

PROJECTS / PROCESSES

**ACTS OF POWER:
PERFORMING MEMORY
AGAINST LEGALITY**

TRINA NILEENA BANERJEE

PROJECTS / PROCESSES VOLUME III

Series Editor: Senjuti Mukherjee

**Acts of Power: Performing Memory
against Legality**

Trina Nileena Banerjee





Still from "Accidental Death of an Anarchist", showcased at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019.
Photograph courtesy The Lumiere Project.





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Spotlight on the margins //
Accidental Death of an
Anarchist

Venue The Little Red, Old Goa
Medical College

Curated by Arundhati Nag

Curatorial Note

Curated by *Arundhati Nag*

Directed by *Dakxinkumar Bajrange*

Actors *Atish Indrekar, Siddharth Garange, Mushtaqueali Shaikh, Hozefa Ujjaini, Jayendrakumar Rathod, Sandipkumar Indrekar, Vaishakh Rathod, Shubham Bajrange*

Production Manager *Krishnkant Machharekar*

Set Designer *Snehalkumar bangali*

Prop Manager *Kushal batunge*

Music *Anishbhai Garange*

Lighting by *Sahil Bangali*

Costume and Makeup *Ruchika Kodekar*

Spotlight on the Margins is a vertical that hopes to bring one theatrical presentation each year to Serendipity Arts Festival (SAF), highlighting an issue that the theatre curator of that edition wishes to forefront. For the 2018 edition of the Festival, I chose to spotlight the LGBTQI community through *Parayan Maranna Kadhakal* (Untold Forgotten Stories), a poignant telling of the woes of our fellow citizens in India today, that was performed by members of the transgender community. For SAF 2019, I have chosen the Chhara community from Gujarat. More than 70 years after Independence, this community faces the wrath of being classified as a denotified tribe, ostracised from mainstream culture because of their labelling as a “community of thieves” in their own country! Members from this community will perform *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, an iconic play by the famous Italian playwright Dario Fo. If theatre is a “mirror of society”, then there are innumerable issues that urgently need to be reflected in that mirror and shown to society!

Based on a play written by Dario Fo in 1970, *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* begins with the stigmatisation of members of the Chhara community as thieves, underscored by the play's focus on impersonation, infiltration, and double-talk.

Translated into Hindi by Amitabh Shrivastava and directed by Dakxinkumar Bajrange, the play has been adapted to the context of Ahmedabad's serial bomb blasts, where a young man who is arrested, jumps from the fourth floor and dies during an interrogation. It discusses police corruption in India, which frames innocent people as anarchists. Through double talk and fast-paced dialogue, the play demonstrates police brutality against innocent youth of religious minority communities in India. The play has been performed in over 30 experimental shows, including museums, small rooms, houses, terraces, localities of religious minorities, and some educational institutions.

-Arundhati Nag

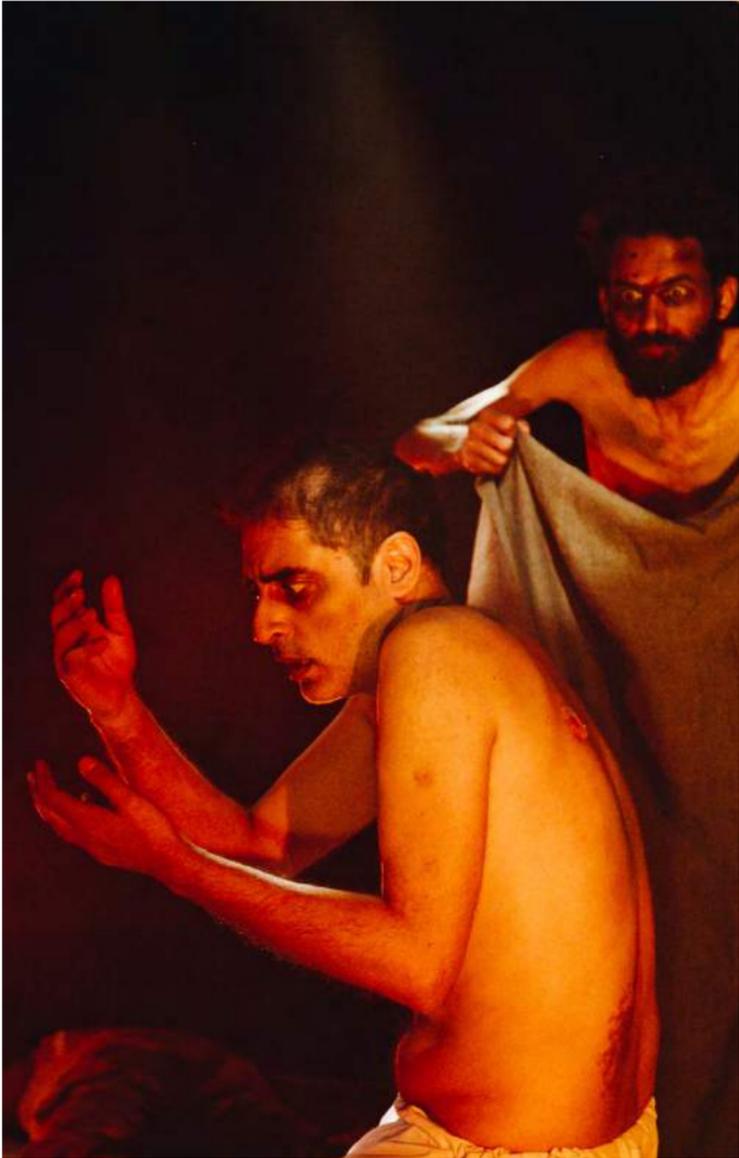


Still from "Eidgah ke Jinnat", showcased at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019.
Photograph courtesy The Lumiere Project.

Eidgah Ke Jinnat

Venue The Big Black, Old Goa
Medical College

Curated by Atul Kumar



Still from "Accidental Death of an Anarchist", showcased at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019.
Photograph courtesy The Lumiere Project.

Curatorial Note

Curated by *Atul Kumar*

Written and Directed by *Abhishek Majumdar*

Translated from English by *Shirin Bismillah*

Actors *Ajeet Singh Palawat, Ashwath bhatt, Aqib Mirza, Avneesh Mishra, Bhanu, Priya Bhatia, Chinmaya Madan, Divya Bhomia, Hitesh Kumar, Shreya Arora, Shubham Singh Bagri, Sudarshan Dadhich, Suresh Sharma, Vijay Patidar*

Associate Directors *Manzoor Ahmad Mir, Neel Sengupta*

Assistant Directors *Abhishek Mudgal, Mumal Tanwar*

Costume Design *Pallavi Krishna*

Sound Design *Nikhil Nagaraj*

Lighting Design and Music *Rajesh Singh*

Production Manager *Saatvika Kantamneni*

Stage Manager *Chelcy Pathak*

Production Team *Rashmi Khanna, Sonal Gupta, Sumit Kumar, Yash Khan*

Producer *Vivek Madan*

Ashrafi and Bilal are orphaned siblings stranded and defined by the troubles in Kashmir. 18-year-old Bilal is the pride of the region, part of a teenage football team set for great heights and pushed to the limits by the violence around them. Haunted by hope, his sister is caught in the past, and Bilal is torn between escaping the myths of war and the cycles of resistance.

Interweaving true stories and testimonies with Islamic storytelling, the play paints a magical portrait of a generation of radicalised kids and a beautiful landscape lost to conflict.

Acts of Power: Performing Memory against Legality

TRINA NILEENA BANERJEE

THE PLAYS AND THEIR CONTEXTS

In the essay, “Enactments of Power: The Politics of Performance Space”, Ngugi wa Thiongo writes: “The war between art and the state is really a struggle between the power of performance in the arts and the performance of power by the state - in short, enactments of power [...] the main arena of struggle is the performance space: its definition, delimitation, and regulation.” He goes on to argue, against Peter Brook, that the performance space is never empty.² It may be bare and open, but it is never free from vortices of power. Performance’s real power, Ngugi argues, comes from its relationship to the audience. Performance transforms an apparently empty space into “a magnetic field of tensions and conflicts”, within which it becomes a potentially explosive “sphere of power revolving around its own axis”.³ Performance is always “poised to explode”.⁴ The state fears it precisely because it is not isolated from other fields, even if it is apparently separated from them by material walls and architectural design. This potential explosiveness is often less about the content of what is performed on stage, and much more about who has access to the performance space and on what terms. Who holds the power to regulate it? To shrink it, expand it, or to make it disappear? Ngugi writes, tellingly: “It matters, in other words, whether, say, the artist’s space is located in a working-class district, in a bourgeois residential neighborhood, in the ghettos, or in the glossy sections of our cities. The real politics of the performance space may well lie in the field of its external relations; in its actual or potential conflictual engagement with all the other shrines of power, and in particular, with the forces

that hold the keys to those shrines.”⁵ Moreover, Ngugi argues, performance must be seen in relation to time, that is, in the context of what has gone before (history) and what might come in the future. “What memories does the space carry, and what longings might it generate?”, he asks.⁶

In December 2019, I was asked to write on two performances at the Serendipity Arts Festival held in Goa. The essay, according to my brief, was meant not just to be a review of the performances that I saw, but a rather more intense exploration that grew out of my engagement with the processes and ideas that had gone into the making of these plays, as well as the political and personal histories that they were embedded in. As it turned out, the more I tried to understand the external and internal networks of power that had shaped these performances, the more it became clear to me that it would be impossible to write about them without bringing into bearing longer and interconnected histories of oppression, memory, identity, and trauma. Embodied memory and arguably unfinished journeys towards political empathy had shaped these performances. Both plays, I gathered, were marked by events of censorship, public outrage, and repression in indirect, if not direct, ways. Both had been changed by these experiences of violence. I needed to understand these shaping trajectories before I could understand the performance itself. Indeed, within the global field of Performance Studies, the necessity of reading “performance” as a process rather than as a singular event has been felt with increasing intensity. If we were to accept Ngugi’s formulation, performances, as potentially explosive spheres of power revolving around their own axes, have the capacity to “ignite” or set ablaze other domains of political relations. Both the spark and the forest it may potentially ignite are often shaped by interconnected transformations within the same politico-cultural field. No performance, in fact, ever takes place in an empty space: we cannot imagine the site of performance as a black box of indeterminate shape that could belong anywhere, suspended from the thin neutrality of the air. Performances are nomadic, yet they are infectiously steeped in memories. Their seeds are airborne.

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The two plays I had been asked to write about were Budhan Theatre's adaptation of Italian playwright Dario Fo's *The Accidental Death of an Anarchist* (directed by Dakxin Bajrange Chhara) and Abhishek Majumdar's *Eidgah ke Jinnat* (directed by the playwright and translated from the English version—*The Djinns of Eidgah*—by Shirin Bismillah). Both plays had long and complicated performance histories. At Serendipity, they were performed in two black box spaces, one slightly smaller than the other. Both spaces had been constructed specifically for the purposes of the festival. *Accidental Death*, which had a history of being performed in very small intimate spaces with small audiences sitting up close, was performed at the “Little Red” which could accommodate approximately fifty to sixty people, with some standing. *Eidgah* was performed at the “Big Black” which could seat a slightly larger audience. It also had a bigger performance area, which made space for the design elements that were crucial to the scenography of the play. Both plays ran to packed audiences, with many who had queued up outside returning disappointed when space ran out. Both plays were starkly political in a way that mainstream news would have certainly termed “bold”. Yet they could not have possibly been more different from each other.

Accidental Death limited itself to a more or less minimalist design and stuck to a largely straightforward style of performance. A few chairs and tables, the frame of a window (from which the terror suspect had allegedly jumped), and a photograph of Mahatma Gandhi marked the small room of the police station. When the play began, we learnt that it is here that the interrogation and subsequent death of the accused “anarchist” had taken place. Little else seemed to be required in the nature of stage props: a few old files, a couple of handcuffs, and a rickety coat hanger. There were no tricks of lighting or any significant use of music intended to enhance or interrupt specific moods or scenes. In fact, in the version of the play available online, we find the actors performing in the flat frontal glare of tube lights in a small room. This particular show, a video recording of which has been uploaded on YouTube, took place in 2014 at the Conflictorium, a museum of conflict in Ahmedabad. In the video, the room seemed

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even smaller than a usual classroom in a government school and consequently the actors had access to only a few square feet of space to perform. At the end of the play, when a couple of blackouts were required in order to present two alternative endings to the narrative, the actor closest to the back wall of the room simply switched the tube light off. He switched it back again when the new scene began. This was all the performance seemed to need as light design. Yet it did not seem like an interruption: no illusion was destroyed by the actors themselves turning into lighting operators. The window frames that looked out on the Ahmedabad street outside, from which faint sounds of traffic came into the room, were real, and so was the light from the moving cars in the pitch darkness. The meta-theatrical elements in the original text were already fairly strong. But the starkness of this old and bare room, with the paint peeling off its dull blue walls and the gloomy white light, made it seem closer to a rundown old police station in Ahmedabad, where terrible things may have happened and continue to happen every day. Everything in the performance space was functional, including perhaps the ironically smiling photograph of Gandhi, often a standard feature of police interrogation rooms across the country. However, to me, each element of this performance was made slightly more poignant by the particular location of the conflict museum in Gujarat. I was aware that I was watching the video of a play that I had recently seen live at Serendipity Arts Festival. Recorded close to six years ago, everything in it was too close to the real. It felt as if the performance space could in reality become an interrogation chamber at any moment in time. Perhaps this was true, in 2019, not just of Ahmedabad but for any place in the country, some more so than others. At the very end of this 2014 show, at a moment in the play when things had come to an impossible climax, the sound of *azaan* from a neighbouring mosque entered the room. In my view, this accidental note did more for the performance than anything in a background score might have. The actors' performances often coasted between agitprop elements, slapstick (very much a part of the original *commedia dell'arte* influence on Dario Fo's work), and the somewhat declamatory style of street theatre. The predominant intent of the performance seemed to be to highlight the satirical and



Still from "Accidental Death of an Anarchist", showcased at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019.
Photograph courtesy The Lumiere Project.



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farcical elements in both the Hindi adaptation and the original Italian text. Adding to the text's intense black humour were references to the recent political history of Gujarat and India. The Hindi, Italian, and fragments of Gujarati text were layered, much like a palimpsest, one on top of the other.

All the actors of the Budhan Theatre live and work in Chharanagar in Ahmedabad. They are members of the “denotified” Chhara tribe. In colonial India, the Chharas had been marked as one of the many nomadic “Criminal Tribes”. According to the provisions of the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 (CTA), they were habitual offenders bound by custom, blood, and birth to transgress the law, causing compulsive and repeated damage to the private property and well-being of others. The carceral stipulations of this Act were exceedingly severe. It criminalised whole communities and branded individuals born into them as criminals incapable of reform. The Act solidified and gave administrative legitimacy to existing prejudices in caste Hindu society against numerous marginalised communities and nomadic tribes. As a direct result, the movement of such populations was severely restricted by British colonial law. Widespread governmental surveillance ensured that being found outside certain designated areas of habitation meant risking immediate arrest and incarceration. Punishment for petty crimes was much harsher for a member of a “criminal tribe” than for a person belonging to the “general” population. Legal discrimination heaped on top of established practices of social stigmatisation ensured that individuals were suspect just by virtue of possessing a particular tribal identity. The very territory of the subcontinent became a prison house for many nomadic tribes under the provisions of this Act and the “Criminal Tribes” were, in effect, incarcerated even outside prison.

In independent India, the CTA was finally repealed in the year 1952, whereby the erstwhile Criminal Tribes were officially “denotified”. The date of repeal—August 31—is annually celebrated as the *Vimukti Divas* or the real day of independence by millions of members of the Denotified Tribes in India. However, after the repeal, the CTA was

immediately replaced by the Habitual Offenders Act, which did little to address the entrenched social stigmatisation, humiliation, and lack of equal opportunity that marked the lives of these communities. While equality had arrived on paper, many forms of discrimination—social and legal—continued. The Chharas, for example, suffered from being categorised among the many million “Other Backward Classes” (OBCs) and not among the Scheduled Tribes (STs). The latter categorisation would have given them the greater benefit and support of reservations in education and employment under the constitutional provisions of the new government. This constitutional deprivation, coupled with continuing social stigmatisation, meant that avenues towards other educational and career opportunities in the newly-independent nation state were effectively blocked for young members of Chhara community, forcing them back into traditional occupations like liquor-brewing common to their tribe. Gujarat, a “dry state”, punishes by death penalty the manufacture of homemade liquor that results in casualties. This vicious cycle of stigmatisation and lack of opportunity, leading to further social humiliation and punishment, has continued to effectively oppress the people of Chharanagar for decades on end. Further, this state of affairs is exacerbated and perpetuated by the fact that the law enforcement agencies of the state benefit significantly through bribes extracted from the community in exchange for “allowing” them to continue their trade. Earning a livelihood for their families has meant a kind of generational entrapment for the Chharas, leaving them confined within an endless cycle of humiliation and violence.

It is in this context that the foundation of the Budhan Theatre in Chharanagar in Ahmedabad must be viewed. The event that acted as the catalyst for its founding was this: in 1998, writer Mahasweta Devi visited Chharanagar with literary critic and tribal rights activist Ganesh N Devy. Chharanagar had been such a stigmatised locality of Ahmedabad that it is said that on knowing that Mahasweta Devi intended to visit the place, the police had tried to stop her, but she escaped their surveillance and visited the place on her own. It was from Devi that the young Dakxin Bajrange first heard the term

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“denotified tribe” and began to learn its legal-historical implications. He learnt that it was a governmental category which, while bearing the legacy of colonial legal stigmatisation, connected the social experience of the Chhara community with that of other “Denotified Tribes” across the country.

Devi, too, became so attached to the community at Chharanagar that she expressed the wish to be buried in Gujarat. In a conversation with G. N. Devy, Mahasweta Devi once said that she wanted to be buried rather than cremated, since she did not want to go into the river as ashes and be dispersed forever. There, she would be useless. She wanted to be rooted somewhere: *“What I want is for a Mahua tree to be planted above me. I nurse an affection for the Mahua...the tree will help me survive”*.⁷ Perhaps a seed was indeed planted in 1998 in the mind of the young members of the Chhara community at the time of Mahasweta Devi’s visit. The tree that sprung from that seed was Budhan Theatre. Dakxin Bajrange writes of that time:

By talking to me about Denotified and Nomadic Tribes (DNTs) in other states, she (Devi) planted a seed in my mind—there was work to be done, not only for my own community but for DNTs across India. She was instrumental in changing lives of DNTs across India through something called the Budhan Theatre, which spawned a movement for dignity. The journey of community theatre within the DNT community in India, which parallels Budhan Theatre’s history, began in 1998.⁸

In a long phone interview, Bajrange told me, “She never died for us. Her body was in Bengal, but I believe that her soul remained in Gujarat. Amma remains alive in the Academy at Chharanagar.”⁹ Mahasweta Devi’s visit initiated and catalysed a process that gradually changed how the youth of Chharanagar saw themselves and their own history. For Bajrange, development meant the right to speak one’s mind. In his interview with me he repeatedly stressed the following idea: where there is repression and injustice, the ability to express

oneself can throw open the possibility of change and democratic action. The inability to speak of one's humiliation and to represent one's own history was a particular kind of affective and emotional incarceration that could only lead to cycles of violence in the long run. "There is an intense and undeniable historical connection between silence and violence", Bajrange said.¹⁰ A community's inability to speak in their own language or to release their pain through songs, dances, and screams meant that society was amassing a storehouse of subterranean violence that would one day erupt dangerously. According to Bajrange, any move towards justice and dignity for a community had to be preceded by the unconditional right to think and speak freely. Consequently, all of Budhan Theatre's endeavours have been orientated towards one fundamental intention: to create a breathing space for the mind and body inside the continuing entrapment as well as material and affective incarceration that defines life in Chharanagar. Over time, theatre became the bridge that connected Chharanagar to the outside world. It also allowed the community to represent its history internally to its own people. Performing history, especially history that had been erased from the official archives of the state, allowed Budhan Theatre to directly address the ignorance, prejudice, and apathy of the privileged classes towards the Chharas.

Budhan Theatre today involves itself with alternative education, legal advocacy, children's issues, and other modes of on-the-ground social networking between the various Denotified Tribes of India. The brief manifesto on Budhan Theatre's official website puts down its vision of "theatre for social action" rather succinctly:

By conducting theater that is both by and for the community, people are directly a part of their own social movement, allowing the community to take ownership of the fight for mainstream recognition. We, at Budhan Theatre do not hide reality in our work. Rather, we perform hard truths and real facts, no matter how disturbing, because it is in this way we connect with our history. [...] It



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is in this way that we fight for dignity and social justice for all De-notified tribes of India.¹¹

Budhan Theatre's journey began with a play on the story of Budhan Sabar, which was narrated to them by Devi. Bajrange wrote the script for the play and called it *Budhan Bolta Hai*. Bajrange writes:

...the judgment of the Calcutta High Court about the killing of Budhan Sabar appeared in the inaugural issue of the quarterly magazine called *Budhan*, which also sought to memorialise the death of this innocent tribal. Belonging to the denotified "Sabar" tribe of West Bengal, Budhan was brutally beaten up by police officials and then sent to judicial custody, where he died due to severe injuries to the head and chest. The court judgment came, soon after, that Budhan had died because of the brutal torture he had endured in police custody. The officers involved were suspended and compensation was awarded to his widow. This judgment was remarkable because for the first time people from Denotified Tribes felt they could trust the Indian judiciary. [...] The brutal killing had resonances in my community's daily encounter with the legal system and judiciary. To pen the incidents related to Budhan was similar to writing down my daily observations of what I faced, interlaced with stories of discrimination faced by our own parents and elders in their lifetime. We had no money for props, lights, costumes, make-up, and even space, really, to stage a play. We only had our bodies and voices to express ourselves.¹²

Budhan Theatre, which took its name from the protagonist of its first play, went on to produce several plays on similar themes of unjust arrest and incarceration of oppressed and stigmatised communities in India. In 2001, Bajrange wrote a play on the fake encounter of Deepak Pawar, a Pardhi man, who was killed by the Maharashtra police in Solapur, where the largest "settlement" (read prison camp)

for the “Criminal Tribes” in colonial India had been located. This was followed by other plays on fake encounters, an adaptation of Badal Sircar’s *Bhoma* (2004), a play on child-trafficking called *Khonj* (2005), a street play created with the female street vendors affected by the Gujarat riots (2005), and *Ulgulan* (2006), a play on the history of Birsa Munda’s revolt against the British. More plays on atrocities against the DNT across India followed, along with an adaptation of Jean Genet’s *The Balcony* (2008). Since its founding, the group has performed more than 1500 shows of over 45 plays across the country. In Bajrange’s own words, Budhan is now much more than a theatre group from Chharanagar; it has become a countrywide social movement of the DNTs: “Actors from the theatre group have become spokespeople, activists, scholars, writers, and social leaders for the cause, leading the movement successfully”, Bajrange writes.¹³ In his interview with me, he said: “For us, every performance is an opportunity to represent ourselves and our demand for a constitutional guarantee of respect, dignity, recognition, and opportunity from the government of India.”¹⁴

However, it is not simply the plight of the Chharas and legal injustices heaped upon them that trouble Bajrange. Custodial torture and death in India, in general, have been a standing concern for him. The unjust incarcerations of not just the DNTs but also of other vulnerable communities find representation in the work of Budhan Theatre. The activists often feel that these other experiences of humiliation and stigmatisation mirror their own. During our conversation, he told me: “If we keep speaking only of our own suffering, our work will be so limited. I must be able to perform the pain of others as well. The Muslim community’s stigmatisation in Gujarat is similar in many ways to the legal and social stigma that plagues the life of the Chhara.”¹⁵

This particular crisis has been more recently represented with great empathy in Bajrange’s film *Sameer* (2017), but it appeared much earlier than that in *The Accidental Death of an Anarchist*. Professor G N Devy suggested that Bajrange read this classic Italian play by Dario

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Fo and recommended Amitabh Shrivastava's Hindi translation of it to him. First conceived and produced in the year 2009, the Hindi translation was further adapted to a setting in Ahmedabad, Gujarat. This was the year after the Ahmedabad serial bomb blasts of July 2008 and the arrest/interrogation of many terror-accused in that connection. Since the play speaks of police corruption and possible governmental conspiracy, it remains highly controversial to this day. Hence, the group has never performed this play on the large scale: but only in very intimate spaces or private rooms, where they can present it in front of small audiences. The two venues already mentioned in this essay fit this pattern: the small room at Conflictorium in Ahmedabad with an audience of about twenty-five to thirty people (2014) and the black box space at Serendipity. The website of Budhan Theatre tells us: "This play discussed police corruption in India, which draws innocent people as anarchists. Through double talk and fast-paced dialogue, the play demonstrates police brutality against innocent youth of religious minority communities in India. It was performed in over thirty experimental shows, including museums, small rooms, houses, terraces, localities of religious minorities, and some education institutions such as IIMA."¹⁶

In his interview with me, Bajrange spoke of how particular references were added to the Hindi text of the play to make it relevant to Gujarat in 2009. Since the play never seems to lose relevance in contemporary India, the text has kept changing in order to allude to the shifting political scenario. "We have to keep updating the text", says Bajrange. The political landscape of India has, of course, changed drastically in the years since 2009. The text of the play now makes frequent references to the figure of the "anti-national", an idea that has been mobilised to great effect by the ruling right-wing government and its supporters. The general political atmosphere in the country is now marked by pervasive suspicion, the constant creation of internal enemies/traitors, and continual panic about sedition. Much of this political hysteria is fanned by unscrupulous politicians, along with jingoistic paranoia stirred up by the mainstream media. The persecution of minorities and political dissenters is the name of the

game. Television channels can cook up cases of treason from thin air and public trials outside the courtroom are a dime a dozen.

It is an interesting historical fact that in India, the law against sedition, the AFSPA (the Armed Forces Special Powers Act), the Dramatic Performances Act (for the censorship of theatre and other performances), and the Habitual Offenders Act are all residues of repressive colonial laws instituted by the British government to keep in check the colonised populations. In our conversation, when I reminded Bajrange of this, he laughed: “I am sure even the British had not used the sedition law as much as we have in recent years. They used it perhaps against stalwarts, great freedom fighters like Gandhi and Nehru. But we are using it against just about anybody, all ordinary citizens.”¹⁷ Bajrange remarked, however, that he had never faced any direct interference from the state government aimed to control or curtail the activities of Budhan Theatre. He imagined it was getting difficult to work or speak openly anywhere in India these days, not just in Gujarat. “I just assume I have full freedom of speech, even though I know I do not, and I proceed on that basis. If you do our kind of work, you cannot always worry about what can happen. The artiste must speak his mind. [...] But I do believe that the work we do is watched and a record of it being kept somewhere. Perhaps there has been retaliation in other ways on the community. I cannot be sure of the connections. But this surveillance is a reality for artistes everywhere in India today.”¹⁸

Indeed, while watching Budhan Theatre’s version of *Accidental Death*, one is struck by the frequency with which direct references to contemporary Indian politics are made. Beyond the surface slapstick and word play, *Accidental Death* is primarily a political satire. Fo’s Italian original was written and performed for the first time in Milan in the year 1970. The title refers to an actual anarchist’s death in a Milan police station in 1969. The late 1960s were a turbulent time in Italy. The student and trade union movements had heated up, a lot of students and workers having been inspired by the atmosphere of revolt and unrest in France and in the rest of Europe. Simultaneously,



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neo-fascist forces were on the rise, and many suspected that particular wings of the government were in collusion with these extremist right wing elements. The government, on the other hand, displayed extreme paranoia about left wing extremism and anarchists, and tried to blame everything possible—from the state of the economy to the falling conditions of industrial production—on these small groups of mostly peaceful activists. The government feared a socialist revolution, which they believed could be coming any day. On December 11, 1969, the Italian government signed a labour charter with the trade unions of Italy. This charter had come after years of strikes and organising, made possible through a coalition of students and workers who fought tirelessly for it. The day after the signing of the charter, on December 12, a bomb exploded in the Piazza Fontana, Milan, killing sixteen people and wounding around a 100 others. Immediately after the bomb blast, the government began looking for perpetrators among the anarchist groups then functional in Italy. On the same day, Giuseppe Pinelli, a forty-one-year-old railway worker and member of an anarchist group, was arrested, along with two others, for the crime. After four days of interrogation at the Central Police Station in Milan, Pinelli allegedly rushed to the window of the room and jumped out of it. Many Italians, including Fo, believed him to be innocent and that he had not committed suicide. They believed the death had been the result of a particularly harsh interrogation, if not outright murder. Many incongruous facts had come to light during the subsequent investigation—for example, a phone call to the ambulance made earlier than the medical time of death, as well as inexplicable bruising at the back of Pinelli's neck. However, at the end of the inconclusive investigation, the Public Prosecutor declared that the cause of death was suicide. The senior investigating officer was accused of murder by far left newspapers, and he responded with a libel suit against one of them. Fo incorporated many details of this case in the text of *Accidental Death* when he wrote the play in 1970.

Even in the original, the play's dark humour turns the police interrogation room into a theatre, where an intricate farce is being played out in the name of serious legal process. If you step outside

this frame, the fictional police station is part of a real performance space where a live audience is watching a meaningless parody of the law unravel. The events leading to the “suicide” are reenacted by the officers as a sort of farcical “play within a play”. All the meta-theatrical elements add up to the fact that in contemporary Italy, *law* itself is an elaborate farce. The script for every case is prepared in advance. Their conclusions are written in accordance with the convenience and whims of those in authority. As a result, the courtroom is endlessly playing a stereotypical legal scene where the end is always predetermined. Every accused in this legal charade is already condemned. In view of all of this, Fo’s suggestion seems to be: “If the court is to serve the purpose of a theatre, let us then turn the theatre into a courtroom!” The theatre might be the only place where the real facts of the case may be exposed and presented before the public without prejudice or interference.

We cannot but remember here the ideological intent of some of the slogans of the May 1968 students’ revolt in Paris: “When the National Assembly becomes a bourgeois theater, all the bourgeois theaters should be turned into national assemblies.” In Budhan Theatre’s version of the play, conceived in India almost four decades later than Fo’s original, references to the farcical nature of contemporary Indian politics are both hilarious and audacious in nature. For example, when the arrested maniac identifies one of the police officers, he claims to have seen him in Nagpur at the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh *shakha*. He then begins to sing a song that obviously reminds the officer of his days of training at the *shakha*. The officer seems to forget that he is currently in the police force. He then begins to march and salute involuntarily, rather like a trained monkey. He is seemingly incapable of stopping as long as the song is playing in his ears. At one stroke, the supposed ideological neutrality of the police is turned into a dark joke: one begins to see the insidious collusion between the law enforcement authorities and the ascendant forces of right-wing fanaticism in the country. There is also the reference to blasts in railway carriages in Gujarat, and we know that many of the 2008 blasts targeted bus stations around the city. It is true that there was

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no direct backlash on the group after the staging of this or subsequent controversial plays. However, in July 2018, there was an incident that shook the Chharanagar community to the core. The event was widely reported in local and national newspapers. The Citizen Bureau reported from Ahmedabad on 27 July, 2018:

Just after midnight a huge posse of policemen attacked Chharanagar, torched vehicles, barged into homes by breaking down doors, and beat whoever they could lay their hands on mercilessly. An old 75-year-old paralysed woman also did not escape the cops, some in uniform others not, who threw her off her bed and punched her on the face. They left taking 29 persons belonging to the Chhara community who are in police lock up at the moment [...]. After burning the vehicles outside the homes they broke down doors, according to eyewitnesses, and entered to beat up women, children, men [...] Why? On Thursday evening two boys of the area had an altercation with a police constable. According to the police they were drunk, had an argument and “assaulted” him. The matter ended, the boys went away, and shortly after the attack on the entire OBC community took place.¹⁹

In spite of the wide coverage by some of the English language media after the incident as well as continual attempts to lodge FIRs with the police by the members of the community, no good has come of this case till date. No redressal seems forthcoming. Bajrange’s own family had been attacked and his paralysed mother-in-law had been punched in the face by the police. This was a case of unprovoked assault on a whole community. At the end of the performance at Serendipity last year, Bajrange was able to narrate bits of this incident in order to highlight to those present how frighteningly close the life at Chharanagar was to the events of the play they had just witnessed. Time ran out, of course, as it always does, before the discussion could become too political. Yet, the already thinning membrane between performance and reality turned too porous for everyone’s comfort.

Abhishek Majumdar's *Eidgah ke Jinnat* also came to Serendipity carrying with it a fairly long history of controversy and public outrage. There has been no *direct* censorship of the play by the state till date, in either its English or its Hindi-Urdu versions, but its performance in Jaipur was stopped by a mob of right-wing hooligans who thought it fit to disrupt the show before its second staging early in 2019. Some of the actors who were part of the ensemble cast later alleged that the Jaipur police had arrived while the thugs were in action and had just stood around doing nothing as they proceeded to create a ruckus. This was the sequence of events: Majumdar's theatre group Indian Ensemble was scheduled to perform *Eidgah* at the Jawahar Kala Kendra (JKK) in Jaipur in February, 2019. The play had been commissioned for a series of shows by JKK and had begun its showing as part of the Navras Performing Arts Festival held every year in Jaipur. The first show at Krishnayan, the black box at the venue, ran to a packed house and there was even a standing ovation at the end of it. Even though three or four members of the audience walked out in the middle of the play, apparently offended by its content, there was no major disturbance. On the following day, the morning of the second show, a couple of local newspapers, including *Dainik Bhaskar*, claimed that the play had offended the audience's sensibilities by insulting the Indian army. It pointed to a particular section of the play which allegedly compared the violence of the stone pelters to the violence of the army in Kashmir. A right-wing group in one of its many local avatars—called the *Jan Samasya Nivaran Manch* (JSNM) on this occasion—broke into the venue. Later, Majumdar said in his interviews to the press that it was unlikely that any of the protesters had actually seen the play, especially since the first show had been meant primarily for a limited press audience. However, JSNM arrived just before the matinee show was about to start and launched an attack that was based clearly on rumour and hearsay. Perhaps there were orders from above. In any case, they seemed to have no clear facts at their disposal about what they were attacking and why exactly they were doing so, not an unfamiliar *modus operandi* for right-wing vigilante groups across the country today.



Still from "Eidgah ke Jinnat", showcased at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019.
Photograph courtesy The Lumiere Project.



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During the attack and ensuing unrest, threats and orders to stop the performance (which was branded as “anti-national”) were delivered by the attacking goons. The protesters claimed that the play had, in the midst of the shock generated by the Pulwama attack, depicted the stone pelters of Kashmir in a way that gave them moral authority. They also alleged that “inappropriate and insulting” remarks had been made about the security forces in the play. One of their demands was that sedition cases be filed against Majumdar and others who were associated with the production. In response, a petition was written and signed by several prominent artistes and intellectuals across the country emphasising the necessity for freedom of expression of artistes and for public sensitivity on the Kashmir issue. The statement read: “We call upon the government of Rajasthan to ensure the safety and security of all those involved in the play, as well as the staff and premises of JKK in Jaipur. We hope that the local police will apprehend the miscreants who reportedly indulged in aggressive sloganeering at JKK and threatened Abhishek and others.”²⁰ However, police officials said that the play had to be stopped in view of the heightened public sentiments after the Pulwama attack. The authorities at JKK panicked and buckled down. One of the officials was quoted as saying: “We have read in newspapers how this play can incite the sentiments of people and hence we started investigating the matter. [...] the play has been cancelled by Jawahar Kala Kendra sensing its after-effects.”²¹ Consequently, the production was brought to a halt and a notice was issued by JKK calling off further shows. In his article in *The Hindu* published in the same month, Vikram Phukan writes about the incident:

Mock-angry goons, and there is really no other way to describe them, from the Jaipur-based fringe outfit, Jan Samasya Nivaran Manch (JSNM), were captured on video as waylaying JKK staff even as they bayed for Majumdar’s blood. The theatre troupe had been led out to safety by a back entrance. [...] The JSNM’s Facebook page is a shrine to press mentions and TV appearances of its leader, Suraj Soni, and this outing was no less gratifying for him. Before

dusk, an acolyte victoriously held up a copy of the letter issued by JKK, whereby it had cancelled the show due to ‘inadvertent reasons’. The venue’s capitulation could perhaps be forgiven, given the 25-strong throng, but the Jaipur Police themselves were in attendance, as facilitators to this egregious attack on freedom of expression.²²

The fact that the play had been commissioned by JKK made it worse. It was not just the next show but a whole year of planning that was lost at one stroke and the play lost its initial funding. It was indeed significant that this attack took place five days after the infamous Pulwama attack on the Indian CRPF forces in Kashmir on 14 February, 2019. Majumdar later told newspapers that he had reason to believe that some of the outrage against the play had been whipped up deliberately because of the exacting political atmosphere at the time, giving this unknown “*hindutvavadi*” group some much-needed mileage in the mainstream media.

All of this sudden outrage was, according to Majumdar, deeply ironic since *Eidgah* was not a new play. It was first written in 2012 in English for the Writers’ Bloc festival, a workshop-residency for writers. Its first show was at the Royal Court theatre in London in 2013, and both productions were directed by Richard Twyman. Since then, the play had been staged several times internationally and in India. Nowhere had it caused any controversy or unrest. The text was also part of the reading list of an online Master’s degree course in English Literature offered by the UGC and had a censorship certificate from the Maharashtra government. Many reviews refer to the play as “Majumdar’s contemporary classic”. The Jaipur show, commissioned by JKK, was to be the first show of the play in Urdu, based on a translation by Shirin Bismillah. After the Jaipur incident, the Urdu play has continued to be staged peacefully at various venues across India, including the “Artists Unite” Festival in New Delhi in 2019. Malini Nair quotes Majumdar in her article on the play and its aftermath: “*Eidgah* is approved for teaching and showing by government institutions. [...] The careful of goons looking for us to

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record a public apology don't know and don't care either about that. How do they get to say they represent the will of the people?"²³ In the same interview, Majumdar also said: "Right-wing protests are all about event management. [...] There is no spontaneity, no real anger there, not that that would have made it better. The moral imperative then is on us artistes to carry on. Today you can't do a play on Kashmir because of Pulwama, tomorrow Ayodhya may mean clamping down on all mentions of Shri Ram in theatre. What next?"²⁴

According to reviews of the play published last year, it is about the "tragedy of insurgency" in Kashmir. *Eidgah* is the last play of Majumdar's trilogy of plays on Kashmir. The two earlier ones were called *Rizwan* and *Gasha*. *Rizwan* (the word in Urdu means "the gatekeeper of heaven") was inspired from Agha Shahid Ali's legendary collection of poems *The Country without a Post Office*. *Gasha* was a story of two children—one Pandit and the other Muslim—growing up together in Kashmir. All three of the plays paint a portrait of an endless cycle of violence that has kept destroying lives in the valley for decades: in Majumdar's view, both victim and perpetrator are trapped in a prison house of pain and helplessness. Majumdar's interviews suggest that he is interested in "human tragedies" and especially in what he calls "the future of nonviolence" as a global political ideology.²⁵ Malini Nair writes: "...a reading or viewing of the play makes it clear that it holds compassion for everyone caught in the horrific circle of violence. [...] Everyone is wounded here, even those who hurt."²⁶ The synopsis of the play reads as follows:

Ashrafi and Bilal are orphaned siblings stranded and defined by the troubles in Kashmir. Eighteen-year-old Bilal is the pride of the region, part of a teenage football team set for great heights, and pushed to the limits by the violence around them. Haunted by hope, his sister is caught in the past, and Bilal is torn between escaping the myths of war and the cycles of resistance. Interweaving true stories and testimonies with Islamic storytelling, the play paints a magical portrait of a generation of radicalised kids, and a beautiful landscape lost to conflict.²⁷

The two children at the centre of the narrative of *Eidgah*, Ashrafi and Bilal, have lost their father to the conflict and are now orphaned. Bilal is his sister Ashrafi's sole guardian. Forced to grow up before his time, he dreams of becoming a footballer, but is often frustrated because he cannot train consistently in the midst of continual disruptions. The overwhelming political unrest surrounding him makes football seem like a trivial pursuit. Those of his friends and elders who have joined the resistance consider him selfish for nurturing personal ambitions in the midst of such devastation. They remind him of his innocent father's death as a way of urging him to fight. He responds that there is no one else to take care of his ailing sister, so he must stay focused and build his own life in a way that he can support both her and himself. Ashrafi, on the other hand, still cannot accept the reality of her father's death and suffers from a severe form of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Visual and auditory hallucinations torment her throughout the day. She is simultaneously in denial of the catastrophic event of her loss and obsessively relives the nightmare every day. Like most traumatic memory, the disaster is a blank hollow inaccessible to her memory in any straightforward way. Yet it is also a wound in her psyche that renews itself repeatedly and is given to unpredictable eruptions which she is powerless to stop or control. She seems to live in two time zones and realities simultaneously, one continually disrupting the other. Ashrafi cannot sleep at night and clings to her brother for reassurance. There seems to have been an irredeemable rupture in her sense of reality that now separates her consciousness from the world around her. She lives inside her own head and the voices in it become *djinns* and spirits which torment her day and night. These "*djinns*"²⁸ populate the nightmarish landscape surrounding the "*eidgah*"²⁹, where the martyred are buried. The *eidgah* is haunted by numerous disappeared and restless spirits. Half-human, half-beast, somewhere between alive and dead, these demented creatures are more real to Ashrafi than the world of doctors, nurses, schoolteachers, and the military. She cannot connect with or speak to other children around her. Even her doctor, even though he is deeply concerned about her state, does not have access to this fearsome territory inside her mind. His attempts to pull her back to rationality and to the reality of the everyday seem futile. His treatment is a

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Still from "Eidgah ke Jinnat", showcased at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019.
Photograph courtesy The Lumiere Project.

PERFORMING MEMORY AGAINST LEGALITY



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failure. Ashrafi does not get better, but Dr Beg moves closer and closer to madness. The pacifist Dr Beg is a physician who needs healing himself. He has lost his young son, an erstwhile member of the resistance. The boy is disappeared, presumably tortured and dead, and perhaps now a “*djinn*”. As Dr Beg loses his grip on sanity, another world seems to emerge from under the skin of the reality around him, and in this world, he finally gains entry into the land of Ashrafi’s nightmares.

As the play progresses, the audience’s perception of the real and the dream-like is increasingly blurred. What had seemed at the beginning only to be a recreation of Ashrafi’s hallucinations in the performance space now begins to take over the material space of Dr Beg’s world. When one’s reality has become a relentless nightmare, nightmares become reality, the play seems to suggest. It is as if from underneath the already fragile skin of linear time-space, memories have begun to emerge as physical bodies. Wounds solidify into spirits who refuse to remain dead. The past is more palpable than the here and now. The present is illusory. One had wished for the dead to return, so they do: only not in the way one had imagined. The nightmares of a child infiltrate the psyche of an old man: one has lost a father and the other a son. Who is to treat whom? Dreams merge into one another in a world of shared hallucinations and traumatic reveries. Majumdar seems to propose the idea that most people in this place have lost so much that they already live perpetually inside their memories. And these memories, finding no real outlet, have now turned monstrous. Dr Beg’s son is a hungry spirit in Ashrafi’s dream. His emaciated body is full of wounds; his voice is no longer human. He appears to the old man in the *eidgah* and haunts him into insanity. All the characters have a flimsy hold on the here and now. Their lives are constantly precarious; they have little or no control over their own experiences. To know what it is to live without dignity, in a constant state of apprehension and facing everyday brutality, is to understand why the “*djinns of eidgah*” are real.

Perhaps it is important to consider two things here. Both draw from the ideas of scholars and political commentators studying contexts of quotidian and protracted violence in the modern world, for example, Latin American or Palestinian history. The first, when trauma is an everyday occurrence, it is no longer an event. There is no singularity, rather the sense of a relentless continuum, which makes reconciliation or healing an impossible task.³⁰ Second, PTSD is a “normal” response of the human psyche to persistent traumatic occurrences. In situations of everyday violence, PTSD can no longer be understood as a pathological condition that pertains merely to the individual. There can be no personal healing of collective trauma. A historical wound needs to be understood and addressed as such, *politically*. In this sense, Majumdar’s play makes a significant political point. Dr Beg cannot heal Ashrafi. Ashrafi is not an individual “case”. Her condition is perfectly normal reaction to a situation of persistent abnormality: a life defined by relentless fear and devastating grief. Her nightmares and memories are wounds shared by an entire community. It is the external world that these characters inhabit that requires a cure; or else nightmares will turn into physical entities that take over the brutalised space of this brittle and fragile polity. The *djinn*s are an embodiment of unmitigated historical and collective pain. They cannot be contained territorially by militarisation or other means; they will spill out from one mind into another, making subjective boundaries porous and frighteningly permeable.

The depiction of trauma in the play, however, does not stop with the Kashmiri characters. We have the vivid portrait of a soldier also haunted by strange nightmares and hallucinations. Critics like Vikram Phukan have rightly pointed out that Majumdar’s position on Kashmir fundamentally occupies a political middle ground. He tries to find representation for the soldiers’ reactions to the violence they carry out, as well as that of the victims. Phukan writes:

There is a diversity of Kashmiris (and thought processes) in *The Djinn*s of *Eidgah* [...] Yet, overall, Majumdar’s works usually tread the middle ground, and bring in balance and

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equivalences. The manner in which a soldier's foolhardy demeanour is treated varies from director to actor, but in the writing, there is most definitely an attempt to delineate him as conflicted and traumatised in his own right. Majumdar is known to be cognisant of soldiers, their backgrounds and their compulsions. [...] In *Eidgah Ke Jinnat*, Beg is played by Kashmiri Pandit actor Ashwath Bhatt, a touch that adds a conciliatory layer to the production.³¹

In the play, we see a Hindu soldier, a Hanuman *bhakt*, who is traumatised and being slowly driven insane by the violence he has had to witness and commit. He admits to having killed a child, and in his almost-hysterical confession to his fellow soldier, he claims that the dead girl's eyes follow him everywhere, making it impossible for him to fight or shoot. He is clearly suffering from some form of PTSD as well: a condition also common to large numbers of the population of militarised Kashmir. The actor's performance makes the soldier's story a wretched one: the audience is driven to pity him even as it recoils from his actions.

Majumdar has said in several interviews, including his interview with me, that during his research for the play in Kashmir, he interacted with not just the common people, especially those among them who had faced violence and torture, but many soldiers as well. Vikram Phukan also mentions this fact in his essay. His characterisation of the soldiers in *Eidgaah*, then, derives from his experiences of prolonged interaction with army personnel. Indeed, there are aspects of the violent life of the army that are rarely spoken about either in the jingoistic public propaganda on Kashmir or anywhere else. There is no space to discuss the embedded irrationality of militarised violence on civilian populations the world over, the debilitating stress and the effect that it may have, on not just the victims, but on perpetrators as well (think of Septimus in Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway*). It is near impossible for trauma, mental illness, dissensus, and vulnerability of any sort to find articulation at all within the hyper-nationalist

discourse of military heroism. However, this representation of the soldier as primarily a man who is a vulnerable and tortured soul, certainly takes the edge off the magnitude of historical violence faced by people in Kashmir. Devastating violations of human rights, like the mass rapes in Kunan Poshpora in the early 1990s³², are yet to find proper representation in public media, let alone legal justice. One wonders if such historical wounds might ever be addressed adequately by moves towards reconciliation that aim for “equivalent” representation. Certainly, all soldiers stationed in Kashmir do not have similar stories, nor are all of them traumatised by their own actions. However, the point is not to claim that the individual soldiers are never troubled by what they are asked to do, but to remember the fact that the military apparatus exceeds the individual cogs and pulleys that make up its wheels. The machine is a beast larger and more monstrous than the sum of its parts. The remorse and vulnerability of individuals do not go any part of the way towards redressal of decades of systemic cruelty.

Because of the very nature of its source text, the design of *Eidgah* incorporated magic realist elements, which then allowed the performance space to drift unpredictably between the terrifyingly dark world of the *djinns* and the more prosaic city of day-to-day Srinagar. The intricate light design made for not just the separation of physical spaces, but also of day and night: each starkly different from the other. Night is the time of curfew, fear, bullets, and silence. Days aspire to an uneasy normalcy, much like in many other militarised zones of the world. There is also the subterranean, almost watery, world of the spirits. Poised beyond day and night, this appears to be a darkness that could rip through the bright lights of the performance space and drown us, just like an oncoming depressive episode or another endless curfew. In the performance of *Eidgah*, these intense moods are manifested in the scenography through the creation of recurrent hallucinatory landscapes. Arundhati Nag says in an interview about the play’s design: “The most striking thing about Majumdar’s scripts is their visual quality. It is almost cinematic, beyond linear narration. [...]”³³ Indeed, when the performance



Still from "Eidgah ke Jinnat", showcased at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019.
Photograph courtesy The Lumiere Project.



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opens, some of the scenes, like stark picture frames, leave you feeling awestruck by their sheer, haunting beauty. Thereafter, eerie music and smoke machines begin to paint a picture of the liminal space between the external and internal worlds in the play. The character's nightmares and the reality of the world outside merge to create a spirit-world as real as it is otherworldly.

However, the overall effect of all of this is sometimes a bit too overwhelming. It seems as if the director is anxious that the audience will miss some crucial metaphorical point. He seems to be constantly clarifying the thematic complexities of the text in the visual and sonic design of the performance. Yes, the *djinns* are simultaneously real and unreal, memory and desire, subjectivity and history. But perhaps the play did not need so much literal emphasis through smoke and mirrors to drive the point home. The overstatement becomes trying after a point. In the intimate space, the smoke machines create distractions which are not always welcome or necessary, especially since it soon becomes predictable that smoke in the performance space means that the *djinns* will soon follow. The background score is interesting but exceedingly overused. After a point of time, you find yourself craving some silence: perhaps just to be able to hear the actors' voices without the perpetual musical undertone clearly designed to set the mood. But the music seems unable to leave the audience alone, constantly telling them what to feel. If anything, this overuse weighed heavily on the sharpness of some of the performances. It also drove the treatment of the play much more towards populist melodrama than it needed to be. Perhaps quietness and a pause, in some scenes at least, would have been far more effective. The text and performances were powerful enough in themselves, and I could not help wishing that they could be left in peace to do their own work for a while.



Still from "Eidgah ke Jinnat", showcased at Serendipity Arts Festival 2019.
Photograph courtesy The Lumiere Project.

A REFLECTION AND A THOUGHT EXPERIMENT

Nightmares and Reality in the Prison Camp: A Reflection

In her essay, “Trauma and Performance: Lessons from Latin America”³⁴, Diana Taylor discusses the Madres (mothers) and Abuelas (grandmothers) of the Plaza de Mayo in Argentina who use installations and various “performatic” modes, including theatre, to remind people that their children and grandchildren are still disappeared. During the six year long Argentinian Dirty War (1976-1983), thirty thousand Argentinian citizens, mostly young people suspected of resistance to the military dictatorship, were abducted and disappeared.³⁵ Most have still not returned, and are often presumed dead. Many women, at the time when they were abducted by the state, were pregnant and their children were subsequently presumed to have been born in captivity. It is imagined that they were later adopted by military families. This second generation also remains disappeared till date. In the late 1970s, grandmothers and mothers began circling and protesting in the central square at the Plaza de Mayo, with placards, photographs and photo ID cards of these disappeared children and young people. They presumed, perhaps rightly, that the most public place of the city of Buenos Aires was the safest for such a protest. In the prevalent circumstances, retaliation from the state could have taken any form. However, the protests began like a weekly ritual and continued for decades. Like a meme that “catches on”, Diana Taylor argues³⁶, the protest of the Madres caught not just international attention but also became a spark that ignited other fires. In the absence of history and in the face of the deliberate erasure of photographic/textual evidence (the military is said to have stormed homes of the disappeared to seize photo IDs and other documents, as if intending to obliterate any evidence of such persons ever having existed), the bodies of the Madres and Abuelas became historiographical records. They wore the faces of their lost loved ones on their bodies, turning them into sites of a dogged and performative memorialising. Taylor’s work speaks to many other protest sites across the world, including those

in our subcontinent. The *meira paibis* or torch-bearing women of Manipur (1980s), the *imas* (mothers) at the Kangla fort (2004), as well as the mothers part of the Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons in Kashmir, led by long-time human rights activist Parveena Ahanter (1990s to the present), are all cases in point. They all created modes of embodied and performative protest that turned memory into a political weapon against historical erasure. The Madres had deliberately created an embodied gesture of traumatic remembrance that found resonance over time, in similarly repressive sites across the world. Some resonances were serendipitous and coincidental, others were not.

However, Taylor makes another crucial point in her essay about trauma and performance in Latin America. In the initial years, no one believed the Madres. They were thought of as madwomen who imagined and exaggerated their victimhood. Worse still, they were seen to be deliberately lying about what had happened. Taylor writes: “Bystanders who witnessed abductions and raids during the dirty wars in Latin America during the 1970s and 1980s recount that they did not know what to do. The excruciating visibility of disappearance was intended by the military to shock everyone into submission. It succeeded. Many pretended not to see or hear the atrocity—a numbing, self-blinding response that I elsewhere theorise as “percepticide” (*Disappearing Acts*). An active inaction or a concerted not doing seemed the best defense.”³⁷ It took years of dogged and precarious action, as well as the fall of the military regime, for the general population to begin accepting that thousands had, in fact, disappeared. It was not the Madres who were delusional and hallucinating: it was the masses of ordinary people who had been wearing blinkers. They had disbelieved the pain of the Madres, since they had not (yet) been subject to such violence themselves.

Today, of course, the tables have turned. The HIJOS, or the children and grandchildren of the disappeared, are seeking out the addresses of the military commanders who had abducted and tortured their parents and grandparents. They stand around the streets of Buenos

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Aires, carrying photographs of the disappeared, just like the Madres. But they also plaster the streets with the photos of the erstwhile officers responsible for these abductions and disappearances, who are now declared “criminal” and stand publicly accused. It is now the perpetrators who must hide themselves and their addresses, escape neighbourhoods and go underground: they are shamed and disgraced in front of the entire population of Argentina. Taylor argues that the HIJOS astutely borrow tactics of protest from the Madres. However, in the modes of public hounding and surveillance they employ against the perpetrators, they also adapt the methods of their enemies, the military strategies of those who had destroyed their parents’ lives. Legal justice may still be some distance away, but social justice has preceded it.

Historically then, sanity and insanity have often proved to be a matter of majoritarian confirmation bias. Our most cherished delusions are shared with many others. Some of them—like nationalism—are perpetually in danger of turning fatal. The *djinns* of political hallucination are everywhere and nowhere.

Actors, Thieves, and Vagrants: A Thought Experiment

“[...] it is one thing to carry out iconoclastic actions in a theatre or museum before a public that is predisposed to tolerating radical behavior, and quite another to bring the work into the street and introduce it into the mined terrain of unpredictable social and political forces. In the street, the risks are far greater. Some of these are obvious, like confronting the intolerance of the police or army, or of extremist religious groups. Others are more random...”

-“The Artist as Criminal”, Guillermo Gomez-Pena and Christopher Winks³⁸

The trouble is, when things get really bad, institutional spaces like the theatre or the museum can no longer insulate themselves from

the realities of the street. Perhaps sometimes it isn't a good idea to do so. There are mobs everywhere: storming the parliament, the museum, the court, and the marketplace. They look different from each other, but everyone knows that they are parts of the same hydra-headed beast. In such situations, we often console ourselves with the idea that the artiste is easy to incarcerate, but his art is not. And yet, the artiste as a hard-to-catch trickster and vagrant is not a figure unfamiliar to most cultures. You cannot pin him down, he knows many disguises, and can travel long distances in the blink of an eye. We think of the *ayyars* and *djinns* of that epic Persianate tale of romance and adventure: *Dastan-e-Amir Hamza*³⁹, an endless saga with numerous leaves and branches, which the Urdu *dastangois* of this subcontinent have made so popular over the centuries. The *ayyars*, led by the trickster-hero Amar Ayyar, are a band of magicians who are adept at camouflage, assuming numerous characters and roles at will. There are diverse other such narratives thronging the oral and literary (sub)cultures of this subcontinent. Societies across the world have found the travelling poet and storyteller a figure that is difficult to trust, yet mesmerising and impossible to resist. In his work, *Verbal Art as Performance*, Richard Bauman speaks of: “[...] the persistently documented tendency for performers to be both admired and feared—admired for their artistic skill and power and for the enhancement of experience they provide, feared because of the potential they represent for subverting and transforming the status quo. Here, too, may lie a reason for the equally persistent association between performers and marginality or deviance [...]”⁴⁰

Yet these marginal figures (poets, storytellers, and performers: categories that were often blurred in pre-modern societies) have always travelled, refusing fixity, territorialising mechanisms, and easy categorisation, especially in the face of modern instruments of statecraft like the population census. We think of Walter Benjamin's long rumination on the rapidly disappearing figure of the “storyteller” in the modern world. One of the two categories into which Benjamin places the storyteller, an oral performer of stories, is that of the traveller: “When someone goes on a trip, he has something to tell

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about”, goes the German saying, “and people imagine the storyteller as someone who has come from afar”.⁴¹ We think of Plato’s ancient refusal of entry to the vagrant poet and master of mimicry in Book X of his *Republic*:

And therefore when any one of *these pantomimic gentlemen, who are so clever that they can imitate anything*, comes to us, and makes a proposal to exhibit himself and his poetry, we will fall down and worship him as a sweet and holy and wonderful being; but we must also inform him that in our State such as he are not permitted to exist; *the law will not allow them*.⁴²

We think of Kautilya’s *Arthashastra* and his comparison of the actor (“*kushilav*”: “one who is of bad lineage” but also the “performing artiste”) with the wandering beggar and the prostitute. Sibaji Bandyopadhyay’s detailed exposition on Kautilya’s text and its implications vis-à-vis performance and statecraft is pertinent in this context. In his essay “The Laughing Performer: The World of Thieves”, Bandyopadhyay quotes from the verse number 4.1.65 of the *Arthashastra*: “Merchants, artisans, craftsmen, nomadic mendicants, entertainers, and similar persons are all thieves, in effect, if not in name.”⁴³ Bandyopadhyay goes on to comment on the passage:

...roving unattached beggars who stand in stark opposition to staid householders; *men of many hues capable of regaling audiences with make-believes*—*Arthaśāstra* brands all of them as artful. [...] Asking for alms with his head held high, the nomadic mendicant unsettles the householder and forces him to ponder over the business-merits of renunciation. Switching from one role to another with enviable dexterity, the entertainer instills in the entertained the anxiety that perhaps there is no notion of “personality” which is not also about “impersonation”. They all have, therefore, the power to dupe people. Lulled by overt antics of rogues [...] the credulous innocent may

end up alienating himself from what rightfully belongs to him! No, there is no other option: the state has to be put on alert.⁴⁴

The trickster-thief, then, has been a popular figure in many oral cultures across the globe: a wondrous and captivating storyteller who could regale you with accounts of his great adventures, while simultaneously distracting and robbing you. He was a pain, but he was fun. Vagrancy, thievery, and the ability to disguise oneself for the purposes of performance or trickery are deeply interlinked in the politico-legal imagination of many cultures, both “high” and “low”.

This strange combination of fascination and anxiety continues to mark the relationship of most elite and institutional cultures to the figure of the trickster. However, within oral cultures which arise from within marginalised and oppressed communities, the trickster is often a shape-shifting maverick who makes subversion, if not resistance, possible in situations of injustice and misery. In speaking of the traditions of black performance in America as sites of resistance, E Patrick Johnson writes: “This grass-roots organising speaks to the employment of the only available resources to the community—orality. [...] Some of the best examples of this use of performance are found in the African American oral tradition and literature [...] Within the black oral tradition animal trickster tales in which the weaker animals—rabbit and monkey—outwits the stronger animals—fox and lion—serve as tropes for the master and slave.”⁴⁵ This kind of historical analysis suggests that fables, mimicry, and storytelling were modes of coded subversion practised and transmitted across generations by oppressed communities, in spite of the limited spaces available to them within the dominant culture. James Scott’s work speaks insistently of the “hidden transcripts” of subjugated cultures as disguised forms of subversion. Again, animal fables and cunning shape-shifters appear with palpable regularity within these transcripts. Scott speaks of the importance of “disguise, deception, and indirection” in the orature of subordinate groups. In *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*, he writes:

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This is a politics of disguise and anonymity that takes place in public view but is designed to have a double meaning or to shield the identity of the actors. Rumor, gossip, folktales, jokes, songs, rituals; codes, and euphemisms—a good part of the folk culture of subordinate groups—fit this description. As a case in point, consider the Brer Rabbit stories of slaves, and trickster tales more generally. *At one level, these are nothing but innocent stories about animals; at another level they appear to celebrate the cunning wiles and vengeful spirit of the weak as they triumph over the strong.*⁴⁶

When oppression has obliterated even the possibility of direct resistance, disguise and deception become skills of survival, as well as coded maps towards a coming resistance. That which is “transgression” for the dominant community (because its unjust and violent hold over property, territory, resources, and knowledge are threatened by these actions) is a magical ability and a talent for those who are oppressed, because it allows them to keep hope, resistance and a sense of dignity alive. Perhaps such processes are possible, through subversive modes, even in situations where such performance is extracted as cultural labour and imposed from above as humiliation. Pertinently, Performance Studies scholars such as Brahma Prakash have recently analysed⁴⁷ the recurrent possibility of a complex affective coexistence of helplessness and liberation in the performance practices of the lower castes in India.

In their essay about the “Criminal Tribes” of India in relation to emerging ideas of constitutional citizenship in the years between 1938 and 1952, Chhara, Gould and Gandee⁴⁸ offer a succinct yet thorough historical account of the bewilderment of colonial legal officials when faced with compulsive border-crossers. Simply put, the “criminal” and nomadic tribes were those who refused to stay in place in order to be counted and controlled. Dakxin Bajrange Chhara told me during his interview that vagrancy in itself was criminal for the colonial state because it just did not know how to deal with it.⁴⁹ (For the postcolonial state as well, the man without an address is inherently suspect, as if always-already a criminal). In *The Art of Not Being*

Governed, James Scott connects the voluntary nomadism of stateless pre-modern communities with orality. In what can be counted as a piece of brilliant historical analysis, he writes: “For hill peoples and for stateless peoples generally, the world of writing and texts is also indelibly associated with states. [...] The elementary form of statecraft is the population list and household census: the basis for taxation and conscription.”⁵⁰ Refusing to be contained within a particular territory as well as being constantly on the move meant that a community could resist being located and identified by a fixed territory, and hence could escape being conscripted into the world of writing, lists, taxation, and legalised exploitation. In order to govern, the colonial state needed to turn the unmanageable and chaotic masses of colonised peoples into “populations” who could be accounted for and located with certainty on maps. Hence, cartography and the census were friends of the colonial state. Borders were drawn so that people could be made to stay within them. If you were found where you did not belong, you could be thrown out. This was what the 1871 CTA was meant for: punishing people who crossed borders without permission. Compulsive and voluntary nomads, especially those who insisted on assuming multiple disguises and speaking in many tongues, destabilised this whole governmental scheme of control and surveillance. Such schemes looked great on paper; it fell flat on the land. The land was messy and unfortunately full of people who refused to listen.

Consequently, in late colonial India, criminal tribe “settlements” sprang up in most of central and western India. Located in Solapur (Maharashtra), Ahmedabad (Gujarat) and other places of the region, these were actually massive prison camps surrounded on all sides by barbed wire. Here “habitual offenders” could be held in place by force. Inmates required passes every time they left the settlement and had to report to the police station twice or thrice a day. According to Bajrange⁵¹, they were called “settlements” simply because the Salvation Army was given administrative control over them in several places in western India and the discourse of reformation stressed “rehabilitation” rather than incarceration. It

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sounded better. But in truth, a member of a “criminal tribe” found anywhere outside his “settlement” could be immediately jailed or otherwise severely punished. Under the colonial state, a history of movement was sufficient to classify ever-newer tribes as congenitally “criminal”. In the build up towards the making of the Constitution of independent India, different and newer modes of exclusion came into place. According to Gould, Chhara and Gandee, exclusion from constitutional rights also took place by:

...marking some parts of India’s population as putative inhabitants of wild and uncivilised frontiers, both in terms of itineracy/habitation and culture. “Tribal” communities, especially those explicitly marked by law as existing outside the boundaries of social convention, such as “nomadic” tribes, therefore challenged the boundaries of constitutional rights in different ways.⁵²

The post-independence years saw, on the part of the DNTs, coterminous moves towards claiming their rightful place as citizens, as well as a mobilisation of “the idea of their role as ‘freedom fighters’, historically inverting the implications of their status as ‘law breakers’”.⁵³ There was, also, interestingly: “... a revalorisation of their traditional nomadism in new contexts of work and settlement”.⁵⁴ Many of their traditional skills were once legally classified as transgressions and continued to be stigmatised socially. Hence, there were significant moves towards a discursive and political reclaiming of these aptitudes and practices. Performance featured significantly among these. Bhimrao Jadav, an inmate of the Sholapur settlement in Maharashtra in the late 1930s, describes a movement against the British settlement Act led by the people of the camp with some help from the Red Flag Union. Theatre was one of the primary means through which the camp inmates expressed their anger to the settlement officers during the strike. Chhara, Gould and Gandee write:

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In the mode of public manifestations of popular performative anti-colonialism in the streets of Bombay, but crucially via specialist “professional skills” of the community, Jadav described the use of theatre as a means of expressing frustration and solidarity in the face of the local administration and settlement management: *The people in the settlement also performed plays in front of the settlement officers... It was a good media for all of us to show our anger to the settlement officer... Apart from this we also showed the different acts of Mahabharata and Ramayan. This was the media for volunteers to make awareness among the settlers. In this process we established one organisation named ‘Bal Hanuman Tarun Mandal’.*⁵⁵

Performance, then, was refashioned as a mode of resistance and subversion within the prison settlement. The nomadic travellers were entertainers and masters of disguise, often proficient in many languages. These were skills that could be reclaimed in the postcolonial polity, even as demands of dignity, constitutional protection, fair representation and justice were made from the new nation-state. While determined to fight the stigmatisation and brutality of being branded as “born-criminals”, the activists of Budhan Theatre are unwilling to disown their history. Aatish Indrekar dreams of a time when the next generation would be able to proudly claim that they are Chharas. Bajrange says in an interview: “My father was a thief. And what is wrong with that? Thieving is an art, like acting, and he was the smartest thief.”⁵⁶ Indeed, perhaps crimes against property are transgressions in this world precisely because owning disproportionate amounts of it—much more than one’s fair share—is not. Many years ago, in 1982, the Bengali Marxist Utpal Dutt had written about his time in prison in *Towards a Revolutionary Theatre*: “About 98% of the prisoners serving sentences in jail had been convicted for the so-called crimes against “property”. The prisoner is a weapon in the class struggle, in the ceaseless war to maintain private property. All the talk of reforming and re-educating criminals is balderdash.”⁵⁷

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However, the fact that some members of the Chhara community were historically known to engage in petty crimes against property did not make all Chharas “born thieves”, nor did it indicate that they had any natural inclination towards what is considered “crime” in a modern society. This much seems common sense. However, the logic of the subcontinent’s entrenched caste system and thereafter the logic of colonial law were different, as we have already seen. Interestingly, Bajrange spoke to me about his father’s ability to travel dexterously from one territory to another, dressing up in the costumes of those regions and speaking their languages. Some members of that generation knew up to twelve languages and owned many different costumes, which helped them to tell stories, entertain, and mesmerise people. One remembers here the costumed maniac of Dario Fo’s play, who is able to impersonate many characters and is thereby, through purely theatrical means, expose the truth about the anarchist’s allegedly accidental death. A “histriomaniac”, Fo’s description for this character, is ultimately a man who is mad about acting.

Yet, as potential histriomaniacs, the Chharas had no social acceptance, and no real form of livelihood, because they would not be allowed entry anywhere in mainstream society, then as well as now. The difference now is that, the Chharas of Budhan Theatre are using many of these community skills to perform in spaces they would have been earlier excluded from. They are building spaces of representation and acceptance through their play-acting. This affects the form of their theatre as well. Bajrange says: “We do not worry so much about the form of our theatre, nor do we restrict ourselves to street performances. This is true even though we are inspired by the work of people like Badal Sircar. I tell the members of Budhan Theatre to be ready to perform whenever and wherever space and time are available. We have to be ready to tell our story under any circumstances. If we can perform, even a street corner is like a palace for us.”⁵⁸ On being asked about Budhan Theatre’s commitment to working with children, Bajrange speaks of the importance of fables and storytelling for children: “You tell a child that the lion is the king of the jungle and he must be obeyed, he believes in this. There are

metaphors hidden in these fables. We must ensure that children are free from the start from this enslavement of the mind.”⁵⁹ Once again, performance and storytelling are given to contain encoded messages for the freedom of the mind: perhaps “hidden transcripts” for an as-yet-unimagined future.

I shall end with a small story about love and punishment, followed by the thought experiment I had promised at the start of this section. In Abbas Kiarostami’s *Where is the Friend’s Home?* (1987)⁶⁰, the first film of his celebrated “Koker trilogy”, Ahmed comes home from school to realise that he has accidentally brought home his friend Mohammed’s notebook. Mohammed has already been chastised at school today by the irate teacher for repeatedly failing to use the school notebook to do his homework. The teacher has threatened Mohammed with expulsion. Is Mohammed’s crime grave? Or are the school rules arbitrary? Is the teacher unnecessarily severe? Or is Mohammed a habitual offender? Who can judge? But Ahmed knows that if Mohammed repeats his offence, something terrible may happen to him at school tomorrow. He feels responsible for the punishment that is about to come to his friend. So he escapes his own family’s strictures in order to go look for his friend. Much of the 83-minute film is spent in looking for Mohammed. At the end of the film, which spans a single day and the space between two neighbouring towns, the friend is still not found. But *Where is the Friend’s Home?* becomes about Ahmed’s journey, his longing and anxiety as he finds his way through an unfamiliar terrain towards the one who knows him, the people he meets on the way and the scenes he encounters. He knows that his unfinished act of love could prevent a coming injustice. Ahmed’s sense of urgency and his determination to protect his friend underwrites much of the affective atmosphere of the film. Unable to find Mohammed, Ahmed returns home. In the face of chastisement from the elders of his family, he finishes his friend’s homework. The film ends at school the next day, when the notebook is returned and Mohammed escapes punishment.

The essence of Ahmed’s journey is love, its end is justice.

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The thought experiment is simple: imagine Mohamed and Ahmed find each other in the space between the two cities. Imagine they never return to school.

NOTES

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- ³ Ngugi wa Thiongo, “Enactments of Power”, 12.
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- ⁵ Ngugi wa Thiongo, “Enactments of Power”, 13.
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- ⁷ Dakxin Bajrange, “‘Amma’ and Budhan Theatre”, *Himal South Asian*, August 22, 2016, <https://www.himalmag.com/amma-and-budhan-theatre-tribute-mahasweta-devi/>
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- ¹⁴ Dakxin Bajrange, interviewed by the author, August 2020.
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²⁴ Malini Nair, “The director of the play cancelled in Jaipur explains why artists shouldn’t give in to the mob”.

²⁵ Malini Nair, “The director of the play cancelled in Jaipur explains why artists shouldn’t give in to the mob”.

²⁶ Malini Nair, “The director of the play cancelled in Jaipur explains why artists shouldn’t give in to the mob”.

²⁷ The Mumbai Theatre Guide Editorial, “Eidgaah ke Jinnat”, *Mumbai Theatre Guide*, <https://www.mumbaitheatre guide.com/dramas/hindi/eidgaah-ke-jinnat-hindi-play-preview.asp#>

²⁸ In pre-Islamic Arabic and Islamic religious mythology, the “*djinn*” is a supernatural figure: a spirit or demon capable of possessing human beings.

²⁹ In South Asian Islamic culture, the “*eidgaah*”, a word of Persian origin, indicates a large open-air enclosure either outside the city or at its outskirts. It is used for prayers offered on the morning of Eid ul-Fitr and Eid ul-Adha.

³⁰ In his book, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma out of Bounds*, Stef Craps argues that the everyday violence faced by victims in these postcolonial contexts makes the individual and (singular) event-based nature of Eurocentric trauma theory severely inadequate. The collective and quotidian nature of trauma experienced by these brutalised communities needs to be understood differently. Craps draws on Fanon to theorise the insidiously erosive nature of this persistent and everyday violence on the psyche of the colonised: “Fanon’s analysis brings to light the harm done to marginalised groups by continuous exposure to ‘a galaxy of erosive stereotypes’ [...]”. Stef Craps, *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), 30.

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³² Essar Batool, Ifrah Butt, Samreen Mushtaq, Munaza Rashid, Natasha Rather, *Do You Remember Kunan Poshpora?* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2016).

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³⁴ Diana Taylor, “Trauma and Performance: Lessons from Latin America”, *Publications of Modern Language Association* 121, No. 5 (October 2006): 1674-1677.

³⁵ It is perhaps interesting to note that under conditions of absolute repression, even an intransitive verb may be forced to turn transitive.

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- ⁴⁴ Sibaji Bandyopadhyay, “The Laughing Performer: The World of Thieves”.
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- ⁴⁶ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990) p. 19.
- ⁴⁷ Brahma Prakash, *Cultural Labour: Conceptualizing the ‘Folk Performance’ in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press India, 2019).
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- ⁵⁰ James C. Scott, *The Art of Not being Governed: An Anarchist History of*

Upland Southeast Asia (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009), 228.

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⁵² Dakxin Bajrange, Sarah Gandee and William Gould, “Settling the Citizen, Settling the ‘Nomad’”.

⁵³ Dakxin Bajrange, Sarah Gandee and William Gould, “Settling the Citizen, Settling the ‘Nomad’”.

⁵⁴ Dakxin Bajrange, Sarah Gandee and William Gould, “Settling the Citizen, Settling the ‘Nomad’”.

⁵⁵ Dakxin Bajrange, Sarah Gandee and William Gould, “Settling the Citizen, Settling the ‘Nomad’”.

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⁵⁸ Dakxin Bajrange, interviewed by the author, August 2020.

⁵⁹ Dakxin Bajrange, interviewed by the author, August 2020.

⁶⁰ *Where is the Friend's Home?*, directed by Abbas Kiarostami (Iran: Farabi Cinema Foundation and Kanoon Parvaresh Fekri, 1987, accessed on The Criterion Collection).

Biography

After completing her MA in English Literature from Jadavpur University, **Trina Nileena Banerjee** proceeded to complete a Masters of Studies (M St.) in English at the University of Oxford. For her PhD, she worked on a history of women in the group theatre movement in Bengal between 1950 and 1980. She has also been researching the interfaces between women's movements and political theatre in contemporary Manipur for several years now. Her essays and reviews on these and other subjects have appeared in national and international journals, as well as in several edited volumes. She writes both in English and in Bengali. Between 2011 and 2013, she taught at the Theatre and Performance Studies Department at the School of Arts and Aesthetics in Jawaharlal Nehru University. She is currently Assistant Professor in Cultural Studies at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences Calcutta. Her research interests include Gender, Performance, Political Theatre, Theories of the Body, Postcolonial Theatre and South Asian History. She has also been a theatre and film actress, as well as a journalist and fiction writer. Her book *Performing Silence: Women in the Group Theatre Movement in Bengal* is forthcoming from Oxford University Press (India) in June 2021.

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Memory against Legality

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