Collaboration against ethnography: How colonial history shaped the making of an ethnographic film

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Abstract

What happens when a commitment to collaborative ethnographic filmmaking runs up against a community's ambivalence towards its own history? This paper provides an ethnohistorical account of the making of the film *Please Don't Beat Me, Sir!*, exploring how colonial-era "police ethnographies" and contemporary communal politics shape the collaborative endeavor. The film was made in collaboration with Budhan Theatre, an activist theater troupe from the Chhara community in the Indian city of Ahmedabad, Gujarat. The Chhara are one of more than 198 communities labeled as "Criminal Tribes" by the British, a colonial legacy that still informs their interactions with the police. Inspired by the work of Jean Rouch, the film makes use of experimental ethnographic and cinematic techniques. These participation frameworks allowed the members of Budhan Theatre and their families to shape the structure and content of the film itself, a process sometimes at odds with the film's ethnographic intent.

Keywords

Collaborative ethnography, ethnographic film, DNTs, Criminal Tribes, India, Jean Rouch

Introduction: A collaborative endeavor

The documentary film *Please Don't Beat Me, Sir!* is about Budhan Theatre, an activist theater troupe in the western Indian city of Ahmedabad. Shot over the course of five years, from 2005 to 2010, the film was a collaboration between myself, an anthropologist, and Shashwati Talukdar, an independent filmmaker. Our collaboration as filmmakers shaped the film behind the scenes, but another form of collaboration took place in front of the camera: a series of negotiations between the filmmakers and the members of Budhan Theatre (and their families) over how much the film should reveal about their lives. The Chhara community, from which the members of Budhan Theatre are drawn, are one of 198 communities that had been labeled as "Criminal Tribes" by the British colonial government (Mohanty, 2006: 133). Although these former "Criminal Tribes" are now referred to as "Denotified and Nomadic Tribes" (DNTs), the stigma of criminality remains. This stigma, along with the fact that some members of the community are still engaged in various illegal activities, meant that the film touched upon a number of sensitive topics. For this reason we felt that close collaboration with the film's subjects was the only ethical way to proceed. This collaboration not only shaped the filmmaking process but also became an important element in the film's narrative arc.

When Budhan Theatre playwright and director Dakxin Bajrange was arrested in 2003 everyone believed the real reason for his arrest to be his plays, which were very critical of the police. The police had been able to arrest him because they found someone willing to press false charges, an all-too-common occurrence in India (Kohli, 2010). Although Dakxin was eventually able to have

the charges dropped,[1] when we visited in 2006 they were still pending and the same thing had just happened again to another Budhan Theatre volunteer. Events like this made us acutely aware that it was the volunteers of Budhan Theatre, not us, who would have to live with the consequences of our film. This made working closely as collaborators with Budhan Theatre all the more essential. At times the collaborative process posed significant obstacles to the construction of a coherent ethnographic narrative. A lingering ambivalence towards the community's history, along with fear of the consequences of exacerbating tensions within the community, imposed certain silences among the members of Budhan Theatre and their families. Respecting the fears and ambivalences of these families sometimes meant preserving these silences in the film; but silences make it difficult "to distinguish what an ethnographic narrative cannot say, refuses to say, and simply does not say" (Sultana, 1992: 21). One solution to this dilemma was the application of collaborative techniques inspired by the work of Jean Rouch in order to reveal the "the tensions, uncertainties, and contradictions associated with knowing and conveying matters that cannot be wholly known or conveyed" (Rappert, 2010: 270) within the film itself.

Ethnographic filmmakers have long been self-consciously aware of the collaborative nature of their work. Over a decade before *Writing Culture* (Clifford and Marcus, 1986) drew attention to the link between authority and style in the writing of ethnographies, David MacDougall (1998: 134) had issued a call for ethnographic filmmakers to move "beyond observational cinema" towards a "*participatory cinema*" where the "filmmaker acknowledges his or her entry upon the world of the subjects and yet asks them to imprint directly upon the film aspects of their own

culture." In so writing he was inspired by the 1960s films made by Jean Rouch and his African collaborators. Among the Rouch-inspired techniques employed in *Please Don't Beat Me, Sir!* are screenings of rough cuts to the film's subjects followed by filmed discussions, as well as the use of short skits written and performed by the members of Budhan Theatre.[2] The inclusion of these participatory techniques was not a mere stylistic element, but served to shape the very structure and subject matter of the film.

Whether acknowledged or not the ethnographic endeavor is fundamentally a collaborative one, which is not to deny the inequality that often exists between the language of the ethnographer and the language of her informant (Asad, 1986: 160), but simply to assert that discourse itself is necessarily a collaborative endeavor that requires the construction of "participation frameworks" through which all parties construct "various roles (stakes, stances, positions, identities), and relationships among [those] roles (alignments, asymmetries, power, hierarchy)" (Agha, 2007: 9). It is through these participation frameworks that "cultural representations" are constructed and subsequently "'move' through space and time" (Agha, 2007: 9). What is unique about a Rouch-inspired participatory style of filmmaking is that it is self-conscious about the creation of such participatory frameworks and seeks to provide a space within which the film's subjects (both on-screen and off-) can negotiate the manner of their own cultural representation. These negotiations are then inscribed in the film, presenting a snapshot of the negotiation process. The following section presents one such snapshot from the film; but, because it is only a snapshot, the film's view of the negotiation process is necessarily limited. This paper seeks to pick up where the film

leaves off, exploring the invisible ways in which colonial history and contemporary politics shaped the participatory frameworks captured in the film.

A rooftop meeting

On a cold winter evening in 2006, we joined the members of Budhan Theatre on the rooftop of Dakxin's house, everyone sitting on blankets and bundled up in sweaters and wool hats, for a meeting, which we filmed. Inspired by the films of Jean Rouch (Jørgensen, 2007) and Budhan Theatre's experience doing street theater, we wanted them to write a series of short skits to be staged just for the film.[3] These skits would serve multiple purposes: First, we hoped that they would reduce the need to rely on "talking heads" or voice-overs in establishing the context for the film. Not only did we feel that this would make the film more engaging, but we wanted to try, as much as possible, to construct the film in such a way that the subjects would speak for themselves. Working with the politically savvy and articulate members of Budhan Theatre, we did not feel a need to rely on outside experts. Second, we felt that a more participatory approach would be more engaging for the audience. A third reason for doing the plays was to tackle subjects that we would otherwise be unable to film without putting the community at risk. For instance, dramatic reenactments could be used to show the police collecting bribes from women who brew liquor, which is an illegal activity in the "dry" state of Gujarat. If we had filmed actual bribe-taking, the police might have sought retribution against the women.

The rooftop meeting was set up to help coordinate the writing of these skits. Budhan Theatre had no compunctions about writing and performing skits about police bribery and torture. They had

been willing to risk their own safety performing plays that protested these issues outside police headquarters, and even Dakxin's own arrest in 2003 hadn't deterred them from continuing with such performance. The previous year we had made a short film about Dakxin's case, *Acting Like a Thief* (Talukdar and Friedman, 2005), which had been well received by the community, making the troupe willing to work with us on this much bigger project. But at this meeting, we made a request that caused quite a bit of controversy, and the ensuing debate ended up becoming one of the pivotal scenes in our next film.

The request was for a skit about the Chhara method of thieving. We were hoping to explore the link between thieving and acting—a connection to which volunteers and their families had alluded in numerous interviews, but upon which nobody had been willing to elaborate. Despite the fact that it has been over half a century since the newly independent Indian state repealed the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act (D'Souza, 2001: 78; Friedman, 2011), thieving remains a sensitive topic for the community. They are still considered "born criminals" by the police and much of the local population, and suffer discrimination as a result. Publicly Budhan Theatre states that they seek "to sensitise mainstream society, [the] legal system, and the judiciary that we are not 'Born Criminals' but we are 'Born Actors'" (Friedman, 2011; Seetha and Muralikrishna, 2007), but while making *Acting Like a Thief* we had discovered that few Chhara see things as being quite so clear cut. The following exchange between Dakxin and his grandmother Prachi Bajrange, or "Dadi" (grandma), as she is called in the film (Talukdar and Friedman, 2005), illustrates the complexity of local attitudes:

Dadi: Yes, yes, we used to steal then. What can I say? My father could steal the blanket off your back while you slept. He would slip away and you would just sit there and cry. I'm telling you ... I swear to god (why would I lie so early in the morning?), this is how my father was.

Dakxin: Did people think of us as thieves or as artists?

Dadi: Artists. Artists, and also thieves. Do you understand?

Numerous interviews had suggested that the very manner of thieving used by the Chhara, which doesn't involve weapons or the use of force, depends on excellent acting skills. But when we had asked for an explanation or demonstration, our interviewees would fall silent or change the subject. We had hoped that Budhan Theatre members would be willing to do a skit that could make the connection between thieving and acting in such a way that it would be acceptable to the other members of the community.

They refused. While we were not surprised at their discomfort in doing so, we were surprised at the nature of their objections. They were far less concerned about the possibility that the film would reinforce negative stereotypes about their community than they were about negative repercussions from within the community itself. Dakxin, who was one of our strongest supporters, was the first to raise an objection: "Tomorrow the community shouldn't blame us for revealing their secrets and harming their livelihoods. For revealing their modus operandi to the

world. Because we'd like the community to see this film some day." The implication being that by showing how the Chhara thieves used their dramaturgical skills to go about their business we would make it harder for them to do just that. Revealing their secrets to the world would put them out of business. But that wasn't the only concern. There was also concern that the film would strain the relationship between Budhan Theatre and a section of the community that had been strongly supportive of their activities. As Jeetu, a Budhan Theatre volunteer, put it: "We shouldn't, because the thieves always help us out. If they see this and get into trouble in the future, they'll think twice about helping us."

Defending our position was Roxy Gagdekar, Dakxin's best friend who had left the theatre to become a successful journalist. He remained very involved in the community development activities undertaken by Budhan Theatre. He led the rooftop discussion, hence the call-and-response pattern of the following exchange:

Roxy: Suppose there is a burglary in the next city, Rajkot, where will the Rajkot police go?

Volunteers: To the Rajkot Chhara community.

Roxy: Right. … Suppose a bag is lost in Surat city railway station. Where will the Surat police go?

Volunteers: To the Chhara community.

Roxy: This is just to tell you, being in the media, I know, that the whole world knows about the modus operandi of the Chhara. We are not revealing anything new. The Police know everything about Chharas.

Although nobody disagreed with Roxy, in the end, the more persuasive argument was the one raised by Vivek. Vivek, a graduate of India's prestigious National School of Drama, had spoken eloquently in *Acting Like a Thief* about how his mother had been a thief. He was concerned about possible blowback to the volunteers if the film angered other members of the community. As he put it, "If someone else gets trapped, history will repeat itself," implying that the film would motivate others to make false statements against Theatre members, leading to another arrest.

Defeated, we let the matter drop. Respecting the wishes of Budhan Theatre, we made a rough cut of the film focused on the theatre, illicit liquor, and police abuses, but which largely left aside the issue of thieving. We knew it wasn't the film it could be, but without Budhan Theatre's support we could only do so much, and we certainly didn't want to risk the well-being of our subjects just for the film. A year later, in 2007, we returned to Chharangar with a rough cut of the film we had shot so far. It was the volunteers themselves who, upon viewing the cut, felt that the film would be incomplete without a discussion of thieving. During this second discussion several of the volunteers, including some who'd objected the loudest during the rooftop meeting, voiced the concern that we'd left out an important part of the story of their community. Jeetu said: "There is one more issue … like my father, he is a thief, but he does not want his children to be thieves. I

don't see his story here." Another volunteer, who was looking forward to his marriage the next year, said "We are fighting because we don't want our children to suffer what we have suffered. This movement is for them. We see the Police come to our house, beat our fathers. We don't want our children to see that." It had become clear that by avoiding the issue of thieving, we had also cut their parents' stories out of the film.

As a result of this discussion, we settled on a new way of talking about thieving that the volunteers felt avoided the risk of blowback without cutting their parents out of the film. Because we agreed we would not talk about the modus operandi of the thieves, the father of one of the volunteers, a thief who carried considerable influence in the community, consented to be interviewed for the film. Then other thieves agreed to be interviewed as well—although most insisted their thieving days were behind them. This was done on the understanding that the conversations would focus on the differences between their own lives and those of the younger generation. Of course, there are young people who are thieves, but the volunteers of Budhan Theatre were some of the better educated and more ambitious members of the community— many because their parents had wanted them to have a better life. They had also benefited from the opening of new primary schools near their neighborhood. However, despite new educational opportunities and newfound aspirations for upward mobility, social, workplace and housing discrimination continued to prevent volunteers from being able to fully integrate into mainstream society. By focusing on the barriers to social change, and the different values and struggles of each generation we were able to incorporate an important facet of community life into the narrative in a way that respected the concerns of the volunteers.

After the rooftop meeting took place, it would take us an additional five years to complete the film, a process that included annual visits to the community, research trips to the British Library, and the usual fundraising and grant writing that goes into making a film of this kind. During that time we came to learn more and more about the historical construction of the "Criminal Tribes" by colonial authorities as well as the political tensions that exist within the community today—a history which helps explain some of the tensions apparent during our rooftop meeting with Budhan Theatre. These tensions were twofold. First there is the community's own uneasy relationship to its colonial past. The very category of Denotified and Nomadic Tribes (DNTs) is framed in terms of the colonial-era Criminal Tribes Act (CTA). As a result, the Chhara find themselves in the awkward position of having to simultaneously accept and reject discourses of criminality that have come to define them as DNTs. They reject these discourses because they still suffer discrimination and violence as a result of the stigma of criminality conferred upon them by the CTA. But it is difficult to reject it completely without sacrificing their very identity. Colonial-era discourses are not simply historical relics; they continue to inform contemporary police practices. Moreover, colonial-era policies largely (if not completely) succeeded in erasing oral traditions that might have provided an alternative heritage discourse. And finally, the primary strategy by which the members of Budhan Theatre have chosen to challenge the official discourse is by painting themselves as victims, a strategy which preserves their colonial heritage even as it seeks to challenge it.

The second set of tensions revealed at the meeting involves contemporary state- and national-level political struggles within India that are centered on the role of Hinduism in defining national identity but that are also bound up with party politics. It is because of these political divisions that the police are able to find people willing to testify against the members of Budhan Theatre; they also help explain why theater members desperately need allies within the community, including the thieves. Political tensions like these also raise important questions about the nature of ethnographic collaboration. From the very moment we chose Budhan Theatre as our subject, we had already taken sides in a complex political landscape, the contours of which only slowly came into view during the course of filming.

Towards an ethnography of collaboration

In 2002, the El Dorado Task Force of the American Anthropological Association issued a call for all anthropologists to engage in "collaborative" models of ethnography in which "all parties are equal partners in the enterprise, participating in the development of the research design and in other major aspects of the program as well, working together toward a common goal" (Lassiter, 2005: 84).[4] But what is the common goal towards which anthropologists and their subjects are supposed to be working? According to the El Dorado Task Force, it should be one that is "from its outset, aimed at material, symbolic, and political benefits for the research population" (Lassiter, 2005: 84). One is reminded of Sol Worth and John Adair's (1972: 5) famous conversation with the Navajo elder Sam Yazzie, who asked the two anthropologists if making films would "do the sheep any good?" While Worth's "sterile and patronizing experiment" (Ginsburg, 1991: 96) may not be the best example of a shared anthropological

endeavor, Yazzie's query does serve to remind us that the interests of scholars and the interests of their subjects can diverge quite significantly—not to mention the fact that there might be multiple, competing goals among the population with whom anthropologists are seeking to collaborate.

The problem then with the El Dorado Task Force approach is that it attempts to delineate an ideal model of anthropological collaboration. Anthropologists would be better off using the tools of anthropology to reflexively analyze collaboration as an important ethnographic subject in its own right. Ethical guidelines serve a useful purpose (see American Anthropological Association, 2009; Papademas and International Visual Sociology Association, 2009; Perry and Marion, 2010), but true collaboration would imply that such guidelines themselves be produced through dialogue with one's subjects (Simpson, 2011: 386). Collaboration is constitutive of the very act of communication and ethnography is perhaps no different in this regard (Watson, 1991) except perhaps for the fact that, like talk therapy, it is more self-consciously aware of its own collaborative nature. Accordingly, the task of scholars seeking to understand collaborative ethnography is not merely to see if a particular work passes a test of moral virtue, but to provide an ethnographic account of the specific "ways that two persons speak to each other, the openness of the two parties, the balance of power, and the resulting production of knowledge" (Jørgensen, 2007: 60).

What then was the context in which our encounter with the members of Budhan Theatre took place? The first time we tried to take a rickshaw to Chharangar, the crowded and chaotic

neighborhood the members of Budhan Theatre call home, our driver was reluctant to take us there. Although we came to feel perfectly safe working there, the Chhara's reputation is such that other residents of Ahmedabad are afraid of the community. Even some of the city's leading NGOs have long eschewed working with the Chhara for these reasons (Roxy Gagdekar, personal communication). Despite increased educational opportunities, discrimination continues to make it difficult for young Chhara to participate in mainstream society.

Shashwati, the co-director and co-producer of *Please Don't Beat Me, Sir!*, had first met the young actors (or "volunteers" as they prefer to be called) of Budhan Theatre through her work on an earlier film about the Bengali writer and activist Mahasweta Devi (Talukdar, 2001). Mahasweta Devi was a founding member of the Denotified and Nomadic Tribes Rights Action Group (DNT-RAG),[5] whose history is closely tied up with that of Budhan Theatre. When Devi came to Chharanagar in 1998 along with the other members of the newly formed DNT-RAG,[6] a group of young people jumped at the opportunity to start a theater troupe as a means of expressing their frustration (Jain, 2004). Their first play, *Budhan* (Bajrange, 2002), documented Devi's involvement in the case of Budhan Sabar, whose death and subsequent trial led to the birth of the DNT rights movement. Shashwati had used their performance of this play in her 2001 film and so, when we learned in 2003 that playwright and director Dakxin Bajrange had been arrested for making plays critical of the police, we felt we should do something to raise awareness of their situation. The idea for a feature-length documentary was born during the making of our short film, *Acting Like a Thief*, which was focused more narrowly on Dakxin's

arrest. Our hope was that a longer film would allow us to draw a richer ethnographic portrait of the community, centered upon the lives of the Budhan Theatre volunteers.

Budhan Theatre's success comes from reframing the Chhara, and by extension other DNT communities, as artists and victims rather than criminals. It is a strategy that has worked well for them. They have achieved international fame for their earnest and moving performances and documentary films (Friedman, 2011). Moreover, their fame has made it possible for Budhan Theatre to function as an intermediary between the community and representatives of India's civil society, making Budhan Theatre a "theatre for community development" (Friedman, 2011; Seetha and Muralikrishna, 2007). But as effective as this strategy is, it makes it difficult for Budhan Theatre to directly address the issue of criminality within the community outside of the narrow frame of victimhood. While the discourse of victimhood effectively challenges the dominant rhetoric of criminality, highlighting the ongoing abuses DNTs suffer to their civil and human rights, it is limited in its ability to explain life in a community where an estimated 20% of the population continues to make its money from thieving (and an additional 60% survive from brewing illegal liquor) (Faleiro, 2005).[7] Only by understanding the Chhara's colonial past, how the Chhara's own past was erased and overwritten by colonial discourses of criminality, and the contemporary politics of identity in Chharanagar can one begin to understand the tensions witnessed during the rooftop meeting.

Police ethnographies

Although the first Criminal Tribes Act was passed in 1871,[8] its history starts much earlier, with the anti-Thuggee campaigns waged by William Sleeman, superintendent (and later commissioner) of the Thuggee and Dacoity Department from 1826–1848 (Anderson, 2004; Dash, 2006; Friedman, 2011; Major, 2000; Nigam, 1990a, 1990b; Radhakrishna, 2001; Roy, 1998; Schwarz, 2010; Singha, 1993; Tolen, 1991; Van Woerkens, 2002; Wagner, 2004). At that time there was a need to control the increasingly troublesome phenomenon of "men on the road" who threatened the safe travel of East India Company sepoys through central India, as well as the recently established opium monopoly in that region (Singha, 1993: 87). These "men on the road" were not simply bandits, but a complex mix of itinerant traders and pastoralists, including "grain transporters, cattle dealers, medicine men, basket weavers, entertainers, and petty pedlars" (Singha, 1993: 103). But Sleeman was not concerned with such complexity; according to Singha (1993: 103): "the desire to feel in control of this 'floating' population encouraged the production of official typologies of criminal cults and of criminal tribes." Roy (1998: 45) describes the characterization of the most famous of these, the "Thuggees," thought to be:

> a cult of professional stranglers who preyed on travelers—though never on Englishmen—as an act of worship to the popular Hindu goddess Kali. They were represented as hereditary killers drawn from all regions, religions, classes, and castes, united by their devotion to Kali and the act of strangulation.

The problem with this description is that it isn't clear if the Thuggees existed outside of the imagination of colonial officials—an issue which has caused considerable controversy. On one

side of the debate are scholars like Mike Dash (2006; see also Wagner, 2004) who rely heavily on the colonial archives, while on the other are scholars who have called the veracity of these archives into question (Roy, 1998; Van Woerkens, 2002), pointing out that all it took to convict someone of being a Thuggee was testimony by an "approver"—a convict who confessed in exchange for a pardon (Roy, 1998: 59). Despite such questionable judicial procedures, between 1826 and 1848 more than 500 were hanged and thousands more were sent to penal colonies, or died awaiting a trial (Dash, 2006: 254).

Central to the colonial lore of the Thuggee was the idea that they were indistinguishable from the rest of the population; not only did their members come from diverse backgrounds, but they were also believed to be masters of disguise, able to pass themselves off as respectable members of society (Roy, 1998: 55). For this reason, one of the lasting legacies of Sleeman's wide-ranging anti-Thuggee campaign was the creation of an "archive of criminal ethnography," aimed at detecting "criminal tribes and castes" (Cohn, 1996: 11). Police ethnographies became increasingly important after the passing of the first CTA in 1871. Although the concept of Criminal Tribes differed from that of the Thuggees in its pseudoscientific grounding in Victorian-era concepts of hereditary criminality (as opposed to religious cults) (Friedman, 2011; Nigam, 1990a: 156), the belief that members of criminal communities could blend into mainstream society, hiding their true (criminal) identity remained an important part of thinking about such populations (Tolen, 1991: 111).

Police ethnographies read like guides written for naturalists, providing descriptions of mating habits, material culture, and more, in the effort to distinguish one group from another. With titles like *The History of Railway Thieves: With Illustrations & Hints on Detection* (Naidu, 1915), these police ethnographies provided police with the information that supposedly allowed them to identify dozens of Criminal Tribes by the identification of various cultural traits and criminal practices (Brown, 2003: 217). Having read numerous examples of the genre I am skeptical that these texts fulfilled their stated function (Friedman, 2011). Their usefulness might be better explained by adopting a Foucauldian interpretation that sees these texts as a part of a larger "investigative modality" (Cohn, 1996: 11), in order to define these groups as "populations" requiring state control (Chatterjee, 2008: 40; Friedman, 2011). As such, these ethnographies should be viewed in light of a wider array of disciplinary practices, which included photographs, tattoos, and even fingerprinting, a technology which was first widely used in this context (Anderson, 2004).

The police focused special attention on each tribe's "modus operandi," including their usual disguises, choice of weapons, and where they were most likely to operate. Despite their quaint titles, police ethnographies are much more than simply a historical curiosity. As recently as 1999 newspaper accounts mention the existence of a "Modus Operandi branch" of the Gujarat police force and reveal them to be using methods nearly identical to colonial-era police ethnographers: identifying criminal "gangs" (including "Chharras [sic]") by their alleged modus operandi (Express News Service, 1999). While filming in 2007, our efforts to conduct interviews with

some of the estimated 20% of Chhara who still make a living from thieving were upended when the thieves had to flee the community to avoid police raids. As I have recounted elsewhere:

The police were rounding up everyone suspected of thieving, and photographing them and videotaping them at the police station. Chhara identified as thieves by the police were being documented whether or not they had ever been caught in an act of thieving. Young people with no criminal record fled the neighborhood and went into hiding to avoid being listed. While such police practices are no longer officially sanctioned, they are nonetheless still quite common in DNT communities (Friedman, 2011: 368).

These violations of the Chhara's civil rights are legitimated by the continued use of colonial-era discourses informed by police ethnographies and discussions about Chhara modus operandi. When, at the rooftop meeting, Roxy said "the whole world knows about the modus operandi of the Chhara," he was alluding to the particular way the Chhara are seen by the modern Indian state (Scott, 1998). Despite being constantly under the gaze of the police, the Chhara are not entirely powerless. Over time they have developed strategies to avoid this gaze (Scott, 2010), some of which directly affected the nature of our collaboration. These include an argot they call "Narsi Parsi," strict rules about disclosing secrets to outsiders, and reluctance by some community members to pay taxes, register their property, or otherwise normalize their relationship with the state.[9] In asking Budhan Theatre to write short skits about the Chhara method of thieving we had inadvertently exposed the very real tensions that still exist between

their desire to challenge the official discourses surrounding the stigma of criminality imposed by the CTA and the hold that colonial past still has over the community.

Erasing the past

Part of the reason for the continuing impact of the CTA is the erasure of oral traditions that might have provided an alternative history. When the Chhara were registered as a Criminal Tribe in 1933 (Friedman, 2011; Symington, 1937: 3), the Bombay Presidency had adopted a policy, inspired by the work of the Salvation Army, of placing them in forced settlements where it was believed that "the moral value of disciplined labor" would reform them and allow them to reintegrate into mainstream society (Tolen, 1991: 119–120). This break with their earlier nomadic existence seems to have also resulted in a form of collective forgetting. The Chhara we spoke with remember very little about life before the settlement. Meena Radhakrishna (2001: 152–153) discusses a similar "inability or refusal to remember" among the Koravas DNT community in Madras, arguing that settlement life was such a "severe rupture in the continuity of their lives" that it destroyed the context in which oral traditions were passed down from one generation to the next (Radhakrishna 2001: 152-153; see also Schwarz, 2010: 103). Radhakrishna (2001: 153) describes the rupture:

their itinerant mode of existence was replaced by settled life. The community as a unit was broken into families, which were now the operational social and economic units…Their earlier social practices were considered barbaric and substituted with ones more acceptable to Victorian and Brahmanical notions of respectability… It was a fractured community life,

with broken bonds and ties. The settlement discipline allowed no meetings larger than six people at a time, except under the Salvation Army's eyes. In any case, there was no leisure, which must be there for the telling of tales or the singing of songs—both men and women worked up to 16 hours a day.

While conditions in the Chhara settlement differed from that of the Koravas, the effects have been similar. When we wanted to record traditional Chhara songs, only some of the oldest women in the community still remembered them, and none of them were agile enough to show us what the dances looked like. This erasure of historical memory has given Budhan Theatre the freedom to write their own history of Chhara as itinerant artists, but this alternative history must compete with numerous others circulating within the Chhara community, none of them authoritative. In the film we interviewed an old man who told us the Chhara once were soldiers, effectively making them members of the Kshatriyas caste (he said that the Chhara's "true community" is that of "Rajputs"), a common claim among DNTs (Chaturvedi, 2007: 13). Still others (and sometimes even the same people who argued that the Chhara were artists or warriors) embraced the official narrative of the Chhara as thieves, bragging about their skill. One popular story describes a man who stole Gandhi's rope bed from his ashram! But if the colonial experience led to a process of forgetting and erasure, the process of remembering has taken place in a highly contested terrain of contemporary communal violence. If the members of Budhan Theatre are worried about how other members of the community might react to the film, much of that has to do with where Chharas see themselves located in this new landscape.

Conflict over religious heritage

In February, 2002 a train returning from Ayodhya, where the Babri Mosque had been destroyed in 1992, was attacked by a mob while it was stopped at the Godhra railway station; one of the coaches was set on fire, killing 59 of the people inside (Yājñika and Sheth, 2005: 278). On the train were religious activists who had gone to Ayodhya to build a Hindu temple on the disputed site. The next day widespread communal riots took place throughout Gujarat, sparking violence which lasted for three months, leaving 2,000 people dead and more than 140,000 in refugee camps, many of them Muslims (Yājñika and Sheth, 2005: 282). Some of the worst of this violence took place in Naroda, near Chharangar, where "eighty-four people were burnt alive by a 15,000-strong mob" on the night of 28 February (Yājñika and Sheth, 2005: 279). Despite the size of the mob, the media and many Gujaratis came to focus on the role played by the Chhara in these riots. A 2007 sting operation by the investigative journal *Tehelka* exposed some of these Chhara (Khetan, 2007).

A poor, marginalized community is easily scapegoated. True, some Chhara were involved in the Naroda riots, but other members of the community risked their lives to save Muslim families. While making the film we shot extensive interviews about the incident, including an interview with one man who hid 70 Muslims in his own home, feeding them with the support of his neighbors. Because explaining communal violence would have required us to spend a significant amount of time educating audiences about issues outside of the Chhara community, we eventually decided that we would be better off making another film solely on that topic. Instead we focused narrowly on how these tensions affected the informal after-school program run by

Budhan Theatre. This program must compete with the *shakha* ("branch") run by the right-wing

Rashtriya Swayamsehvak Sangh (RSS) for the enrollment of Chhara children (Friedman, 2011).

Martha Nussbaum (2007: 153) describes how these *shakhas,* of which there are over 33,000

throughout India, lure "boys in with fun and games" and then teach them that "the future of India

depends on unity among Hindus and marginalization of alien groups," including Muslims. Or as

one Budhan Theatre volunteer put it, "they instigate you against the Muslims" (Friedman, 2011).

While the RSS had been an important player in Indian politics since its founding in the 1920s, it

rose to new prominence in the 1980s when the (largely upper-caste) Gujarati middle class began

to seek alliances with lower castes and indigenous groups under the framework of Hindutva*,* a

form of virulent Hindu nationalism (Yājñika and Sheth, 2005: 260). During this period the textile

mills in Ahmedabad were closing and "about 40,000 textile workers lost their secure

jobs" (Yājñika and Sheth, 2005: 257). Many of these were of the lower castes, Muslim, or from

"other backward castes" (OBC)—a category that also includes the Chhara (Yājñika and Sheth,

2005: 257). With the exception of the Muslims, many of these groups were drawn to Hindutva.

Moreover, Hindutva organizations deliberately targeted these populations, calling them "back to

the Hindu fold" (Bhatt, 2001: 200; Sonawane, 1999). Whereas the Chhara were once animists,

over time their religious practices had become more eclectic, including the worshiping of Sufi

saints and Hindu gods as well as the traditional earth, sun, water, and wind spirits embodied in

the stone deities they once carried with them (Roxy Gagdekar, personal communication).[10] Now

a portion of the community had come to strongly self-identify as Hindu, regularly going on

pilgrimages and building numerous shrines throughout the community. Dadi complained that in her time "nobody did so much *puja*, now they're always keeping fasts and going to temples."

These religious differences are directly linked to political tensions, at both the state and national levels, between the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and India's ruling Congress Party. The RSS supports the BJP, whose charismatic leader Narendra Modi has been chief minister of Gujarat since 2001. It has been reported (Jose, 2012) that as a young man "the RSS gave Modi a sense of purpose and direction." Especially troubling to many people are rumors that Modi supported—or at least did nothing to deter—the violence against Muslims in the 2002 riots. Although these accusations have clouded his ambitions to become prime minister, the riots are seen as having helped solidify electoral support for both Modi and the BJP in Gujarat (Jose, 2012). These political tensions are reflected in Chharangar and it is partially because of them that the police are able to find people willing to testify against the Chhara. Although the connection was never made explicit during the rooftop meeting it helps explain the political alliances Budhan Theatre has formed within the community. By choosing Budhan Theatre as our subjects we implicitly chose sides in a political struggle whose contours were only partially visible to us as filmmakers. Having made the decision to work with Budhan Theatre, our efforts to reach out to other sectors of the community, and even the police themselves, were consistently rebuffed. (We did not push too hard, as the volunteers of Budhan Theatre seemed anxious that we avoid provoking their enemies within the community.) Ethnographic collaboration is never collaboration with a "community" as a whole (if such bounded entity can even be said to exist), but always with certain sectors of that community.

Ruby (1991: 56) writes that "cooperative ventures turn into collaborations when filmmakers and subjects mutually determine the content and shape of the film." But he worries (Ruby, 1991: 5) whether or not subjects have the cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1984[1996]) necessary to make effective judgments. Ruby (1991: 59) quotes Edmund Carpenter (1974: 188), who wrote that "media permit little experimentation and only a person of enormous power and sophistication is capable of escaping their binding power." Of course, one might add that the filmmakers themselves are often equally unable to judge the unintended readings (and real-world consequences) engendered by their own work (Eco, 1989). In making *Please Don't Beat Me, Sir!* we felt fortunate that the members of Budhan Theatre were especially savvy about issues of media and representation, very far from the naïve subjects discussed by Ruby. Two volunteers had gone on from Budhan Theatre to attend India's prestigious National School of Drama, and others had experience working in television broadcasting, and journalism. At the time we were filming Dakxin was emerging as an independent documentary filmmaker in his own right (Friedman, 2011). And because they are experienced political activists we felt that they were in the best position to judge whether talking about specific topics risked any negative repercussions —from within the community or from without.

Ultimately, however, it is the members of Budhan Theatre and their families who will face any negative consequences resulting from the film—long after we have packed up and gone.[11] In such a situation it is reasonable to ask: Why even risk making a film? Doesn't the risk of harm outweigh any possible good that could come of it? Here is where activism combines with

ethnography, for in our desire to raise awareness not only of the situation in their own community, but that of all 60 million DNTs throughout India (Devy, 2004),[12] it is arguable that we do share a "common project" with the members of Budhan Theatre in the sense called for by the El Dorado Task Force. In us the volunteers of Budhan Theatre see outsiders capable of reaching a wider audience for their cause, a cause for which they have already been willing to take significant risks. However, despite this common goal the ethnographic approach we adopted in making this film occasionally clashed with the activist politics of Budhan Theatre—an activism that is hesitant about airing the community's dirty laundry in public. Only by demonstrating our long-term commitment to the community and the collaborative process itself were we able to persuade them that a complex and honest portrayal of the community would do more to further the DNT cause—a proposition which, admittedly, remains to be tested.

Collaborating beyond the film

Having looked at how the past and the present shaped the participation frameworks through which we were able to collaborate with Budhan Theatre, it is also worth examining how those participation frameworks have extended beyond the film. As I write, this is something we are still struggling with. The nature of such collaboration is much more complex and open-ended than the clearly defined boundaries of a single film or text. For one thing, it depends on the long-term stability of Budhan Theatre as a collaborative partner. As the leaders pursue their own careers, a new generation must take over, and that is an ongoing process. In the past, stability came from the presence of a strong local partner: the Bhasha Research and Publication Centre, a regional non-governmental organization with a strong commitment to DNT rights. Recently,

however, Budhan Theatre has taken steps to ensure that they can survive on their own. They have registered as an independent cultural organization; established the Budhan School of Theatre, Journalism and Media, which is affiliated with The Indira Gandhi National Open University; and successfully organized the Ahmedabad Theatre Festival (ATF). These activities, along with donations from supporters around the world, bring in a small amount of income that allows them to pay expenses and provide their volunteers with a small stipend (Roxy Gagdekar, personal communication).

Our current collaboration with Budhan Theatre takes two primary forms. First, we have helped establish a web presence for Budhan Theatre, providing them with server space, a website, and technical support. Over time Budhan Theatre members have become sophisticated users of new media, setting up their own blog, Facebook page, and social media campaigns (Budhan Theatre, 2012). Secondly, with the help of our producer Henry Schwarz, we established a US-based non-profit, Vimukta, Inc., which does fundraising on behalf of Budhan Theatre's community development activities, such as the children's branch of Budhan Theatre and their informal schooling program (Vimukta, Inc., 2012). We hope that the charity will provide a means for international audiences to become involved in the DNT rights movement.

Looking forward, we are discussing how we might establish an archive for our raw footage. We recorded oral history, music, and performances that will be of value to the Chhara community, and we'd like to give them control over that material; however, we are still working out the details regarding the legal and technical issues involved in doing so. Because there is some

potentially incriminating material in the footage we have to be especially careful to protect the privacy of our subjects. We have only just begun to research what might be involved in creating such an archive, but in doing so we have been particularly inspired by the work of Kimberly Christen whose Mukurtu Wumpurrarni-kari Archive is exemplary of how anthropologists can engage in ethnographically sensitive "digital repatriation" (Christen, 2011: 187).

We also have begun to discuss the possibility of collaborative future projects, including a potential fiction film to be co-written with members of Budhan Theatre. And on our last visit to India we explored the possibility of using the film as a means to spark dialogue between the Chhara and other DNT communities. We took the film to a Madari community in Lunawada, Gujarat, and to a Nat village in the same district. The Madaris, who used to make a living through snake charming and street magic, are increasingly having difficulty with the police, who now require them to have a license to perform in public. As a result the Madaris were therefore very receptive to the film, whereas the people in the Nat village we visited were less interested in the issue of police violence. The Nats we met with were doing much better than the Madari community, as they have some of their own land to fall back on when not working as acrobats and musicians. They were much more interested in talking to Budhan Theatre members about issues related to schooling and education. We have applied for grant money to do such workshops on a larger scale (including funds for dubbing the film for communities who cannot speak Hindi nor read subtitles) but so far we have been unsuccessful in securing such funds. Whether or not any of these future plans succeed, they point to ways in which a commitment to

participatory filmmaking requires thinking beyond the film itself, both into the distant past and the far future.

Conclusion: Indexing the silence

The various participation frameworks used in the film can be usefully cataloged using Bill Nichols' typology of documentary "modes" (Nichols, 2010): The rooftop scene exemplifies both the "participatory mode," with its emphasis on "the ethics and politics of encounter" (Nichols, 2010: 116), as well as the "reflexive mode," in its metapragmatic discourse about the filmmaking process itself. The short skits embedded in the film operate in the "performative mode," drawing upon the troupe's experience in street theater to convey the "subjective, affect-laden" (Nichols, 2010: 131) aspects of Chhara life. Even when the film's narrative required that we revert to the traditional "expository mode" in order to provide historical or ethnographic detail, we did so without the use of experts and relied instead upon the voices of Budhan Theatre members and their families. Doing so allowed the Chhara to construct the narrative on their own terms, even if that narrative is ultimately interpreted and filtered through the editing process.

Each of these modes have their own manner of producing silence. I have already discussed the silences which are directly addressed in the film's more reflexive scenes, but some of these silences were the result of decisions made while editing. In some cases the community's preferences contradicted those of individual interviewees, and we were forced to choose between the two. We filmed one interview with a thief who described, in great detail, the entire thieving process. When we screened the final cut of the film for the members of Budhan Theatre and their

families, this thief was angry with us that we had not included his interview. When we suggested that much of what he said was incriminating he dismissed our concerns, saying he wasn't afraid of the police. While probably true, we also heard a story about how his son had gotten slapped by the police and had his bat (a gift from his father) taken away after a stray cricket ball fell near a police officer (Dakxin Bajrange, personal communication). Not only did we have a responsibility to his family, but we had already participated in a series of discussions with the community during which we had agreed to talk about thieving only within the context of generational change, and to remain silent about their modus operandi. In the end, we felt that this was a much more satisfying narrative, and it let us talk about a number of other issues within the community, such as changes in attitudes towards marriage and religion.

Rather than filming something like Bresson's *Pickpocket*, with its famous scene on the art of picking pockets (2005), we made a film about a community undergoing rapid social change. The conflict over the representation of thieving is ultimately much more revealing about the role of Budhan Theatre in the community than such 19th century-style accounts of the Chhara modus operandi would have been. It is not unusual for an ethnographic filmmaker to shoot between one and two hours of footage for every minute of footage used in the final film. As a result, ethnographically rich footage is left out for much more pedestrian reasons and filmmakers rarely talk about what *isn't* in the film. I have taken the time to do so here because I think it sheds light on how important context and history are for thinking about ethnographic collaboration, as well as the ways in which collaboration can impact ethnographic style.

The collaborative methods we used (community screenings, dramatic performances, and reflexive discussion about the film) are all techniques that have been used before, but the film gained from the extent to which these techniques were embraced and utilized by the Budhan Theatre volunteers. Why not simply let Budhan Theatre members speak for themselves? In their own films, plays, and books they have already established a strong voice. Our hope is that we, too, bring something to the dialogue—both an understanding of our international audience, as well as a specifically ethnographic agenda that is different from the activist agenda of Budhan Theatre. In this sense then, *pace* the El Dorado Task Force, collaboration benefits as much from the divergence of goals as it does from having shared goals. The major obstacle we faced was the need to keep silent about the modus operandi of the Chhara thieves, but, in exchange, we gained insight into the social tensions and transformations that shaped Budhan Theatre's relationship to the community.

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Notes

1   A final judgment was issued on June 15, 2009, stating that Dakxin was "innocent" and that charges were dropped due to "lack of evidence" (Dakxin Bajrange, personal communication).

2   *Please Don't Beat Me, Sir!* was awarded the 2011 Jean Rouch Award for Collaborative Filmmaking by the Society for Visual Anthropology.

3   Within the film these skits are set apart with title cards identifying the author of each skit. In some cases the process of scripting and staging the skits is incorporated into the scenes, further highlighting their performative nature.

4   Even though the American Anthropological Association was to later rescind (http://www.aaanet.org/stmts/05ref_eldorado.htm) their acceptance of this report, I believe the report's call for a more collaborative and engaged anthropology captures the contemporary ethos.

5   DNT-RAG was founded by Mahsweta Devi along with Ganesh N. Devy and Laxman Gaikwad. Although DNT-RAG has since dissolved, a new DNT rights organization, Adhikar Abhiyaan, was created in August of 2010. Gujarati writer and activist Kanji Patel is the current chairman (Roxy Gagdekar, personal communication).

6   There were two meetings that summer. During the first meeting, in June of 1998, only Mahasweta Devi and Ganesh N. Devy were present. In July they returned with a larger group, which included, among others, Laxman Gaikwad, Bhagwandas Patel, and Surekha Devy (Roxy Gagdekar, personal communication).

7   Others, including a high-level police official, quoted similar numbers to us, but we were not able to find out the source or methodology for these figures.

8   See Friedman, 2011 (366–369) for a more detailed discussion of historical context of the Criminal Tribes Act, as well as its implementation in the Bombay Presidency, which at that time governed the region now known as Gujarat.

9   While we were filming there was an effort by Budhan Theatre to normalize relations in just this way, and meetings were even set up with government officials to discuss how taxes might be paid, but the initiative met with numerous obstacles and was put on hold.

10   Roxy's family keeps such stones in their family altar and he has photographs of his grandparents "wherein the 'stones' are [being] worshiped" (Roxy Gagdekar, personal communication).

11   It is quite common for community members to come to Roxy or Dakxin "to either argue, clarify or quarrel" about the issue of revealing Chhara secrets to outsiders (Roxy Gagdekar, personal communication).

12   As there has not been a proper census since 1931, the number of DNTs is hard to determine. The widely used (Ashti, 2010; Mohanty, 2006: 133) estimate of 60 million is based on a projection from the 1931 census (Ahmed, 2010). This has recently been revised upwards to 70 million (Ganesh N. Devy, personal communication).