

The Budhan Podcast



[Budhan Podcast](#) is a video-podcast series which began during India's first national lockdown in 2020, aimed at documenting the short and long-term impact of Covid-19 among India's most precarious indigenous and nomadic groups through arts-based methods.

India counts more than a hundred million Denotified and nomadic Tribes (DNTs), communities that were 'notified' as born criminals during British colonial rule under the 1871 Criminal Tribes Act. Despite de-notification following India's independence, the stigma of criminality continues to be associated with these groups. It negatively affects their ability to access basic state provisions from schools to food and health services, deprives them of citizenship rights and entitlements. As precarious workers at the margins of India's informal economy (manual labourers, migrant workers, street performers, sex workers), DNTs are among the communities most severely affected by the health and economic consequences of the pandemic.

In May 2020, a group of seven artists belonging to Budhan Theatre Group and the Chhara DNT community of Ahmedabad (Gujarat), began an extensive project of documenting the lockdown and post-lockdown experiences of DNT groups. They produced a series of video podcasts in indigenous languages, disseminated through community social media platforms. The episodes address the health, socio-cultural and politico-economic dimensions of the pandemic through multiple art forms that include monologues, songs and poetry. They cover topics ranging from health and safety measures, changes in death and marriage rituals, precarious livelihoods, the lives of children and the transformation of the domestic sphere.

All episodes were directed, acted, and produced by artists from the Chhara community and the Budhan Theatre team. Season one is an intimate portrayal of the experiences of the Chhara community itself during the first pandemic wave. The beginning of the series, filmed in the early days of the pandemic, relies heavily on performances to deliver information, but also to process loss and suffering. Season

two was filmed in between pandemic waves and focuses on the experiences of other DNT communities through a mixture of performances and documentary styles. The podcasts document the realities of marginalised groups otherwise overlooked in national reporting. For their makers, the series was also an opportunity to experiment with and learn filmmaking and editing, and to create new artistic forms by translating performances onto the screen.



[This](#) film presents stories from the Bahurupi community of itinerant theatre performers, and their struggles to continue their century old art and make a living during the pandemic. Communities with itinerant lifestyles have been the most affected by public health measures like lockdown aimed at containing the spread of Covid-19; and so have communities of wandering artists who depend on public gatherings for their everyday livelihoods. Across the episodes, we see a tale of impoverishment – from artists to beggars – of groups who used to make a life by selling their art and, with no permanent address or ID cards, now fall outside the mechanisms through which humanitarian support is provided in times of crisis. We see how this shift has particularly affected women. Seen to have a greater emotional appeal on the public, women sustained entire families through begging, exposing themselves to violence as well as the virus. As an activity that is in itself criminalised, begging has intensified violence against these communities, while contributing to a process of de-skilling of their rich performing traditions. The film was circulated through community social media networks. Together with the other episodes it served to strengthen a public sphere among communities who struggle to create a united political front because of histories of exclusion and movement. A longer film about the project and the experience of Covid among India's indigenous DNT communities will be released in 2022 for national and international audiences.

This research is part of an AHRC funded project led by [Alice Tilche](#) at the [School of Museum Studies](#) (University of Leicester) and co-designed with [Budhan Theatre](#) and [Bhasha Research and Publication Centre](#) – a grassroots theatre group and an NGO with a track record of working for the rights of India's indigenous and nomadic groups by linking art and rights-based campaigns; and Dr. Akshay Khanna, a medical anthropologist. To watch more episodes from the podcast series please visit <https://www.budhanpodcast.com/>

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