

Empowering Women through Theatre: The Role of Budhan Theatre in Promoting Gender Equality and Social Justice in India

Abhishek Kumar Gupta

Research Scholar

Department of English

Banaras Hindu University

Varanasi, 221005 (U.P.)

Email ID: abhishekkumargupta69@gmail.com

Mobile no. 8005279303

Abstract

Budhan Theatre is a renowned theatre group in India consisting of members of the Chhara tribe, who are one of the many Denotified tribes (DNTs) in India. They were previously known as 'Ex-Criminal tribes' and still carry the colonial stigma of 'Born Criminals.' Budhan Theatre focuses on social issues about DNTs in India like the stigmatization of Chharas and other DNTs as 'Born Criminals', social segregation and marginalization, Police atrocities, continuous negligence by the state even after their Denotification, etc. Budhan theatre uses theatre as a means of creating awareness towards Chharas and other DNTs and initiating social change. In addition to addressing issues related to Chharas and other DNTs in India, they are also raising voices on behalf of women in the community. This paper intends to discuss how women play a crucial role in Budhan Theatre, both in terms of their participation in the group and the themes that the group addresses. The group actively encourages women's participation in theatre, both on stage and behind the scenes. Many women have been a part of the group's productions, and some have even gone on to become leaders in the group. This theatre has addressed various women's issues in its productions, including violence against women, gender discrimination, and patriarchal societal norms. Through their performances, the group aims to challenge these norms and bring attention to the struggles faced by women in society. The purpose of this article is to examine how Budhan Theatre has been instrumental in promoting women's rights and empowering them through theatre and how the group's work serves as a reminder of the importance of women's voices in creating a more equitable and just society.

Keywords: Budhan Theatre, India, Women, Empowerment, Gender equality, Social justice.

Introduction

Empowering women and promoting gender equality and social justice are critical goals in societies around the world. In India, one impactful avenue for achieving these objectives is through theatre. Theatre has long been recognized as a powerful medium for raising awareness, challenging societal norms, and sparking meaningful conversations on social issues. Theatre remains any society's sharpest way to hold a live debate with itself. If it doesn't challenge, provoke, or illuminate, it is not fulfilling its Function (Hall 5). Budhan Theatre, a notable theatre group in India that primarily deals with the issues related to the Chharas and other Denotified Tribes in India, has played a significant role in empowering women and advocating for gender equality with its foundation by G N Devy and Mahashweta Devi. Budhan Theatre was established in Chharanagar of Ahmedabad in Gujrat, India, with its origins dating back to the efforts of G N Devy and Mahashweta Devi in the year 1998. The founder of Budhan Theatre herself, Mahasweta Devi, had many powerful statements regarding the role of literature and theatre in addressing social issues. One of her famous quotes is:

My India still lives behind a curtain of darkness. People still live in abject poverty, oppressed by landlords, moneylenders, and middlemen. They are still bound by caste prejudices. They are still being exploited by a whole battery of demons like the police, the forest guards, the revenue officers, and the irrigation officers. The dams built for irrigation have killed their lands. (45)

Recognizing the potential of theatre as a catalyst for social change, they founded the theatre group to empower Denotified tribes of India. Since its establishment in 1998, Budhan Theatre has continuously performed and raised its voice against the colonial stigma of being 'Born Criminals' and the Police atrocities on them. So, the chief aim of the Budhan Theatre is to raise voices against police brutalities on Denotified Tribes, sensitize the audience, create a performance space between other DNT communities in India, and hence erase the colonial stigma of 'Born Criminals' imposed upon them in the year 1871 through an act called 'Criminal Tribes Act, 1871'(CTA,1871) and secure a Constitutional guarantee for these traumatized population. As Augusto Boal stated, performance is a powerful platform for oppressed people

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to address concerns, discover solutions, and effect change. The evolution of Budhan Theatre provides insight into the slow shift in the general public's attitude towards tribal issues in India. Budhan Theatre Group explains what they do:

We, at Budhan Theatre, do not hide reality in our work. Rather, we tell hard truths and real facts, no matter how disturbing, because it is in this way that we connect with our history. It is in this way that we use theatre to show our people that we need to change our future. In this way, the many people of India, from common people to mainstream society members, to policymakers, to educators and intellectuals, to government officials, and beyond, may finally recognise the human needs of the Chhara community. It is in this way that we fight for dignity and social justice for all De-notified tribes in India. (20)

In addition to this, Budhan Theatre is also performing its plays revolving around various issues related to women's marginalization and subjugation. The unique approach of Budhan Theatre lies in its commitment to amplifying the voices and stories of marginalized women themselves. The theatre group actively involves women from these communities, providing them with a creative platform to express their lived experiences, struggles, and aspirations through the art of theatre. By harnessing the power of storytelling and performance, Budhan Theatre enables these women to share their narratives, shedding light on the gender inequalities and social injustices prevalent in Indian society. The plays and performances staged by Budhan Theatre tackle a wide range of pressing issues, including gender-based violence, discrimination, patriarchy, and unequal access to resources and opportunities. These performances serve as a means to challenge existing societal norms, dismantle oppressive structures, and advocate for gender equality and social justice. Through their powerful storytelling, Budhan Theatre seeks to create empathy, inspire dialogue, and drive positive change within Indian society.

This paper aims to explore and analyze the role of Budhan Theatre in promoting gender equality and social justice in India. It will examine the strategies employed by the theatre group to empower marginalized women and foster social awareness. Furthermore, it will assess the impact of their performances on challenging gender-based stereotypes, influencing policy

reforms, and nurturing a sense of empowerment among its participants. By shining a spotlight on the transformative power of theatre in empowering women and advocating for social change, this study aims to underscore the significance of artistic expression as a catalyst for gender equality and social justice. The experiences and accomplishments of Budhan Theatre, guided by the vision of Dakxin Chhara, lead actor in the group, and Mahashweta Devi, serve as an inspiration and provide valuable insights into the potential of theatre to empower women, challenge societal norms, and foster a more inclusive and equitable society in India and beyond.

Brief History of Chhara Community and Emergence of Budhan Theatre

Since Budhan Theatre is a community-owned theatre group and stands for its community Development, understanding its Chhara community is important. Chharas were a nomadic tribe and were traditional entertainers like street singers and dancers. With the arrival of Britishers in India, nomadic civilization came under threat. Since time immemorial nomadic people in India or elsewhere in the world have been moving people. They did not ascribe to a sedentary way of living. They moved from one place to another. This very movement of nomadic people in India became problematic for the British regime. To check their movement and keep a vigil on them Britishers made an act in the year 1871 called the ‘Criminal Tribes Act’, CTA. Through CTA they categorized over 200 nomadic tribes as criminal tribes. Further, they made reformatory settlements and forced these nomadic tribes to dwell in these settlements throughout India. In the name of reformation, Britishers used them as cheap labourers in the construction of railways and highways. Chharas are one of the Criminal tribes and in the year 1932, they were also forced to live in Chharanagar reformatory settlement. After India's independence in 1947, they did not become free from the colonial stigma of ‘Born Criminals’. The whole Constituent Assembly missed this stigmatized population. CTA was repealed in 1952 by the Indian Government and these erstwhile criminal tribes were Denotified and given the new term ‘Denotified Tribes’. Even after their denotification, they did not get any relief and their marginalization and social segregation continued. Devoid of land and constitutional guarantee, Chharas adhered to petty crime and the brewing of country liquor in the dry state of Gujrat. Due to their colonial stigma of ‘Born Criminals’, Chharas were the prime suspect when any theft took place in the locality. So, they were always under the Police radar. Due to this stigma of the ‘ex-criminal tribe’, they are continuously suffering police atrocities and are victims of marginalization and social segregation for a very long time. So,

this hereditary notion of being criminals is glued to them even after so many years of India's Independence. Real relief came to them in the year 1998 when renowned author and activist G N Devy and Mahasweta Devi came to Chharanagar. They started a library in Chharanagar with the help of Chhara youths. Meanwhile, the judgment by the Calcutta High Court about the killing of Budhan Sabar appeared in *Budhan*, a quarterly magazine. Budhan Sabar was a DNT who belonged to the Kheria Sabar community of the Puruliya district in West Bengal. He was killed in the Police custody on false theft charges. The judgment came that he was killed in police custody, the officer in charge was suspended and compensation was granted to Budhan's wife. This judgment was remarkable in the history of Denotified tribes and gave them hope in the Indian judiciary. Prof. G N Devy asked Chhara youth to enact the entire judgment of Budhan Sabar's case in the form of a play. Chhara youth prepared a play which was named *Budhan* and performed it on 31st August 1998 when the first International Convention on Denotified and Nomadic Tribe was organized at Chharanagar. In an interview in the documentary film titled *Actors are Born Here* (2008), Devy stated about the play *Budhan*, 'I believe that it was not an enjoyable play, or it was not the play to perform on the stage, in fact, I don't believe that it was the play at all. I think the play was associated with the life experience of the community and slowly, it was getting the voice and that voice had dramatic form'. He further explained that in the first performance of *Budhan*, 'There was hardly anybody in the audience who did not feel profoundly moved to see the Chhara youths enacting the entire Budhan Sabar case, with what passion, with what ease do they act, these Chhara boys and girls!' (Devy 26).

Since that very day Budhan theatre came into existence and it became voice of the India's vast majority of Denotified tribes. *Budhan* has become a cultural symbol and a myth for these traumatized population. Budahn Theatre is continuously performing the past agonies of DNTs, their stigmatization, marginalization, social segregation, and police atrocities through theatre activism. The style of theatre practiced by Budhan theatre is 'Theatre for Community Development' and 'Theatre for Social Change.' They perform street plays, intimate theatre, and other kinds of experimental theatre to raise awareness about discrimination, violence, and police atrocities faced by Chharas and other DNTs.

Budhan Theatre has been raising its voice against the injustices towards Chharas and other DNT communities because of the colonial stigma of 'Born Criminals'. Through theatre

activism, they have been successful in portraying their marginalization by the masses and state and hence formed an alternative world in which justice is realized. Through theatre activism they have been raising various issues like the discriminatory attitude of society towards Chharas and other DNTs, police atrocities on Chharas, lack of basic amenities, negligence of welfare scheme towards Chharas and other DNTs by State Government, unemployment of Chhara youth, etc. Through theatre Chhara youths are asking for the constitutional guarantee for DNTs in India and their treatment as normal human beings and not as 'Born Criminals' or 'second-class citizens'. Through their plays, they have been raising these issues and established themselves as 'Born Actors' and not as 'Born Criminals.'

Caleb Johnston and Dakxin Bajrange Chhara in their essay, "Street Theatre as Democratic Politics in Ahmedabad", discuss the change caused by Budhan Theatre as a political process. In their essay, they present Budhan Theatre as having a three-fold purpose: "... to enunciate a political identity in a bid to force state actors to remember and recognize", "... using performance to construct a localized affirmative identity politics within Chharanagar" and "... reclaiming spaces for democratic politics by using theatre to stimulate debate on issues pertaining to DNTs" (14).

Role of Budhan Theatre in Empowering Women and Promoting Gender Equality

Since its inception, Budhan Theatre has been performing continuously on social issues related to Chharas and other DNT communities in India. Apart from this, Budhan Theatre is also performing plays based on women's issues. They also encourage the active participation of women actors from the community to bring real change in the lives of Chhara women in general and womenkind as a whole. One of their aims is also to achieve social recognition through theatre activism in which the group has been successful so far. Many of the Chhara Actors involved in the Budahn theatre have made their mark in different spheres of their life. For example, some of the Chhara youth have secured a place in TV serials, some of them have enrolled in NSD, some have become journalists, etc. In the same way, Budhan Theatre is also encouraging women actors to participate in theatre activism and bring some kind of change in their lives and other women in the Chhara community. Although we find very few women actors in the group, they play very important roles in the group and have also achieved a lot through theatre activism and have inspired the next generation of women. In a society where

the whole tribe is facing the colonial stigma of ‘born criminals’, the situation of women is doubly marginalized. Kalpana Gagdekar, one of the lead actresses in the group, has encountered societal pressure and parental opposition. Kalpana, who has embarked on a new journey by getting a role in a local television channel, was opposed by her parents to leave the theatre. In 1998, when Budhan Theatre was established to create awareness about the condition of these tribes, Gagdekar joined them in their mission. Her family resisted but her husband supported her in this endeavour. “I got married when I was in Class 10,” she says, “But my husband motivated me to complete my education, so I graduated in social work and devoted my time to my theatre group” (6). Through Budhan, Gagdekar was able to reach out to people across all sections of society and make them understand the importance of education, and women, besides highlighting police atrocities against DNT members and the condition of tribal women and children. “I believe that theatre has the power to change people’s mindsets and sensitize them to the issues we face” (6), she says. Thanks to her efforts, tribal children in Gujarat were allowed to continue with their education, through a Supreme Court ruling. Gagdekar has acted in various plays across a stream of issues, but her first-ever play on the real life of Budhan Sabar, a tribal who was murdered in West Bengal, is close to her heart. “That play is popular even today,” she says, “We have done over 800 shows across the country” (7). Gagdekar, who also teaches children about arts and their impact at Budhan Theatre, is a recipient of the CII Exemplar Award in the field of education.

Budhan Theatre has staged several impactful plays and performances that specifically address gender inequality and advocate for women's empowerment. *Choli Ke Pichhe Kya Hai* (What is beneath the blouse?) is a play based on the short story *Stan-dahini* (Breast-giver) written by Mahasveta Devi, a renowned Bengali writer. The play sheds light on the prevalent gender violence in rural India, specifically focusing on the exploitation of women, the struggles faced by lower caste women, and the exploitation of rural women by landlords. It delves into the social and economic challenges faced by these marginalized women and aims to raise awareness about their plight. The play received appreciation from prominent personalities such as actor Mohan Agashe and poet Dilip Chitre, who regarded it as an ultra-modern form of theatre. Their recognition highlights the innovative and impactful approach taken by the play to address pressing social issues and challenge existing power structures.

Schwarz observed, 'In CKPKH, the actors who play Jashoda hack and cough until one imagines real blood being drawn from their lungs. They, too, drool and expel phlegm, tears in their eyes from physical exertion. This is beyond realism, and the physicality is transmitted to the audience with great effectiveness. He compares Budhan Theatre's catharsis with the community people's 'intense oppression and physical pain endured by criminal tribes' and conforms to the realistic representation of suffering, however painful' (Schwarz 121).

Sangharsh Aur Siddhi is another play that emerged from a theatre workshop organized by SEWA, the Self-Employed Women's Association. This play revolves around the struggles of women vendors who sell vegetables on the streets. It depicts their agitation against the city council, which was attempting to prevent them from selling their goods. The play also highlights the legal judgment that favoured women vendors in the Gujarat High Court, emphasizing their fight for their rights to sell vegetables on the streets. *Sangharsh Aur Siddhi* received the "Best Play Award" in the National Competition and performed on multiple occasions to mobilize women vendors and rally support for their cause.

Save Girl Child is a play that was specifically developed for PD Malviya Arts College in 2006. The play tackles the pressing issue of female feticide, which refers to the selective abortion of female fetuses due to cultural, social, or economic preferences for male children. This practice is prevalent in certain regions and communities, leading to a significant gender imbalance and posing serious consequences for society. The play aims to create awareness and draw attention to the importance of gender equality and the need to protect and value the lives of girls. By highlighting the issue of female feticide through theatre, the play seeks to engage the audience emotionally and intellectually, encouraging them to reflect on the harmful effects of gender discrimination and the significance of empowering and supporting girls. Through its performances, *Save Girl Child* strives to shed light on the value and potential of every girl and advocate for their rights to education, healthcare, and equal opportunities. The play serves as a platform for raising awareness, challenging societal norms, and fostering dialogue to address the issue of female feticide and promote gender equality. By bringing this important topic to the forefront, *Save Girl Child* aims to inspire individuals and communities to take action and work towards building a more inclusive and equitable society where every girl is valued, protected, and given the opportunity to thrive.

Prati 54 Minute, produced in 2005, is a play that tackles the issue of rape in India. It is based on a book titled *Praati Chopttan Minutes* (translated as "Every 54 Minutes") by Devy. The play sheds light on the frequency of rape incidents in the country and brings attention to the urgent need for societal change and stronger measures to address and prevent sexual violence. *Hamari Zindagi* (Our Life) and *Jeet* (Victory) were two plays produced in 2005 by the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) organization in India. These plays were the result of a 10-day theater workshop conducted with women vendors and widows who had been affected by riots. The main objective of the workshop and the subsequent plays was to raise awareness about the social and economic issues faced by these marginalized groups.

Hamari Zindagi focused on portraying the challenges and struggles faced by women vendors in their daily lives. It highlighted the issues of gender inequality, economic exploitation, and lack of social support systems. The play aimed to shed light on the importance of recognizing and valuing the contributions made by women in the informal sector and advocating for their rights and empowerment.

Jeet, on the other hand, centred around the theme of victory and resilience. It depicted the journey of widows who had endured the hardships of riots and emerged as strong individuals. The play aimed to inspire and motivate audiences by showcasing the determination and courage of these widows in overcoming adversity and rebuilding their lives. Both *Hamari Zindagi* and *Jeet* were highly acclaimed and received the first prize in the National Competition of Street Plays, which was organized in Delhi. This recognition further helped to amplify the voices of the women vendors and widows, bringing attention to their issues at a national level and encouraging dialogue and action for their empowerment and well-being.

SEWA, the organization behind these plays, is a trade union and an organization of self-employed women workers in the informal economy. It focuses on organizing women workers, providing them with support services, and advocating for their rights and welfare. Through initiatives like theatre workshops and street plays, SEWA aims to create awareness, mobilize communities, and bring about positive social change. These plays serve as powerful platforms for social commentary and activism, addressing critical issues such as gender violence,

women's empowerment, and social injustice. They aim to provoke thought, raise awareness, and inspire action for positive change in society.

These are just a few examples of the plays and performances staged by Budhan Theatre to address gender inequality. Each production aims to raise awareness, challenge societal norms, and promote women's empowerment and gender justice. Through its powerful storytelling and performances, Budhan Theatre strives to create a transformative impact on audiences and inspire positive change in society. The plays staged by Budhan Theatre have had a significant impact on their audiences, both in terms of raising awareness about gender inequality and inspiring positive change.

Here are some ways in which these performances have made an impact: Firstly, they create awareness by educating audiences about gender inequality and the experiences of marginalized women. Secondly, they challenge stereotypes and societal norms by portraying strong female characters who defy expectations. Thirdly, these performances spark dialogue and discussions about gender inequality and women's empowerment. Fourthly, they foster empathy by humanizing the experiences of marginalized women and promoting understanding. Lastly, Budhan Theatre's performances motivate action by inspiring individuals to challenge discrimination, support women's empowerment, and work towards a more inclusive society.

Conclusion

Budhan Theatre has played a tremendous role in empowering women and promoting gender equality and social justice in India through the transformative power of theatre. By actively involving marginalized women in their productions and highlighting issues like violence, discrimination, and patriarchal norms, the group has provided a platform to amplify women's voices and stories. The plays staged by Budhan Theatre have created meaningful impact at different levels. They have educated audiences, challenged stereotypes, sparked important dialogues, fostered empathy and motivated real change in society. Individuals like Kalpana Gagdekar have served as inspiring examples of how theatre can nurture empowerment. Beyond audiences, Budhan Theatre's work has also influenced policy discussions and advocacy efforts. Their performances have been recognized on national platforms, demonstrating theatre's ability to influence decision-makers.

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