of the officers — to suggest the complex means by which (and points at which) criminal identities come to be officially and socially constructed. At the same time, it suggests that the uneasy realities of tribes people's engagement with the state are not always entirely absent from the official archive, even though they are obscured.

Birth 1871 was screened to a range of different audiences in India, Europe and the US and was also viewed by the Department for Social Justice in its preparation for an Interim Report on the status of DNT communities in India in 2017. As well as indicating the need for caution in turning to official colonial and postcolonial data in exploring the lives of ex-Criminal Tribes, the film gave a very clear indication of the continued salience of these histories to communities' contemporary lives: the problem of continued criminalisation, for example, was clearly illustrated in the depiction of custodial violence and the police operations targeted at women in Chharanagar. These were rooted in the colonial past in the film's interviews. These historical memories and their archival inaccuracies are crucial in setting out the possible means by which collective mobilisation can take place around the identity politics of DNTs. The

variable reservation status of DNTs across India, and their relationship to 'disadvantage', is shown by the film to be multi-layered and complex, suggesting that the existing constitutional structures for protecting marginal communities need to be extended.

The second film explored here was written, produced and directed entirely from within the Chhara community itself in the winter and spring of 2017, among actors and activists in Budhan. The screenplay was generated from small production team meetings among the actors and casting, production and location scouting was also part of a collective process. *Who Am I Mom?* is a fictional account of a young girl who is a member of a DNT community living in makeshift accommodation on the outskirts of a large city. The location, which was based in an actual DNT encampment, was chosen to replicate the feel of a documentary, while exploring certain dramatic episodes. Much of the film's footage is therefore also taken up with the everyday life of the settlement: children playing, food preparation, camel carts transporting wood and household cleaning. The main events of the film are also incidental: the main character — the young girl — overhears the deliberations of a community *panchayat* (council), which discusses a dispute around a relationship. In the course of the *panchayat,* one of the elders mentions the fact that members of the community should emulate their ancestor — Rana Pratap. The girl runs back to her mother and asks about Rana Pratap. Her mother confirms that he was a king, leaving her daughter with the impression that she and her people have royal ancestry. When the girl and her friend are subsequently asked to go to get milk from a local shop on the outskirts of the

city, on the other side of a section of jungle, they are abused by the shopkeeper, who is on the look-out for theft, as 'dirty thieves' and told to leave the area immediately. The girl hurries back to her mother in tears and poses the question– 'Who Am I?' There is no answer to the question and the film ends with a shot of the mother's face, clearly distressed by her daughter's treatment.

Fig. 9.1 Closing shot of *Who Am I Mom?* (Still from film).

Who Am I Mom? makes reference to one of the most important aspects of community historical memory — that of the tribe's decline from service to the Rajput kings in north western India in the pre-colonial period. It also suggests that such collective memory is held and transmitted via some of the main community organisations — in this case the *panchayat.* Historical knowledge, in this sense, rather like the content of *Birth 1871*, is presented as contingent and locational, operating in alternative archives. Its key role is to help to generate a sense of community identity and it has an instructional and disciplining function: historical parallels are used to enforce local community

orders about relationship misdemeanours in the *panchayat* and the importance of Rana Pratap is repeated by the mother in explaining to the girl the need to maintain pride in the community. The use of historical knowledge is also presented as problematic. The young girl's alienation is produced by the false sense of hope built up by a community history that no longer has relevance or traction. The history is also a limited, specifically community one that it not acknowledged beyond the jungle that separates off the DNT settlement.

In conveying this separation, the film depicts very clearly the alienation of the community from the urban space — the girl and her friend are filmed in an important sequence tracing their way through a section of jungle as they travel to the shop for milk. The journey does not follow a road, but rather a mud path, suggesting the community's disengagement from basic infrastructural features of the urban environment. This separation, then, is mirrored by the knowledge-separation presented in the main dramatic sequence of the girl's alienation from a sense of her own history, bluntly set out in the contrast between her perception of ancestry and her eviction by the shopkeeper for even appearing at the shop.

Perhaps the most significant point about *Who Am I Mom?* is the process of historical thinking contained in its production. The film, created by relatively young and new filmmakers, primed members of Budhan again for the multiple uses and problems of historical representation. Reference to community-based ideas of ancestry are presented as part of the tragedy of the DNT

predicament. As a result, members of Budhan are keen to not simply explore the means by which historical research can bolster identity politics and rights claims, but also to set out a more critical community history. As with the company's theatre scripts, its filmmaking has employed collective methods, with storyboards decided via joint discussion. And, as with theatre, historical themes have continued to be centrally important to these narratives. In most cases, as we have seen with *Who Am I Mom?*, but also in plays such as *Budhan,* and other projects, Budhan deliberately connects the complex and messy problems of everyday life to larger historical processes. In what the group describes as 'Theatre for Social Action', creators see the process of performing hard truths as a means of connecting with their history (Gould 2017). These ideas of the everyday are always experimental and contingent, reflected in another recent initiative which has used 'Playback Theatre', taking the direct stories and accounts of members of the community from interviews to create theatre pieces. The central concept here is that all individual stories have a value and are worthy of public narration and representation.

Conclusion

Historical research clearly has a specific place in advocacy methods adopted by communities such as the Chharas in Ahmedabad, via organisations like Budhan Theatre. This is partly because of the longer-term historical predicament of the communities themselves that are determined in large part by the history of the state, and especially its administrative and legislative forms around penal policy. The marginalisation and social disadvantage experienced by ex-Criminal Tribes is directly related to our means of

interpreting the history of the state. It is also, perhaps, precisely because the many formal narratives of this history are problematic when it comes to exploring the everyday lives of these communities that recent historical interventions have taken an especially critical turn. Some of the most productive recent historical explorations of DNT history have taken on board, for example, the deep rooted politics of criminality in longer-term community histories (Piliavsky 2015); the contradictions and tensions inherent in the Criminal Tribes Act and its successor legislation (Gandee 2018); or the complex inter-relationship between caste and tribe (Chandra 2015).

Exploring history in a more performative way, however, can become a means for communities to both confront and publicise more broadly the predicaments faced by ex-Criminal Tribe communities. A recurrent theme in Budhan's street performances, and in the film projects undertaken by its members, has been the nature of state violence and how communities have dealt with it. This is something that continues to be a reality for many in Chharanagar and neighbourhoods like it — in late July 2018, Chharanagar was subject to a violent police raid, following an altercation between two young members of the community and Ahmedabad officers due to a stop and search incident. A number of elderly members of the community were assaulted during the raid, properties broken into and a large number of people detained. Such events have been relatively common throughout the history of this part of the neighbourhood, and in this case (as in the past), Budhan Theatre has plans to turn the event into a piece of street theatre (Ramanathan 2018). Community

activists are all too aware that the roots of policing powers and the ethnicising of crime in these instances is very much rooted in the colonial past.

In methodological terms, historical events and the nature of the archive itself can be interrogated through performing arts and film. The two films explored here suggest that the combination of oral historical work with the formal archive brings greater nuance to our sense of when, and means by which, criminality comes to be officially and socially constructed. In one way, conducting historical documentary work provides new means for reading and using archives, and brings a clearer sense of how the archive is constituted by popular belief systems in some respects, and how apparent certainties about political behaviours are unreliable and fragile. In general, such work highlights the inadequacies of the formal archive and the need for a critical approach to typical historical sources on Denotified communities.

Finally, community filmmaking, especially when it contains participatory research, allows historical research to be internally critiqued by organisations using historical data. *Who Am I Mom?* explored the ways in which communities can be alienated from their own histories, especially when those histories are mediated through powerful and patriarchal community organisations. Nevertheless, this film, and others like it being explored and produced by organisations like Budhan, clearly aim to show how individual and specific community histories connect to larger historical processes, and how, in exploring those connections, we can valourise the individual

experiences of those who face daily challenges to their rights as citizens of India.

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i The Sansi and Bhantu communities are a collection of tribes and castes from the North West and western parts of India that claim Rajput descent, but who were subsequently delineated as 'Criminal Tribes'. Within the wider Bhantu collectivity are a range of sub-groups or individual castes and tribes.

ii Criminal Tribe settlements were set up from 1908, most of which served as open prisons for groups that had been notified by the colonial state. They often contained whole families of offenders, although in some provinces children were separated from parents. In western India, a number of 'industrial settlements' were established to provide labour for large public works projects.