“What is happening in Kashmir?”
This book explores this question 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 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-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
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Scene Twenty: The Seesaws

A room full of seesaws. Audience sits on seesaws.

The characters speaking these lines are also on seesaws. The characters are in fatigues: they could be representatives of a nation-state’s armed forces, or a group of guerrillas.

There is a rhythm playing in the background. Everyone must COLLECTIVELY move the seesaws in sync, according to the rhythm. If anyone goes off the rhythm — at any time — the lighting changes; a siren plays for 15 seconds. Back to the rhythm and the seesaws.

Ideally, the rules of this world are communicated to audience members non-verbally, after a few times of them going off rhythm when they first start on the seesaws, only to be met with changing lights and the sounds of sirens — the audience should be taught the rules of the world in this way.

The sound and lighting operator control the scene, essentially. They watch for people going off rhythm. They cause the scene to start and stop. The actors need to pick from where they left off. As if nothing happened. And yet, knowing something has.

PERSON IN
FATIGUES #1: A bit of shame. That’s a lie, there’s also pride. I’m very proud of myself that I was a combatant. But there’s a lot of shame, many thoughts afterwards, and for years now I’m still thinking about it.

PERSON IN
FATIGUES #2: Did I behave properly during that incident? Should I have opened fire? Did I not need to? Was it unnecessary?

PERSON IN
FATIGUES #3: I was a fighter, but for only one side, and... I don’t know. I felt... a lot of hatred for them. A feeling of being exploited and... That they took everything out of you in impossible conditions, and then it sort of doesn’t interest anybody.
PERSON IN
FATIGUES #4: I thought that I would be a combatant and defend... Sometimes, you do actually have the feeling that you’re doing something but then when you think about it you realize it isn’t exactly like that.

PERSON IN
FATIGUES #5: I remember being on the border and I would think to myself: seriously, they don’t have the slightest idea what’s happening a meter from their back, like, it’s amazing. You step one meter away and you’re in a completely different reality, and people don’t know about it.

PERSON IN
FATIGUES #2: There’s this reality, which is sometimes, you know, kind of surreal. Where an 18-year-old boy checks, and de-facto controls that day’s fate of 200 people, adults, children, old women, not-so-old women.

The rhythm changes. Same rules.

PERSON IN
FATIGUES #4: And nobody knows this. People don’t understand what’s happening right next to them. And people who are there do things out of habit, it’s their daily routine, it’s what they do. And sometimes... it took me some time before what was really problematic about my service hit me. What’s really problematic is that you don’t understand what you’re doing; because you’re doing it as a fighter and not doing it as a thinking human being.

PERSON IN
FATIGUES #5: It’s problematic that I, as a 19–20-year-old kid, control the lives of so many people, and that I have disproportionate authority. And honestly, I’ll tell you the truth, I also have no idea what to do with it. I would check people without knowing why I’m doing it. And this whole situation where people are, every day, under military rule, and their day-to-day lives are determined by it. That’s what’s problematic. That’s it, at large. That’s what bothers me.

PERSON IN
FATIGUES #1: When I call someone over, just to call someone over, like, “come,” because you know, you have to check, because you do have to check who the people are passing there in the street, yes, there are all sorts of incidents there, all sorts of stuff. So even when I called up someone to talk to them, just in order to prevent friction, because I see someone shitty approaching. Only to move the other one out of his way. And you see the man go: “yes, yes, what, what, no, I don’t have anything, what.” Like, in fear.
PERSON IN
FATIGUES #3: Seeing an old woman crawl to me on all fours just to say: “I know there’s a curfew, that’s why I’m not walking, but I have to go there, my kid is just here at the neighbour’s, and I have to bring him home.” And she comes back with a baby. She says to me: “Should I crawl on my knees?” I say to her: of course not, get up, go. A second later a soldier cocks his weapon at her just because she’s passing by his post, and she gets back on her knees, so he won’t... “I’m just getting my baby, I’m just...”

The rhythm changes. Same rules.

PERSON IN
FATIGUES #4: Like that. I say: why should she have to explain anything to me at all? She’s walking in her neighbourhood. It’s her neighbourhood, and she has to explain to me that she’s just going to bring her baby. That’s bad.

PERSON IN
FATIGUES #2: What shocked me, was that you would do things sitting behind a desk, in front of a computer, and you would cause colossal damage, collective and personal, to every single person there.

Trauma for life, psychological problems, killing, of course. Everything comes from the political echelon, which you’ve stopped believing in.

PERSON IN
FATIGUES #3: The first year was the hardest. Mostly because... I guess I thought more people would be thankful for what we are doing. That more people would appreciate that we are fighting. But... it can be isolating, this life.

The rhythm changes. Same rules.

The rhythm changes. Same rules.

The rhythm changes. Same rules.

GUIDE #1: How much longer is this going to go on?

GUIDE #2: As long as these folks want to keep playing the game!

GUIDE #1: How many of you want to move on?
A vote is taken. If more than half the audience wants to leave, they leave.

Otherwise, the rhythms keep changing and the seesawing continues.

Every so often the GUIDES take a vote. When more than half the audience votes to leave, the group leaves. They head to the next space, walking down a path that is composed of semi-wet clay.