What is happening in Kashmir?

This book explores this question through a site-adaptive 24-hour theatrical performance. Developed between 2013 and 2018 by the Ensemble Kashmir Theatre Akademi and Nandita Dinesh, the play uses a durational, 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-adaptive 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
Scene Nineteen: The Return

Split scene. Three pairs of actors. Each pair has two characters: one Kashmiri Muslim and one Kashmiri Pandit. The pairs are staged at different locations on the periphery of the space, with the audience seated in the middle. In each pair the two men/women are childhood friends who are reconnecting after a long time. When the audience enters, each pair is frozen in a different tableau. One pair is hugging and crying. One pair is sitting across a table from each other. One pair has their backs to each other.

PANDIT #3: I miss Kashmir.

MUSLIM #3: Why don’t you come back?

PANDIT #3: *Dil toh chahta hai* but people keep talking about the “halaat”…

MUSLIM #3: What about the halaat?

PANDIT #3: I hear every day that things in Kashmir are not good. That there are still… well, you know what I mean.

Change in focus.

MUSLIM #2: Look, I’m not going to lie and tell you that everything is fine. But you should know that whatever the halaat is going to be for you, that’s how it’s going to be for me also. If they try to hurt you, it’ll be over my dead body.

PANDIT #2: That is really sweet of you to say. But how can Kashmir be my home again if I have to rely on you or stay in a camp to be safe?

MUSLIM #2: That’s not what I’m saying. I’m saying that if things remain unsafe for you… I was a child last time and I couldn’t help. But this time, I can do something.

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The safest place for Pandits will be in the hearts of Kashmiri Muslims — not in the camps.

Pause.

PANDIT #2: Some of our people are telling us that we should not go on an individual basis until there is a plan for how to settle the entire community. Others are telling us that we should start going back and test how things are. Others are talking about creating demarcated areas in which we can live under some kind of protection. And some, some even want a part of Kashmir just for our community. I don’t know whom to believe any more.

MUSLIM #2: Whom do you want to believe?

PANDIT #2: The dreamer in me — the part of me who will always consider Kashmir my home — wants to listen to those who tell me that I can go back without fear. But the realist in me — the part of me who remembers what made me leave...

MUSLIM #2: That part of you doesn’t know what to do.

PANDIT #2: Yes... If we return, will we get our jobs back?

MUSLIM #2: I’m sure they are looking to put some sort of plan in place.

PANDIT #2: But what about the unemployed Kashmiri youth? Won’t our return add to the pressure of the jobs that already need to be created? Won’t that create more resentment towards us?

MUSLIM #2: That’s a good question... and we also need the jobs. I don’t know the answer to that question.

Change in focus.

PANDIT #1: What about our homes?

MUSLIM #1: Would you consider selling your current home and using that money to build a new home in Kashmir?

PANDIT #1: Should I?

MUSLIM #1: Why not?

PANDIT #1: What if it all happens again?

Pause.

MUSLIM #1: You won’t know till you take the chance.
PANDIT #1: Easy for you to say. You’re not the one who has to risk his life.

MUSLIM #1: Kashmiris have to risk their lives every day!

PANDIT #1: Oh, come on. Don’t make this a competition about who has suffered more. We have all suffered. The difference is, no one forced you to leave your home.

MUSLIM #1: No one forced you to leave your home either. Look at the Sikhs — they stayed.

*Change in focus.*

PANDIT #3: There we go again. “Why did those Pandits have to leave? They could have stayed.” Let’s see if you say the same thing when the men with guns come knocking on your door.

MUSLIM #3: They have come, many times. I didn’t leave.

PANDIT #3: It’s not the same thing.

MUSLIM #3: Stop making excuses. Why don’t you just tell the truth?

PANDIT #3: And what is the truth according to you?

MUSLIM #3: You don’t want to come back because then, all this attention you are getting for your story will go away.

PANDIT #3: How dare you say that!

*MUSLIM #3 and PANDIT #3 get into a fight with each other. Punches are thrown and they are on rolling around on the floor. Suddenly PANDIT #3 starts laughing uncontrollably:*

PANDIT #3: Don’t punch me there, please, it tickles.

MUSLIM #3: I guess some things don’t change.

*Both men collapse in laughter.*

*As pair #3 is laughing, pairs #1 and #2 pick up balls of wool, and by looping the wool around different parts of the space and audience members’ bodies/spaces between them, create a web. The following conversations, then, happen while the six actors are creating this huge web between the bodies and the space. The speed of the conversation increases, as does its intensity. It should be unclear, at the end, who is responding to whom.*

MUSLIM #1: I’ll give you my land. Build a house there.

*What is the significance of the audience building a web with the actors?*
PANDIT #3: What?

MUSLIM #2: I’m serious.

PANDIT #2: They’ll never allow this to happen. They’re going to paint me as a betrayer to the cause.

MUSLIM #3: So, what? Let them say what they want to say. What’s more important? Coming home or...

PANDIT #1: Or my relationship with my community? Both are important.

PANDIT #2: Look, this issue of us returning has to be addressed at a policy level. Individual cases of Muslims hosting Pandits till they feel safe is not only ridiculous, it’s useless.

MUSLIM #1: OK. But what about policies to ensure that with the Pandits’ return, Muslims who have had to take over their jobs and buy their homes are not suddenly left without employment or houses?

PANDIT #1: So, you agree that policy changes are what’s needed at this point? Can you ensure that your fellow Muslims don’t invite Pandits to come back on a one-to-one basis and then mediatize these invitations as “proof” of things being better?

MUSLIM #3: I can try my best to ensure that we get enough people behind us, but I cannot ensure that people will not invite their friends back on a one-to-one basis. This is a free country, after all!

PANDIT #2: Is it?

Change in focus.

MUSLIM #1: Maybe it’s better for you to be careful. Don’t come back till you’re sure that you will be safe.

PANDIT #2: I want to come home. But I can’t.

MUSLIM #3: I am with you. They’ll have to kill me before they can get to you.

PANDIT #2: I don’t want anything to do with Kashmir anymore.

MUSLIM #1: You should only come back if you’re ready to start from scratch again.

PANDIT #2: They should give us our own space; our own little slice of Kashmir.

Each different conversation between a MUSLIM and PANDIT pair showcases a different dimension to the historical narratives of conflict and reconciliation between these communities.

What are these different dimensions?

What are the dimensions to the Kashmiri Muslim-Pandit that are still absent from this scene?
MUSLIM #2: Come back only if you can be part of our struggle.
PANDIT #1: I’ll only return if I can get my house and my job back.
MUSLIM #3: I really want you to come back but... not everyone feels that way.
PANDIT #2: Promise me that we’ll be safe.
PANDIT #3: No.
MUSLIM #1: Yes.
MUSLIM #2: Maybe.
PANDIT #1: Should I?
MUSLIM #2: Shouldn’t?
PANDIT #3: Can I?
MUSLIM #1: Why?
PANDIT #2: Why not?
PANDIT #1: When?
MUSLIM #3: How?
PANDIT #2: May I?
MUSLIM #2: Yes.
MUSLIM #1: No.
PANDIT #3: Maybe.
MUSLIM #3: Why?
PANDIT #1: May I?
MUSLIM #2: Why not?

*The repetition of these words gets faster and faster until they reach a crescendo. GUIDE #2’s irritation has only been growing, as he gets enmeshed within the web.*

GUIDE #2: STOP.

*All the MUSLIMS and PANDITS freeze.*

GUIDE #2: What would you like us to do?
ALL ACTORS
(MUSLIMS & PANDITS): Find a way out.

The way in which the web is wound should not make it too easy for the audience members to disentangle themselves from it. GUIDE #1 is the first to extricate himself and he helps each spectator free themselves from the web. Once GUIDE #2 is free, he starts handing stone souvenirs to audience members who are free of the web. Each stone is covered, simply, with the following terms:

- Repatriation
- Reintegration
- Rehabilitation
- Reconstruction

The group moves to the next space, navigating a webbed pathway.