This book explores the question of what is happening in Kashmir through a site-adaptable 24-hour theatrical performance. Developed between 2013 and 2018 by the Ensemble Kashmir Theatre Akademi and Nandita Dinesh, the play uses a duration, promenade format to immerse its audience within a multitude of perspectives on life in Kashmir. From a wedding celebration that is interrupted by curfew, to schoolboys divided by policing strategies, and soldiers struggling with a toxic mixture of boredom and trauma, Chronicles from Kashmir uses performance, installation and collaborative creation to grapple with Kashmir’s conflicts through the lenses of outsiders, insiders, and everyone in between.

Due to varying degrees of censorship and suppression, the play has not been performed live since 2017. This book is, therefore, an attempt to keep Chronicles from Kashmir alive by including filmed scenes, a script, contextual questions, a glossary, and an illuminating introduction by Nandita Dinesh and EKTA founder Bhawani Bashir Yasir. A valuable Open Access resource for practitioners, educators and students of performance and conflict, this book is also stimulating reading for anybody who has asked, ‘What is happening in Kashmir?’

This playscript includes:

- Twenty filmed scenes of the play in performance
- A range of contextual questions to stimulate discussion on staging site-adaptable theatre in places of conflict
- A helpful glossary

As with all Open Book publications, this entire book is available to read for free on the publisher’s website. Printed and digital editions, together with supplementary digital material, can also be found at www.openbookpublishers.com

Cover image: Photo by Vladimir Palyanov on Unsplash from https://unsplash.com/photos/Q8qTersW9Fk
Cover design: Anna Gatti
Scene Seven: The Soldiers

They reach the next space.

The room contains an installation of women’s clothes, of various ages. Women’s clothes are nailed to the ceiling; others are strewn on the floor. It is important that the installation is as vague as it is direct; as abstract as it is realistic.

When the audience walks in, they see four soldiers who are just hanging around (SOLDIER #1, SOLDIER #2, SOLDIER #3, SOLDIER #4).

SOLDIER #4: Ah, there you are...

GUIDE #2: Hello again, sir. Please take your seats everyone. I’ve asked these soldiers to talk to you about something, or someone, that they are waiting for in their lives. So please, take your seats and let’s hear what they have to say to us!

SOLDIER #4 nods at SOLDIER #1, who walks through/around the crowd in an intimidating fashion.

SOLDIER #1: You want to hear my story? Stand in three straight lines. Close your eyes. Raise your hands above your head. (During the course of the following monologue, SOLDIER #1 interrupts his story, correcting audience members’ positions should they be falttering in their stances). What am I waiting for? Hmm.... you know, two years ago I was living in Jammu. It was raining heavily and I was thinking of the assignment I had to complete and submit the next day. Amidst all this, I heard the melodious sound of a flute coming from somewhere. I turned my head around to find an old man sitting on the doorstep of an old people’s home, playing the flute in the most incredible way I had ever heard. Tears were rolling down his cheeks.... This man sat on the doorstep every day, playing his flute, waiting, hoping that his son — his son who had just left him there — would realize his mistake and come back for him.
It’s just…fathers and sons just have this bond, you know? My father was an army man and when I got into the Academy, he was happier than I was. Seeing his joy, his pride, seeing that I might be able to do for him what the flute-playing man’s son does not…. I am waiting for the day my father will see me in this uniform, with stars shining in his eyes, flagging off the aircraft which is being flown by his son.

SOLDIER #2: ABOUT TURN. Stand at ease. Attention. Squat and hold your arms out in front of you. DO IT. (During the course of the following monologue, SOLDIER 2 interrupts his storytelling to correct audience members’ positions). What am I waiting for? When I was a kid, I was told I was worthless, that since I was not good in academics, I was good for nothing. No one ever asked me what I wanted to do or where I wanted to go...And then, in the eighth grade I watched the Bollywood movie Border. For the first time in my life, I was fascinated by the armed forces and that night when I went to bed, I had a dream. An incredible dream. An army of 300 brave Spartans charging over the enemy territory. The anger and blood in their eyes, the feeling of patriotism for their land. One among them — a young soldier — charging; making his way out to shed the blood of his enemy. Trrr...trrr... trr...trrrrrrrrrr... To fly, to wear the uniform, to do something for my land... So, when you ask me what I’m waiting for, well, I wait for the day a war breaks out and I get called to march ahead... I wait for the day I can shed every drop of my blood in serving my motherland and her boundaries, and when I come back from war, to continue my work to make this country a better place. It’s this wait that keeps me alive. And all those people who told me I’m worthless, I’m waiting for the chance to prove them wrong.

SOLDIER #3: TURN TO ME. (He smiles) You don’t have to do any exercises to hear my story.... Sit or stand how you like. What am I waiting for? I’m waiting for her. For her to come back to me and say to me that yes, she was wrong in her choice. I want her to feel that I was the best guy she could have ever met, and she made the biggest mistake of her life by choosing him. I am just waiting for the day that I will finish the Academy, become an officer, and go to her wearing that shining olive green uniform... Is that why she left me? Because I am an army man and she would have to be both the father and mother to our children?... I don’t know. All I know is that I want her to regret choosing him. And he, he will realize that he too made the biggest mistake of his life by betraying such a good friend like me... What am I waiting for? I’m waiting for a true friend, true love. But what does this ‘truth’ look like? How does it behave? Do I ask for too much from the people in my life? I don’t know... Maybe I’m asking for too much... (Pause) An army man getting desperate about a girl... You know, I think it’s because I have too much time on my hands now. These peace postings, they give you too much time to think. Next week though, next week I’m being posted to Kashmir and then, I’m sure I’ll forget all about the past. And I will find someone new. Someone better. I guess that’s something worth waiting for!
SOLDIER #4: Turn to me, please. Please stand over there, in a line; thank you... What am I waiting for? You know, I wanted to become a doctor... or to just focus on buying a new car... or to start a chain of restaurants... but then, I got selected into the Academy... And now, now my life is so... screwed up. Running... 7 km, 10 km, 12 km, 20 km, punishments for minor mistakes, physical strength but intellectual degradation... I am eagerly waiting for the day when I’ll finish the Academy. I feel suffocated; like I’m caged in some kind of prison. But until that happens, I wait for the term break, count the days left to go home, clear my physical training tests, finish cross-country runs, try to clear my exams. Most of all, I wait to go home. For that day when I can wake up, pack my bags, check my tickets, get ready in jeans and a t-shirt, board the train, and leave the Academy. I close my eyes on the train and see people all around me, cheering, clapping. I’m playing on my guitar, performing to the words of my own life. Or, or, I’m sitting on a veranda with a good book, a hot cup of chai... (Long pause) You know what I’m waiting for? I’m waiting for the day that I have a child and then he or she gets to live their life their way. I’m waiting for my child to have the freedom and the independence that I... (Pause) Every day that passes by makes me think that I am a day closer to what I am waiting for. For the wait to be over.

SOLDIER 2: Ok, I’m bored with this storytelling now. Let’s have some fun, guys, come on...

SOLDIERS #1, #2 & #3 stand up and start walking around the installation. They begin to play with the clothes that have been hung as part of the installation. Some of them caress the clothes that have been hung tenderly; others tear them down.

SOLDIER #4 conspicuously stands off to one side, not joining the others. SOLDIER #2 notices him after a while, goes to him, leads him to some of the clothes and tries to get him to play with the clothes as well. He tries for a few seconds but cannot seem to get into it the same way the others are. He watches the others for a while, wreaking havoc with the installation.

When their actions reach a frenzied pace, SOLDIER #4 pulls out a gun. Points it at his colleagues. Shoots them all. Puts the gun to his head. Freezes in position.

Silence.

While the SOLDIERS lie inert on the ground, the GUIDES and the ACTOR IN AUDIENCE involve the audience members in putting the clothes back in the way that they were when they first entered the room. Once some order has been restored:
GUIDE #1: Shall we move on, janab?

As the spectators begin to move toward the exit —

ACTOR
IN AUDIENCE: I can’t, sir.

GUIDE #1: Why not?

ACTOR
IN AUDIENCE: I need to wait here. To make sure something is done about all of this.

GUIDE #1: About all of what?

ACTOR
IN AUDIENCE: What the soldiers have done here; something needs to be done about this. Him (points to SOLDIER #4)... how is shooting them and killing himself doing anything to change this situation?

GUIDE #1: You think he should have stopped them sooner?

ACTOR
IN AUDIENCE: He should have tried. Instead of just watching them do what they did and then taking out his anger in this way.

GUIDE #1: And if he had tried to stop them, what do you think would have happened?

ACTOR
IN AUDIENCE: They probably would have killed him. But he’s dead either way, isn’t he?

GUIDE #1: True. Whichever way he dies though, it doesn’t stop what happened here.

ACTOR
IN AUDIENCE: That’s why I can’t continue on this journey, sir. I want to stay here. I want to wait and see that something is done about this.

GUIDE #1: People have already been waiting for a long time. It’s the same old story. The people say, “They did this” and they say, “No we didn’t.” The cycle goes on. Your waiting here is not going to change anything.

ACTOR
IN AUDIENCE: You don’t think I should try? Justice needs to be done and I want to help.

GUIDE #2: What does justice look like for something like this?
Scene Seven: The Soldiers

ACTOR
IN AUDIENCE: I don’t know.

GUIDE #2: Is justice that the people who do this get put in prison?

ACTOR
IN AUDIENCE: Maybe.

GUIDE #2: Is justice that they get killed?

ACTOR
IN AUDIENCE: Maybe.

GUIDE #2: Is justice that the victims won’t be ostracized anymore? That the women will finally start getting marriage proposals again?

ACTOR
IN AUDIENCE: Maybe.

GUIDE #2: Is justice that the victims will get a chance to take the perpetrators to court?

ACTOR
IN AUDIENCE: Maybe.

GUIDE #1: What is justice for something like this?

ACTOR
IN AUDIENCE: Maybe justice is that there will be no more weeping.

GUIDE #1: And if justice doesn’t come today?

ACTOR
IN AUDIENCE: Maybe it will come tomorrow.

GUIDE #1: Or the day after tomorrow?

ACTOR
IN AUDIENCE: Possibly.

GUIDE #1: Until...?

ACTOR
IN AUDIENCE: Until justice comes.

ACTOR IN AUDIENCE sits down near the installation. A line of LABOURERS enter.

ACTOR
IN AUDIENCE: And who are you?
LABOURER: We were contracted to come and build this place back up sir.

ACTOR
IN AUDIENCE: Of course. They couldn’t get find any Kashmiri workers willing to come here so they brought you, isn’t it?

LABOURER: I don’t know, sir. We are here because we were told that we would make good money doing the construction here. We don’t know anything about this place, and we don’t want to get involved in the politics of what might be happening here.

ACTOR
IN AUDIENCE: You don’t want to know about what happened here? You don’t want to know why you’ve been asked to come here and build over this place?

LABOURER: No, sir.

ACTOR
IN AUDIENCE: You don’t want to know?

LABOURER: No, sir. I am here to do my job. I am here to make money for my family. Please, just let me do what I was paid to do.

LABOURER moves ACTOR IN AUDIENCE out of the way and gives orders to his men to start the work. The men start singing a worker’s song and pass bricks in a line. A wall is being built around the installation; ostensibly, to hide it from view. The ACTOR IN AUDIENCE gets more and more agitated till —

ACTOR
IN AUDIENCE: Stop. STOP DOING THIS.

LABOURER: What’s your problem, man?

ACTOR
IN AUDIENCE: If you do this, if you build this wall, people will forget what happened here.

LABOURER: Maybe people want to forget what happened. What’s wrong in that?

ACTOR
IN AUDIENCE: No, people should not forget. They cannot forget. You will not build anything here. This place needs to stay as it is as a reminder of what has happened. Of what continues to happen.

LABOURER: Look, I have a job to do and I need to do it. Please get out of my way.
LABOURER makes as if to start working again. The ACTOR IN AUDIENCE pulls audience members to stand in front of each labourer, while saying, “don’t let him do anything, ok?”

The main LABOURER tries to stop ACTOR IN AUDIENCE by reasoning with him; reasoning with the audience members; raising his voice a little; calling his boss on his cell phone. But the ACTOR IN AUDIENCE continues doing what he’s doing. Finally —

LABOURER: PLEASE STOP THIS. HEY. STOP THIS.
You are going to get me into a lot of trouble.

ACTOR IN AUDIENCE: I don’t care if you get in trouble. You are not changing anything here till justice comes. YOU WILL NOT CHANGE ANYTHING HERE TILL JUSTICE COMES.

Pause. The LABOURER realizes that this man is not going to get out of his way.

LABOURER: Come with me. Come and speak to my boss. You want us to stop building this wall? Come and talk to the man who actually makes the decision instead of taking out your frustration on us. Come on. Let’s go.

The LABOURER ushers the ACTOR IN AUDIENCE toward the door and leaves the space with the other labourer’s following him.

During the conversation that follows, the GUIDES also hand out a stone souvenir to each audience member. Each stone is covered with this information:

310 army personnel committed suicide since 2014: Government (Hindustan Times, 2017)
Indian army suicides blamed on ‘poor leadership’ (BBC, 2012)
Suicides and fratricide: Indian Army takes care of its soldiers, stop maligning it (Kakar, 2017).
Over 100 military personnel commit suicide every year (Pandit, 2017)
Why Are the Armed Forces in Kashmir Plagued by So Many Suicides and Fratricides? (Maqbool, 2017)
India’s Troubled Soldiers (Ramachandran, 2013)
GUIDE #2: Every time I come to Kashmir I meet people who are fighting for what they believe in. People who are fighting for justice in their own way. And while there is a part of me that does understand their fights, I must admit that there is a part of me that remains uncertain. Uncertain of how all these different fights for justice will coalesce for Kashmir’s future... I guess it’s doesn’t matter in the grand scheme of things, whether I understand or don’t... Or does it matter? What do you think, janab?

GUIDE #1: Personally, I don’t think it matters if you understand why people are fighting for justice in the way that they are. I don’t think it even matters if I or other Kashmiris understand why a certain individual’s fight for justice looks the way it does. What is important is that that person who is fighting understands why they are fighting the way they are fighting. It is important that that person understands what justice means to them and if/when their fight will be over.

GUIDE #2: But sir, what about how the fights all come together... For example, let’s say this student here (points to one member of the audience) has found a way of fighting for justice that is completely different from what this other student (points to another member of the audience) thinks justice is. They both believe in their fights and their means. They both have their own definition of justice. But what does that mean in the larger scheme of things if one person’s fight for justice derails another? What will that mean for the future of Kashmir?

GUIDE #1: That’s a great question but one that I cannot answer. I daresay no one has been able to answer that question, have they?

GUIDE #2: No, no they haven’t... So, shall we just move on then?

GUIDE #1: Shouldn’t we wait to see what happens with this situation? If the young man who was protesting will find justice?

GUIDE #2: I think that will be a long wait, janab. Who knows what he will find and when he will find it.

GUIDE #1: You’re right... Please, lead the way. Let’ move on.

As the audience members move out from this space and into the next, they walk through a path made of sacks.