Chronicles from Kashmir
An Annotated, Multimedia Script

NANDITA DINESH

“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

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Exploring the legitimate scope and space for theatre in a conflict zone like Kashmir is an extremely uphill task. It involves many social, cultural, religious, political and economic challenges, and above all, the risk to one’s life, property and reputation.

Jammu and Kashmir have been a bone of contention since 1947, when this Subcontinent was divided after the termination of British rule into two new nations — India and Pakistan. This partition also forcibly divided the multi-regional but then politically united fabric of Jammu and Kashmir State, which fractured the State geographically, intellectually, socially, culturally and politically.

After the uprising of the militancy in 1988, Kashmir has become an uncontrolled conflict zone that presents multi-dimensional socio-political and humanitarian challenges, including risk to life, prosecutions and persecutions, unabated violence, military operations, and above all, uncertainty and loss of peace in the region. While peace of mind and a peaceful atmosphere is the basis for every theatrical activity, turbulent situations like these can provide rich dramatic content.

As an “insider,” I would not like to say much about the history of this region, as my comments are likely to be treated as stemming from a biased viewpoint. Besides, Nandita (the “outsider”) has already thrown sufficient light on the subject in her introduction, with the big question: “what is happening in Kashmir?”

Being a theatre professional and a Kashmiri nationalist, I have long felt it to be my moral obligation to give new impetus to the theatre movement of Kashmir and to carve a legitimate space for theatre after a dark era during 1990–2005. Thus my decision to establish the Ensemble Kashmir Theatre Akademi — EKTA (School of Drama & Repertory) in 2006, as a step forward in that direction. EKTA soon went on to become recognized as a national institution; the first of its kind in Kashmir.

In 2012, Nandita Dinesh — who had gone through a tough experience during her first visit to Kashmir in 2011, which had made her desperately sick and reluctant to return at first — came to see me at EKTA in Srinagar, referred to me by one of my students, who happened to be a college professor. After hearing about her work and
her wish to collaborate with EKTA as part of her doctoral project, we embarked on a multi-year collaboration.

It is important to remark here that providing a platform for an outsider is extremely challenging in Kashmir due to potential security risks and suspicions of secret agendas. But given my commitment to the theatre, I decided to take on these risks and to provide space open for Nandita to work with the artistes of EKTA, without putting any restrictions or limitations on the work. The only suggestion I made was that we had to be very careful about the sensitivities and sensibilities of people in Kashmir when dealing with their unimaginable suffering, while approaching the subject with honesty and constructing/deconstructing the content of the play. Such conversations formed the basis of the characters Guide #1 and Guide #2 in the play, representing the insider and the outsider views that were present at every step of the creation of “Chronicles of Kashmir”.

While Nandita explains the process in detail in this book, I would like to draw your attention to some important points:

1. Being “insiders” who have lived the conflict, our Kashmiri actors and audience could easily connect with the content of the play and its immersion in everyday life in Kashmir.

2. When performing in Kashmir, every scene — however much we tried to be indirect — was immediately connected to someone’s real-life experience.

3. During the process of revealing some concealed realities of Kashmir, about which I happened to be a first-hand source, the actors and the audience often reacted furiously towards Nandita and me, and suspected that we had some secret agenda.

4. There were big questions raised, even among my friendship circles within the theatre fraternity, concerning my collaboration with an (Indian) outsider who could not be deemed as “trustworthy”. On many occasions, even my actors and members of EKTA asked: why are we doing such a project?

5. In spite of having been a leading pro-freedom activist, in many political and public circles I was viewed suspiciously for my approach to theatre activities that were unconventional.

6. It was also a big challenge to maintain consistency of performance in this multi-year project. Every stage included a gap of one year, and there were always new additions of content, concepts, thoughts, audiences and artists — but we did not let the spine of the play break.

From 2012 to 2014, the play was performed at the EKTA campus and all of the scenes were set in different rooms and spaces. Most of the scenes were very intense, but the movement of the audience from one space to another allowed them a sigh of relief to prepare for the next powerful scene. I don’t mean that the audience was alienated
from the play, as Brecht has put it, but that moving from one space to another provided them with time to connect with the action intellectually.

However, the final live performance of the play at a theatre space in Kamshet, Maharashtra, was a bitter experience in comparison with the performances in Kashmir. I do not understand why a group of high-profile police officers raided the campus, and although they did not actively disturb our performance, their arrival disturbed the audience mentally and added to the intensity of the play. It showed us all how the word “Kashmir” is disturbing for Indian authoritarian rulers.

I am sure this play will be a new milestone in the landscape of world theatre in general, and a landmark in the evolution of the contemporary theatre of Kashmir, in particular. I feel proud to be part of it, as co-author and a lead actor.

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