



Sharing India's Hidden History

Written by Abhishek Indrekar



Abhishek Indrekar on a shoot with Budhan Theatre

My name's Abhishek Indrekar and I'm 23 years old. I'm an independent documentary film maker and theatre artist working mainly in India. I'm going to share some of my views on why young voices matter through films and theatre.

Introduction to India's Hidden History

India, as a country, has seen a lot of influential movements in the past about various socio-political issues including caste, land rights, community violence and gender inequality. A very large stratum of the Indian population has totally forgotten about those tribes which were an integral part of the Indian Independence struggle. Just imagine: what if your very existence becomes non-existent to the government? Where you have to prove to the government that you or your tribe actually exist? The Indian political system works on the electoral votes of its citizens. This reminds me of a saying by the young, persecuted Dalit scholar [Rohith Vemula](#):

“The value of a man was reduced to his immediate identity and nearest possibility. To a vote. To a number. To a thing.”

In the same way, the Indian government forgot about those tribes which were stigmatized as “Born Criminals” (otherwise known today as [Denotified and Nomadic Tribes or DNTs](#)) by the British Colonial Government in the year 1871 under the ‘Criminal Tribes Act’. Suddenly, in the year of 1952, five years after Indian independence, the government came to know about such tribes who were then living in an open jail. I guess at that time, they must have needed large chunks of electoral votes for their elections. These Criminal Tribes then had to prove to the government that they did exist in this world, and that must have been very hard for the young generation of that time, to prove this. Today, these same issues – and the stigmas that accompany them – still persist for generations of DNTs. What's the best way to combat these? Through art, especially theatre and films.

Work of a Nomad

Having come from this background of ‘Criminal Tribes’, I was amazed during my high school days at how art, particularly theatre, was used to sensitize people and consolidate a tribe to come together to fight against injustice. Theatre has always fascinated me through its immense process of creating a realistic piece based on true incidents in society. So, I indulged myself in theatre from the beginning, when I used to watch the rehearsals of [‘Budhan Theatre’](#), a community-led theatre collective that fight for DNTs rights, on the terrace of our local library. I felt that theatre gave you the power and the confidence to perform at any given space and time, when you want to convey the injustices that happened to your own people or to the minority sections of society.

As theatre widened my horizons to look beyond the injustice, I was introduced to films through Budhan Theatre's founding members, ‘Dakxin Chhara’, who is also one of the best filmmakers of India when it comes to socio-political issue-based documentaries. To



Abhishek and fellow members of Budhan Theatre on a shoot for ‘Who Am I, Mom?’ – a participatory film project in collaboration with University of Leeds.

be brutally honest, I believed that film had a kind of magic, where different people work on a single subject together and where the final output of that film process is crucially important, as well as majestic.

Film

“Through films and theatre, we fight the injustice being done to the DNT tribes of India”

I was very young when I was introduced to documentary films, but I feel that it's of a great use now because a young person has to be introduced to some medium of art so that one can understand the world through art and contribute in creating a space for humanity. As I slowly entered into the world of filmmaking, especially the documentary genre, I was surprised that a film was used to initiate a dialogue between the government and the victims.

Since I came from the 'Criminal Tribes', I started documenting the lives of Nomadic people in Ahmedabad, Gujarat especially my own tribe which is called 'Chhara'. In the past, 'Chharas' were portrayed as Criminals by the mainstream media whenever any robbery case took place near 'Chharanagar'. But someone also has to counter this narrative. So, Dakxin Chhara and his team members chose to fight through the medium of theatre and films, although films came later. 'Chharas' were ill-treated by the police in every sense, they were discriminated by the mainstream society and still are, so theatre and films were the best option for us to fight this unending discrimination. Through films and theatre, we fight the injustice being done to the DNT tribes of India, especially issues related to self identity, respect by the mainstream society, torture by police and unemployment.

As a young person of this tribe, you have to be sensitive enough to understand people's problems and how to portray them in your best way so that a larger section of other societies become sensitized to the issues, which has been quite a challenge for me. As a young person, you need to fight not only for your own community but for all those people whose voices have been suppressed by the government and society at large.

Why young voices matter

“Young people need to take the path of art [...] because without the help of art you cannot bring a revolution.”

'Budhan Theatre' was established by a group of youngsters who were very keen on doing something good for their tribes. And I believe young voices are the very first base of any organization which fights the injustices done to the voiceless people of any country. Today, the world is entering into another world where young people becomes the source of everything. It's the young minds that sought out the solutions to this crazy world. And especially in India, young people are very crucial to nation building. India has been going through many ups and downs in the past many years but there are young artists who are trying to save the country from becoming a fascist state. And that's why I've been involved with various documentary films that deal with the socio-political issues of India. Young people are needed not only in India but in the whole world, to stand out from the crowd and raise a voice against injustices taking place.

With this thought in mind, I recently worked with Anand Patwardhan who is considered to be the best socio-political documentary film maker in the world. He taught me why a young film maker is really needed in times like this when the country is going through the phase of rising intolerance. India is in dire need of young voices because the medium of film is one of the only ways to counter the given narrative of oppression of minority communities in India. Young people need to take the path of art for this because without the help of art you cannot bring a revolution.

Abhishek is currently working with “[Chalchitra Abhiyaan](#)” (Film and Media Collective) as an Assistant Director and Cinematographer mainly working in the western Uttar Pradesh region of India. He has been documenting the rise of Dalit agitation as well as DNT movement extensively in India. He has recently assisted in a Hindi Bollywood film ‘[Sameer](#)’. You can follow Abhishek on [Twitter](#).

This blog is part of Changing The Story’s #YoungChangemakers series. If you are a young person leading alternative actions for civil society building in ODA-recipient countries and would like to be featured in the series, [contact us](#).

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