

370

A Street Theatre One-Act
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22 January 2021

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Acknowledgements:

Special thanks to Jose Casas and Malcolm Tulip for their contributions to this work and their continuous support for this story. Thank you also to Rebecca Mannery and the University of Michigan Hopwood Awards selection committees. With all the support, 370 was awarded the:

Hopwood Drama Award, University of Michigan, 2021

Dennis McIntyre Prize for Distinction in Undergraduate Playwriting, University of Michigan, 2021

Finally, thank you to Samina, Sulaiman, Aleesa, and Nauman for believing in me and supporting me at every step of the way.

A Note to the Director:

Thank you for choosing to help bring awareness to the plight of the citizens of Jammu and Kashmir. As a Pakistani-Indian American, it was imperative for me to understand and share this part of my history. It is evident that Kashmir has always been a turf war and power struggle for the two rival nations. As often the case in such colonialist land grabs, Kashmir has found itself exploited by all involved, never receiving respite, liberation, or self-determination.

Because this is an ongoing crisis rooted in over 75 years of intense conflict, this play requires extensive dramaturgy and ongoing research. The characters in this play are fictitious, but every event portrayed or discussed in this play has occurred to individuals in Jammu & Kashmir over the last year, and endnotes are provided as a starting point for research on current events in the region. Adaptations or improvised additions based on recent developments are not only allowed but encouraged, as this play does not even begin to cover the suffering Kashmiris have endured over the last several decades.

The battleground of a century-long conflict between two nuclear-armed nations, Jammu and Kashmir is the most militarized region in the world, and no one is more deeply affected than the children of Kashmir. Children are raised amidst conflict and disturbance, and these cycles of physical and psychological violence, illegal detentions, police stations, court proceedings, protests, and funerals set the stage for their eventual support of the separatist movement. The local children have been known to throw stones at Indian forces in order to distract them from the separatist militants attempting to escape their wrath. The measures used by the Indian military and reserve police forces against the youth include pellet guns, nocturnal raids, teargas, pepper spray, chili grenades, frisking, harrassment, and physical and sexual violence, and they've only added fuel to the fire.

Furthermore, due to the communications ban and internet shutdowns, Kashmir is separated from the rest of the world in a way that few regions are. Information about the internal workings of the Indian and Pakistani militaries, along with information about their interactions with Kashmiri citizens and children, is extremely inaccessible. It is my hope that this play should begin to shed some light on the current conditions in Jammu & Kashmir following the repeal of Articles 370 and 35A from the Indian constitution, especially for those in the Western world for whom this conflict seems abstract and unreachable.

I hope that, by seeing the conflict through children's eyes, the world can begin to understand the need for a peaceful, free, and independent Kashmir, and I can only hope that we will come together to bring it about.

Trigger Warning:

This play contains graphic depictions of violence and sexual assault.

Timeline:

The play takes place over the course of 370 days between February 12, 2019 and February 17, 2020, encompassing events including the border skirmishes between India and Pakistan, the potentially-staged Pulwama suicide bombing, Modi's re-election to a second term, the abrogation of Articles 370 and 35A of the Indian Constitution, the backlash from militants and protests by citizens of Jammu and Kashmir, the initial lockdown, the disappearances of hundreds of young boys, the sexual violence against young girls, and the militarization of children throughout the region who have been immersed in violence throughout their lives.

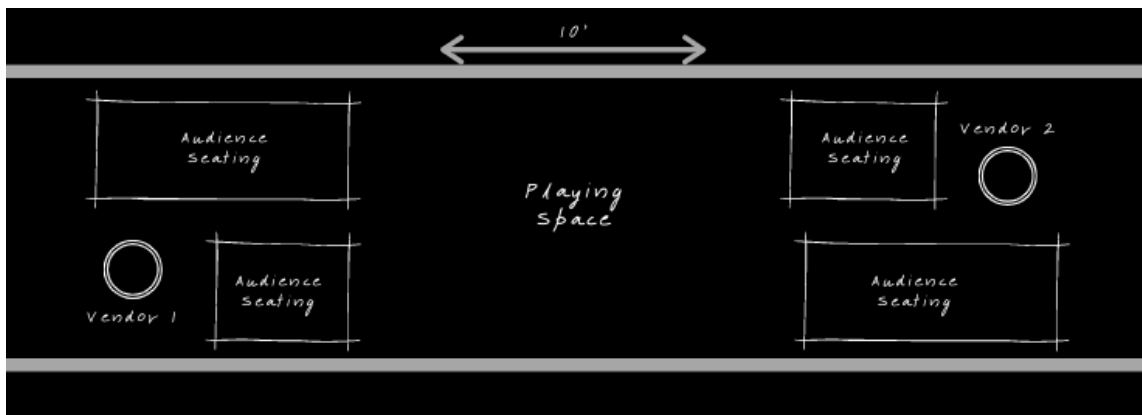
Setting:

This play is meant to be performed at night in an alley. The play setting should reflect the small alleys children explore in Indian-occupied Srinagar, Jammu and Kashmir.



Image source: Reuters

The audience will be seated on tarps or chairs on both ends of the alley, leaving a space of approximately 10 meters in length for the actors to play with.



Behind the audience on both sides of the alley, a vendor or two sit and peddle their wares to whomever passes by. The vendors sell jewelry and shawls and snacks. The colors in the alley are bright - textiles and snacks and jewelry of all different shades of pinks and oranges and turquoise juxtapose the dark neutrals of the CRPF military men in riot gear.

Characters:

AQIB (13)

MASOOD (15)

ISHA (11)

CHHOTE (10)

INDIAN CRPF SOLDIER 1 & SOLDIER 2 (any age)

STREET VENDOR 1 & VENDOR 2 (any age)

Any passersby in the alley may become characters through interactions with the actors.

*Ab na hume chhodde Hindustan, ab na hume chhodde Pakistan,
Arey koi to humse bhi puche ki hum kya chahte,*

Azaadi.

*India won't let us be, nor will Pakistan
Someone at least ask us for what we long,*

Freedom.

I. February 12, 2019

As the audience is settling in, AQIB plays with a toy plane. He runs around the alley, imagining it dodging a fusillade of bullets. Every so often, he bends down to pick up some pebbles. He weighs them in his hand and examines them closely. He pockets them if he finds them to be the correct shape.

Daily life in the alley continues as the audience arrives. The vendors haggle and sell to the audience members coming in, and a little boy, referred to fondly as CHHOTE (little one), announces the date and breaking news of the day. He tries to sell his newspaper to audience members as well.

CHHOTE - Aaj ka (today's) breaking news, 12 February 2019, newspaper lo! CRPF Soldier killed in encounter with separatist militant group Hizbul Mujahideen!¹ 12 February ka excellent news paro! Newspaper lelo! Yeh lo sir, only 5 rupees!

CHHOTE continues yelling the headlines as he exits the alley. Once the audience has settled in sufficiently, the play officially begins with MASOOD running in and tackling AQIB to the ground. The boys yell as they roll in the dirt and greet each other affectionately. AQIB tries in vain to keep the bigger and older MASOOD from reaching his plane.

AQIB - Man down!! Man doooown! Send for backup, over!

MASOOD - Target has been assassinated! He was in direct line of fire! Reporting for duty, Captain - who's next, over!

AQIB - Assemble our troops, our drone is down, captain, respond! I can hold down the fort but I need reinforcements, over!

MASOOD - Surrender and you shall not be harmed!!

AQIB - Militants kati karan surrender (*militants will never surrender*)!! Azaadi (*Freedom*)!! Send backup, captain!

MASOOD - No one's coming for you, traitor! You're ours!

Pinning AQIB's arms to the ground with one hand, MASOOD grabs AQIB's toy plane and brandishes it victoriously.

MASOOD - Aha! Shot your drone down again!

AQIB - No fair! It was an ambush, I was looking for missiles!

AQIB sits up and holds out his hand to show MASOOD his pebble collection.

MASOOD - Well you gotta watch your back, bro! Militants don't have excuses, this is life or death, man! These are pretty nice though, hey, look at this one!

MASOOD takes a small pebble from AQIB and weighs it in his hand. A sly grin comes over his face. He crouches low to the ground, then suddenly jumps to his feet and flings the stone down the alley with all his might. A shatter is heard, and then a loud, angry yell from further down the alley.

VENDOR 1 - Abey saale kya karre ho, pagal hogay ho (*you idiot, what are you doing, have you gone crazy*)?!

AQIB - Masood, yaar, kya karre ho (*bro, what are you doing*)?!

Still on the floor, AQIB gasps and crawls to the side of the alley, crouching out of sight from whomever the stone hit.

MASOOD - (*Yelling down the alley*) Are yaar sorry, haath se slip ho gya! (*Sorry man, it slipped from my hand!*)

AQIB - Pagal ho (*Are you crazy*)?! There are real police and soldiers down there, you can't do that! Get down!

MASOOD - Aqib yaar, why so serious, khel raha hun, kisi ko laga tho nahi (*I'm just playing, no one got hurt*)! Come on!

Still standing tall, MASOOD tousles AQIB's hair affectionately. He extends a hand to AQIB to help him up. In the classic move MASOOD should have anticipated, AQIB pretends to take his hand, then forcefully jerks MASOOD back to the ground. AQIB seizes the toy plane back and takes off running. He runs through the audience and down the alley.

MASOOD - Captain! The prisoner! He's taken off with the plane, he's getting away! I'm on it, send backup due north of Lal Chowk!

MASOOD takes off after AQIB, much to the chagrin of the vendors in the alley. They yell and call the boys names as they disappear. They're not gone from the alley for long. A second later, ISHA comes running in at full speed with both boys in tow.

ISHA - *(yelling after the boys)!* The British are victorious! The Royal Air Force strikes again!

ISHA runs to the center of the alley and waves the toy plane around. AQIB snatches it back.

ISHA - Hey! I won it, fair and square!

AQIB - *I'm* the Royal Air Force! Masood is the Luftwaffe.

MASOOD - Luftwaffe.

AQIB - Ya that's what I said. Anyway, mein *hamesha* British army khelta hun *(I always play the British army)!*

MASOOD - That's why you always lose!

AQIB - What? No, didn't you pay attention in class? RAF ne tho Luftwaffe ko bomb kiya tha *(RAF bombed the Luftwaffe)!*

MASOOD - Luftwaffe.

AQIB - That's what I said!! Isha, you can be Churchill if you want, you know the speech.

ISHA - Churchill nahi banna hai *(I don't want to be Churchill)*, he didn't even do anything! I want to be the RAF.

AQIB - No!

ISHA - Mummy made me learn the speech to impress the teacher so you would pass your class!

MASOOD snorts.

AQIB - I was passing!

ISHA - Yeah, okay

AQIB - Just do the speech, Isha! Masood and I don't know it so we can't be Churchill.

ISHA - But I won it! I got the plane, I bombed your drone!

MASOOD - She did win it this time - second time you were ambushed today!

ISHA - See?!

AQIB - Whose side are you on?!

MASOOD - Hey, I'm just saying!

AQIB - Ok fine, Isha you can be the RAF, but that makes me the Luftwaffe Captain Goering.

ISHA and MASOOD - Luftwaffe.

ISHA and MASOOD look at each other and giggle.

AQIB - Ya Allah kassam se (*I swear to God*).

He throws the plane back to ISHA and points at MASOOD.

AQIB - You're Churchill then. Do the speech and count us off.

MASOOD - I don't know the speech.

A vendor yells from down the alley (offstage).

VENDOR 1 - Are yaar everyone knows the speech! "Four score and seven years ago -"

VENDOR 2 - Are ullu ka pattha (*Son of an owl*)! Not that speech! "We will fight the beaches" wala speech!

MASOOD - "We will fight the beaches?"

ISHA bites her tongue and nods encouragingly. She whispers the rest of the speech to MASOOD line by line. Throughout the speech, MASOOD grows more and more confident, and he embodies his idea of a soldier, a leader in a World War. He paces the playing space and addresses the audience directly. Emboldened, he jumps onto a milk crate.

MASOOD - *(continuing)* ...Until, in God's good time, the New World, with all its power and might, steps forth to the rescue and the liberation of the old!!! Aqib, Luftwaffe, 3 second head start!

AQIB takes off running down the alley. ISHA hikes up her skirt and prepares herself in a runner's lunge.

MASOOD - 3, 2, 1, go get him!

MASOOD throws his hands in the air as ISHA takes off. He watches her for a few seconds, smiling. He comes to his senses and realizes he's still on the crate. He hops down and jogs after the others.

MASOOD - Ay wait up!

ISHA and AQIB have exited the alley. On MASOOD's way out, he nearly runs into SOLDIER 1 who shoves him roughly. MASOOD doesn't stop running.

SOLDIER 1 - *(yelling after him)* Oi saale! Watch where you're going or I'll give you a reason to run, boy!

MASOOD exits the alley as SOLDIER 1 and SOLDIER 2 enter the playing space from behind the audience.

II. - February 28, 2019

As SOLDIER 1 and SOLDIER 2 file into the playing space, audio clips of news about the border skirmishes beginning with the Pulwama suicide bomb on February 14th, 2019 should fade in and out over an audio clip of Modi responding to Pulwama.²

The news clips should reflect Indian, Pakistani, and British coverage of the events. It is a barrage of sound, with only small bits of information getting through to the audience.³

While the audio clips are playing, the soldiers will ask members of the audience to volunteer to participate in the play as Indian soldiers, recruiting them. While this is going on, CHHOTE makes his way across the alley, yelling the headlines, information overload.

CHHOTE - February 28 ka newspaper lo! Pulwama suicide attack ke baad Pakistan aur India ka ceasefire violated! Line of Control shooting! Pakistan captures India pilot, ye lo, newspaper paro! Panch rupaiya, just 5 rupees, sir! Thank you, sir!

CHHOTE exits as the recruited soldiers who agree to join the play are brought into the playing space and handed camouflage-print jackets.

SOLDIER 1 - Brothers, by now you've surely heard of the destruction our fellow Central Reserve Police have suffered at the hands of the Pakistani army in the suicide bombing this month. Vo Bharat par is tara ke hamle karke, Pulwama jese tabahi maja kar, vo soch ta hai ke Bharat bhi padhal ho jayga (*They wreak havoc on our country, causing destruction of the kind seen in the suicide bombing of Pulwama, and they think our country is destroyed*)⁴. Pakistan ne Bharat ke do larakon maar maar giraye hain aur do piloton ko bhi pakarliya hain (*Pakistan has shot down 2 of India's fighter jets and has also captured 2 pilots*)⁵.

Lekin hamare dushman Pakistan bhetewe log, bhali ye baat samaj le. Aapne jo raasta panaya he, aapne apni parwadi dekhi he (*But our enemies who are sitting there in Pakistan, let them understand this well. With the path they've chosen, they've now seen the future of their own destruction*)... Hum milke jawab dhenge, motho jawab dhenge. (*We will band together and give them a response, a very appropriate response*).⁶

You have all been handpicked to defend India from our enemies at the border. Humare desh ko protect karna zaroori hai (*It is crucial that we protect our country*), by any means necessary! Samaj aagya (*Understand*)? By any means necessary. Any questions?

SOLDIER 1 pauses for response.

Good. All new recruits will be stationed in Srinagar. The honor and responsibility is yours to win the Kashmiris over, allow them the chance to progress. They have never enjoyed the privileges that being part of India can provide, but that will change soon. You are part of half a million soldiers who will be deployed to Srinagar over the next few months⁷, and you will protect the Kashmiri people from the Pakistan army. The youth in Jammu and Kashmir are uninformed, disillusioned, disrespectful, and susceptible to radicalization by Pakistani forces. The Pulwama attack could not have happened without support from the Kashmiris. Future terrorist attacks that cost Indian lives are to be prevented by you at all costs, and by any means necessary, do you understand?

Excellent. Return to your stations until further notice.

SOLDIER 1 and SOLDIER 2 escort the volunteers from the audience to reserved seating in front of the other audience seating. SOLDIER 1 and SOLDIER 2 take their seats in the audience as well.

III. March 24, 2019

CHHOTE makes his way through the alley again, peddling his newspaper.

CHHOTE - March 24 2019 ka newspaper hai, panch rupaiya! At least 10 houses demolished in Pulwama crackdown operation!⁸ Get your news here! Newspaper lo!

ISHA and AQIB rush into the alley, chasing after one another. AQIB laughs as he dodges ISHA's desperate grabs at him and MASOOD's toy plane. CHHOTE continues in the background.

CHHOTE - Cordon and search operation! Indian army uses human shields!⁹ March 24 ka news idhar paro!

ISHA runs after AQIB, still not processing the news,

CHHOTE - 12 year old boy Aatif Shahi used as human shield by Indian army - Aatif Shahi killed in crackdown.¹⁰ Aaj ka news paro! March 24 ka breaking news paro!

AQIB rushes up to CHHOTE, shushing violently.

AQIB - Are Chhote, kya karre ho (*what are you doing*)?! CRPF sunega tho kya hal hoga tumhare (*If CRPF hears you what will happen to you*)?!

CHHOTE - Are bhaiyya, sab ko to pata hai (*brother, everyone already knows about it*), at least let me get 5 rupees from whoever wants to read!

AQIB - I'll give you 5 rupees, just stop yelling!!

AQIB tosses a coin to CHHOTE who pockets it, beaming. He makes his way out the alley.

ISHA - What was that about?

AQIB - What was what about?

ISHA - What was he talking about? And why did you tell him to stop?

AQIB - You - you don't know?

ISHA - Mummy aur papa mere saath news ke baare mein nahi baat karte hein (*Mom and dad don't talk about the news with me*).

AQIB - Oh, okay.

AQIB tries to draw ISHA's attention back to the game they'd been playing.

AQIB - Okay, who's turn is it?

ISHA - They use boys as shields? How?

AQIB - What? No! Chhote doesn't really understand what he's talking about, he's just reading off the headlines!

ISHA - Okay, but that was the news, they're using boys as shields? How?

AQIB lunges for ISHA in a deft motion. He pulls her arms to her sides and lifts her up by her elbows, spinning her around.

AQIB - Like this!

ISHA, caught off guard, laughs a bit, but as soon as AQIB puts her back down, the somber line of questioning resumes.

ISHA - What do they need the boys for? Do they need girls too?

AQIB hesitates, not wanting to be the one to teach ISHA about their world.

AQIB - Mummy ne bola news ke baare mein nahi baat karna tho nahi baat karte hein (*mummy said we shouldn't talk about the news so we don't talk about it*).

ISHA - Aqib, come on!

AQIB - Isha, let's just play!

ISHA - Aqib!

AQIB - Okay, okay! Let me think!

Aqib fiddles with the plane.

AQIB - Okay. You know how we learn about these air raids in World War II?

ISHA - Yeah.

AQIB - Well, the air raids didn't always kill enemy soldiers. Sometimes, a lot of times, they killed the people who lived in the countries they were fighting. Civilians. People like us. Like, on purpose.

ISHA - Why?

AQIB - They called it "total war". It gave them military advantage, because it made their enemies upset, hurt their morale. It made the people in their enemy countries oppose the war efforts because they kept losing friends and family members to these kinds of attacks.

ISHA - Okay. So they killed young boys?

AQIB - Uh, yeah, among other people.

ISHA - That happens all the time here. Why was the news about that one boy?

AQIB looks around uneasily and drops his voice.

AQIB - Well, the Indian army has enemies here, militants. Like in our mujahid-military game. There are some people here who don't think Indian forces should be here, or that we should be part of India.

ISHA - We don't either!

AQIB - Shhhh, yes, yes, but we don't go around saying that. Because the Indian army and police, CRPF, know they have enemies here. So, when they're going to - um, investigate - some people they think might be their enemies, they take people like those boys, civilians, like us. Er, like me. Um, to protect themselves. In case those people do turn out to be militants and open fire at them.

ISHA - Oh.

AQIB - Yeah.

ISHA - So that happened to the 12 year old.

AQIB - Yeah. Um, many others too.

ISHA - Okay. So, total war.

AQIB - Yeah. India hopes that when other civilians here see this happening, it will make us angry, and we won't support Pakistani militants. Because they put us in danger and kill us.

ISHA - Oh. But it doesn't work.

AQIB - No, not really. But Indian soldiers also save themselves from harm like this, so they keep doing it.

ISHA - And the boys die?

AQIB - Lots of people die.

ISHA - What about girls? They don't use girls?

AQIB - Well, it's harder for them to act like the girls are a threat to them. Like they can say the boys they use were causing trouble or are more likely to be a threat to their safety.

ISHA - Girls can be soldiers too.

AQIB - Oh, Isha, don't start!

ISHA - Pakistan had a female suicide bomber!¹¹

AQIB - Isha! I thought you didn't read the news!

ISHA - I pick things up...

AQIB - Man, get that idea out of your head, whatever it is!

ISHA - No, no, no ideas.

AQIB - Good.

ISHA - Just, they harass boys so much! And kill them! Do they think girls aren't as strong or something?

AQIB - Isha, that's not it.

ISHA - We can do everything you guys do! I beat you in our games all the time!

AQIB - Those are games, it's different!

ISHA - How is it different? You don't think I could be a soldier?

AQIB - What, Isha, I think you could, but I hope you don't want to be!

ISHA - No, but I could if I wanted to, right?

AQIB - Sure.

ISHA - Good. We can be a threat to them if we want.

AQIB - You don't want to, Isha! They don't need a reason to hurt you!

ISHA - Well you said they only use boys like that.

AQIB - Isha, why are you stuck on this, they do worse things to girls!¹²

ISHA - What? Like what?

AQIB - Nothing!

ISHA - Tell me!

A shift in the space. AQIB realizes the gravity of what he's almost let slip.

AQIB - No.

ISHA - Aqib!

AQIB - No.

ISHA - Shouldn't I know?

AQIB - No.

ISHA - Why not? I'm a girl.

AQIB - Hum is cheez ke baare mein nahi baat karte hein (*We don't talk about this kind of thing*). Come on, we have to get home.

ISHA - Aqib, what if whatever it is happens to me? Shouldn't I know?

AQIB - It will *not*. Don't bring this up anymore, okay?

ISHA doesn't answer, and she averts her eyes. She doesn't need to know much to sense it's stigma worthy of shame.

AQIB - Come on, it's getting late.

AQIB begins walking briskly out the alley. ISHA watches him for a minute, then follows.

IV. May 23, 2019

Off-stage, CHHOTE can be heard announcing the news.

CHHOTE - May 23 ka news paro! Panch rupaiya! Prime Minister Narendra Modi re-elected to second term! Pakistan Prime Minister Imran Khan congratulates Modi. Aaj ka news paro, May 23 ka news hai!¹³

SOLDIER 1 and SOLDIER 2 arise from the audience and enter the playing space, encouraging the volunteer soldiers from the audience to join them.

SOLDIER 1 - Attention! We have a few orders of business to attend to before your deployment in Srinagar. Number 1, most important, is discipline. We may not be the army, but as the Central Reserve Police Force, we are the most important command in Jammu and Kashmir and we will behave accordingly. So, when I address you, you will respond with sir. Is that clear?

SOLDIER 2 encourages audience soldiers to respond with "yes, sir".

SOLDIER 1 - Good. Now, number 2. I'm sure you've all heard rumours of people defecting from the CRPF once they've gotten to Kashmir. Those boys were weak and unprepared for the sacrifices these outposts will demand from you. You will be deployed for 90% of your commitment to this institution. You should expect your days to range between 12 and 14 hours, and don't come to me expecting Sundays off or any holidays. This is an issue of public safety and the security of our nation, and you should see it as an honor to serve your country. If I catch wind of any plans to disobey orders or defect, you better be ready to hear directly from me, is that clear?¹⁴

SOLDIER 2 encourages audience soldiers to respond with "yes, sir".

Which brings me to number 3. Jammu and Kashmir is dangerous. Beautiful, heavenly paradise, sure. But you must be prepared for long hours and rough days. The Kashmir police are contemptuous of us and the citizens are much worse. You will encounter many undisciplined youth pelting stones whenever things don't go their way. So, you must be prepared to defend yourself and your nation at a moment's notice.

SOLDIER 2 distributes pellet guns and chili grenades.¹⁵

SOLDIER 1 - These have proven to be the most effective methods of dispersion and defense when dealing with the miscreants in Kashmir.

The last thing you need to know is your rights in Jammu and Kashmir as enforcers of Indian law. Under the Armed Forces Special Powers Act, you are entitled to arresting and taking anyone into custody that you have reasonable suspicion could be a threat to the peace in your outpost, even anyone you think is *about* to commit an offence. You have the right to fire or use force on any person who is acting against *any* law or order... eeeeven to the point of causing death. You can break open locks, stop and search vehicles, seize anything you like without a warrant.¹⁶ As long as you can tell my boss you felt there was a need, I won't ask any questions. I understand we all need something to... feel alive in such dire circumstances. Have your fun boys, we won't take that from you. So, keep 'em in check by any means necessary. Any questions?

If there are any questions, SOLDIER 1 should address them by reiterating points of personal safety, necessity of public order, and right to use force. Otherwise, SOLDIER 2 encourages audience soldiers to respond with "No, sir". SOLDIER 2 shows the audience members back to their designated seating area. SOLDIER 1 and SOLDIER 2 sit with them.

V. August 1, 2019

Off-stage, CHHOTE announces the news headlines to anyone who will listen.

CHHOTE - August 1 ka news idhar paro! 38,000 more troops sent from India to Jammu and Kashmir¹⁷, separatist leaders rounded up¹⁸! News paro, panch rupaiya! Tourists asked to leave Kashmir immediately, panch rupaiya!

MASOOD and AQIB run into the playing space, tossing the toy plane back and forth, imagining it weaving through a volley of bullets.

MASOOD - Tushum tushum tushum!!

AQIB - *(In an exaggerated German accent)* Radioing for backup, if you can hear us, abort friendly fire, we're on your side!!

MASOOD - Tushum tushum!!

AQIB - Repeat, this is Captain Goering of the Luftwaffe, we are being fired at above German Air Space, abort!!

MASOOD - *(Dropping his voice for authority, and attempting a British accent)* Captain Goering, this is Air Chief Marshal Dowding, this is not friendly fire, we will not abort! Tushum tushum!

AQIB - Araahhahhhhhh!!! They have followed us into German air space, this will not stand. Ready the ranks, prepare for Blitzkrieg!

AQIB circles the plane around the space then hovers in the air as he faces off with MASOOD. He imagines the might of the Luftwaffe fighter jets behind his toy plane, and releases a fierce battle cry as he charges at MASOOD. MASOOD ducks and dodges AQIB's blows, lunging to grab the toy plane. A brief struggle ensues.

AQIB - We will never surrender!!

MASOOD - It's only a matter of time! We will win the Battle of Britain!

AQIB - Yeah, yeah okay, but not this time! AHA!

With a surprising amount of force, AQIB yanks the plane out of MASOOD's grip and brandishes it victoriously.

MASOOD - Wow.

AQIB - Finally! Yes! Again?? I want to be Dowding this time!

MASOOD - You're always Dowding but you've never won!

AQIB - But now I know I can! Let me be the RAF!

MASOOD - Yaar ye bhataao, hum London aur Germany ke fights kyun baar baar khelte rehte hein (*Bro tell me, why do we keep playing fights between London and Germany*)?

AQIB - You're just mad I finally won!

MASOOD - No I'm not, I'm serious! There are so many better battles -

AQIB - It was the greatest air battle in the world! No one thought the British could actually defeat the Germans but they did! Britain was underestimated by the whole world, and Goering had no idea how many fighter jets and pilots they had on hand and in reserve...

MASOOD - Yeh baat samaj me aagaya leken, pata nahi (*yeah, I get that, but I don't know*), it's so old, you know?

AQIB - It's iconic! It's legendary!

MASOOD - It's boring!

AQIB looks wounded.

MASOOD - Come on man! It was fun the first 500 times!

AQIB - While you were winning?

MASOOD - No, even this time was fun! It was a fair fight.

AQIB - Okay. Whatever.

MASOOD - Look, we can play it if you want, it's still fun, it's just, there are so many other games we could play too! And we keep playing this one about stuffy angrezi log.

AQIB - Germans angrezi nahi hein.

MASOOD - You know what I mean though! Here, what if I grab Asif and you get Isha, we'll play Military-Mujahid!

AQIB - Military-Mujahid is fun with more people, not just four! We need everyone from school!

MASOOD - Okay, that's true. I'm just saying we should change it up! There are so many exciting things happening right here, right now!

AQIB - (*glances around uneasily*). What do you mean?

MASOOD - Tum ko paata hai (*you know*)! Pulwama ke baare me tho suna hoga, na (*You heard about Pulwama, right*)?

AQIB - Mummy ne bola ke is ke baare mein baat nahi karna hein (*Mummy said we don't talk about this*).

MASOOD - Are kyun nahi (*Why not*)? Hamare baare me tho hai (*it's about us*)! India aur Pakistan Kashmir ke piche pare hai (*India and Pakistan are after Kashmir*), of course we can talk about it! Listen, you can be the Indian air force pilot with the fighter jets - MiG 21 Bison Warplane, top of the line! Aur main (*And I'll be*) Pakistan Air Force. If you cross this line of control (*he draws a line between them in dirt*), I will shoot at you and capture your jet!

MASOOD collects pebbles as AQIB continues to look around uneasily.

MASOOD - Come on, it's just a game, we're not hurting anyone, they're not going to ask a couple of boys for our opinions on their war, no?

AQIB - CRPF don't ask anyone anything, Masood, and they don't wait for answers.

MASOOD - Good! Okay, 3, 2, 1 - tushum, tushum!!

MASOOD begins pelting AQIB with little pebbles, and AQIB laughs. He grabs his plane and dances around the line of control, trying to make it to the other side without being

hit. He dodges MASOOD's bullets deftly and picks up a wooden plank and a few pebbles to 'shoot' back.

AQIB - This is my AK-47! Step in the line of fire if you dare!

MASOOD - Come on, coward, can't keep that Bison away forever!

Eventually, AQIB takes a running leap over the line of control and charges across the playing space, but MASOOD tackles him to the ground. The boys wrestle, and AQIB tries desperately to cling onto the fighter jet. MASOOD grabs an end of it and wrenches it from AQIB's hands, causing it to snap.

AQIB - Shit!

MASOOD looks at the plane in two pieces.

AQIB - I'm so sorry!

MASOOD - No it's okay, wasn't your fault. You're just getting strong.

MASOOD tries to chuckle it off but it comes out quite forced.

AQIB - Maaf karo (*forgive me*), man, I'm really sorry.

MASOOD - Hey, it's okay, it's just a toy.

AQIB - Yeah, but it was a gift.

MASOOD - Seriously, it's fine. I have other things from my Papa.

AQIB - Can I see it?

MASOOD reluctantly hands over the pieces.

AQIB - I think I can fix it.

MASOOD - It's fine as it is, I'll just keep it.

AQIB - Can I try?

MASOOD - Sure, whatever.

AQIB - Okay, I'll bring it back next week, okay? Same time?

MASOOD - Yeah, okay. See you.

AQIB - Okay see you!

AQIB takes off running down the alley. MASOOD turns to exit in the opposite direction, but at that moment, SOLDIER 1 and SOLDIER 2 come out from the audience.

SOLDIER 1 - Boy, stop right there.

He cocks his gun and points it at MASOOD, who stops and backs up into the center of the playing space.

SOLDIER 1 - *(to the vendor closest to him)* You, get out of here.

The vendor packs his cart and wheels it out of the alley. SOLDIER 2 beckons to the volunteer recruits from the audience and encourages them to come into the center of the playing space. This scene may be improvised depending on reactions from the audience recruits. Scenarios where audience recruits object to the treatment of MASOOD must be rehearsed thoroughly. SOLDIER 1 may either crack down by revoking the guns and banishing the audience members who object, or he may relent a bit, laughing off the mistreatment, and letting MASOOD go earlier in the scene.

SOLDIER 1 - Soldiers, you were called upon to serve your country. Let this be your first lesson. Come around, don't be shy. Boys like this one cause a lot of trouble. I've seen you around here before. How old are you?

MASOOD - 15.

SOLDIER 1 - 15 what?!

MASOOD - 15, sir.

SOLDIER 1 - These boys throw disrespect in our faces, then join Jaish-e-Mohammad and throw bombs on our country. What are you doing here?

He prods MASOOD with the butt of his gun.

MASOOD - I was just going home, sir.

SOLDIER 1 - Get on your knees. Murga banna aata hai na (*you know how to be a chicken, right*)? Ma baap tumko murga banna sikhaya (*your parents taught you how to be a chicken/your parents disciplined you*)?

MASOOD - Yes, sir.

SOLDIER 1 - Chal kaan pakro (*Grab your ears*). Aur aese karo, utthe betthe kar, das baar (*And tell you what, squat up and down 10 times*).

MASOOD holds his ears. He squats to the ground and straightens up 10 times.¹⁹

During this time, SOLDIER 1 and SOLDIER 2 laugh and spit on the ground, and encourage the audience members to laugh at the boy as well. When MASOOD is done, SOLDIER 1 continues questioning him.

SOLDIER 1 - What's that line in the dirt, what's going on there?

MASOOD - Hum game khel re thein (*We were playing a game*), sir.

SOLDIER 1 - Konsa game (*Which game*)?

MASOOD - We just made it up, sir.

SOLDIER 1 - What's the line for?

MASOOD - It was a boundary, sir.

SOLDIER 1 - Which boundary?

MASOOD - Line of Control, sir.

SOLDIER 1 - Line of control ko game banaadiya (*You made the line of control into a game*)?

MASOOD - Yes, sir.

SOLDIER 1 - Wow! A game! This is all a joke to these kids.

He steps even closer to MASOOD and holds his gun to MASOOD's chest.

SOLDIER 1 - Are we a joke to you?

MASOOD - No, sir.

SOLDIER 1 - Good. Acha yeh karo, itna game khelne aur line drawing karna mazaa aata hein to dekh ke banao (*Okay, so do one thing, if you like games and drawing lines so much then make it and show us*). Naak se yeh line of control matti mein banao (*Draw this line of control in the dirt with your nose*).²⁰

MASOOD - (*mumbling and avoiding eye contact*) Sorry, sir? Samaj me nahi aaya (*I don't understand*).

SOLDIER 1 - Draw that line of control. In the dirt. With your nose. Aur kaan nahi chhorna hein, hah (*and don't let go of your ears, yeah*)?

SOLDIER 2 leads the audience and new recruits in laughing at MASOOD as he holds his ears and struggles to trace the line of control in the alley with his nose. SOLDIER 1 goes over to inspect his progress.

SOLDIER 1 - Sahi hai (*It's fine*). Chal baag ja yan se (*Okay get out of here*). Aur sun, respect mat bhulna (*And listen, don't forget to show respect*).

MASOOD - Yes, sir.

MASOOD scrambles away, running out of the alley with his hands still on his ears.

SOLDIER 1 - These rascals will learn one way or another. Alright, listen up. First month in Srinagar and Indian Administered Kashmir.

I'm sure you all have questions about why so many of you have been deployed here, but I'm not at liberty to disclose everything I know. How many of you are familiar with Article 370 of our constitution? Anyone?

SOLDIER 1 pauses for answers. If anyone raises their hand or indicates knowledge, let them answer. SOLDIER 1 should acknowledge with "Very good" and proceed as follows.

In 1947, the year that Pakistan betrayed India and became a separate entity, a Pakistani invasion of Jammu and Kashmir threatened the peace. India stepped in as a protector, and Article 370 officially made Jammu and Kashmir an Indian territory. It belongs to us.

Article 370 gave Jammu and Kashmir the status of autonomy, the ability to write its own constitution and legislation, and the ability to have its own flag. So, Jammu and Kashmir made its own rules relating to permanent residency, ownership of property and fundamental rights, and it could also bar Indians from outside the state from purchasing property or settling there.

I can't tell you too much, but I can tell you that our bold leader Modi plans to... "integrate" Kashmir with India in the way it should have been integrated in the first place. We have provided Kashmir with so much - protection, independence, rights, and what have they given us?! Nothing but trouble. Death and destruction. Violence. But soon, finally, Indians will be able to enjoy the land and the women of this paradise that belongs to us.

It won't be easy. These people and their terrorists will defend 370 to the death. This article has been used to spread lies about us and terror that has cost so many Indian lives. These separatists and Pakistani terrorists have made the valley a living hell, but the stupid locals defend them anyway, and throw rocks at us when we try to maintain the peace.

Modi is taking matters into his own hands. Once Jammu and Kashmir is officially recognized as an Indian state, we won't have to pretend to give a shit about these stupid kids that want us dead. This area will prosper, because Indians will be able to own land and conduct business here, and as more of us settle here, the demographic will change to reflect our country's values. We will have the upper hand over our enemies in Pakistan, since attacks like Pulwama will not be possible without the help of the locals.

So, these are your orders. Any tourists? Get rid of them. Political leaders? Lock them up. Groups of more than 4? Insurgents - separate them by any means. Internet and telephone services will be suspended soon, so you are to communicate with your superior officers in person and via internal channels only. If the kids give you trouble, show 'em whose country they're in. Is that clear?²¹

SOLDIER 2 encourages audience recruits to respond with 'Yes, Sir!'

SOLDIER 1 - A bunch of little girls. I said, is that clear?!

Audience recruits should respond, louder.

SOLDIER 1 - Good, then what are we waiting for?

SOLDIER 1 winks. Blackout.

VI. August 15, 2019

As soon as the blackout hits, several overlapping sound clips from the days that followed the repeal of Article 370 on August 5th 2019 begin to play.

Sounds of indiscriminate beating and anguished yelling.

Indian propagandist and TV Anchor Arnab Goswami discusses killing thousands of Muslims and Kashmiri residents.²²

Protests by Kashmiris on Pakistan's and India's Independence days (August 14th and 15th respectively).

As the noise continues overhead, CHHOTE announces the date and the events.

CHHOTE - August 15!! India independence day!! Newspaper lo, newspaper lo! Aaj ki protests ke baare me paro, Article 370 aur India ke bare me sikho! Newspaper lo! Srinagar ka protests ke baare me paro! Breaking news, evidence that India staged Pulwama attack as nationalist ploy for Modi reelection -

SOLDIER 1 - Chup kar (shut up)! Ese kese baat karne laga ho (what kind of shit have you started spewing)?!

A sound of the whip of a stick, and CHHOTE yells out. More cracks of the stick, and more anguish and yelling as other sounds continue in the blackout.

Pellet guns firing indiscriminately at protestors chanting for liberation and independence of Kashmir.

Protests over the communications and internet ban.

Pakistani Prime Minister's statement that Pakistan would fight to the end for Kashmir's independence from India.

The noise continues as the lights come up on the playing space. MASOOD is walking home quietly and carefully, but it is no use. SOLDIER 1 and SOLDIER 2 rise from the audience and yell at him.

SOLDIER 1 - Bardo isko gadi mai, tum pather marte ho (Get him in the car, you dare throw rocks at us)?!²³

A brief struggle. MASOOD tries to run, but SOLDIER 2 grabs him and SOLDIER 1 hits him repeatedly with a stick.

SOLDIER 1 - Aab pather maro, maro (*now throw rocks, throw them!*)

MASOOD's body goes limp as he falls unconscious, and SOLDIER 2 drags him out of the playing space as the lights dim.

Pellet gunfire continues, followed by yelling, then finally, an eerie silence. A few birds chirping, a car horn, then nothing again for a few beats.

VII. November 1, 2019

Lights up on the empty alley. No vendors, no soldiers, no movement. Barbed wire fences and barriers with CRPF insignia behind audience seating, blocking the entrances to the alley. A stack of newspapers where CHHOTE should've been standing and yelling the news of the day.

AQIB comes cautiously into the playing space, ducking under the barbed wire and staying close to the walls of the alley. He is holding the toy plane which he has patched together and has been meaning to return to MASOOD for months.

He waits for MASOOD, and checks the ends of the alley a few times. He picks up a few nicely shaped pebbles, weighs them, and pockets them while he waits, but his heart is not in it.

He notices the stack of newspapers with dismay. He picks one up and reads it.

AQIB - November 1 2019.

He tries it again, this time quietly in CHHOTE's voice.

AQIB - November 1 2019! Third month of lockdown and internet shutdown!
Newspaper lo, get your news here. Pakistani Prime Minister Imran Khan vows to defend Kashmir.²⁴ News paro, 5 rupees. Get your news.

His voice grows faint by the last sentence, and the game gets old very quickly. He tosses the newspaper aside. Growing tired, he slumps to the ground with his back against the alley walls.

After a few more moments of contemplative silence, ISHA creeps into the playing space and joins her brother against the wall.

ISHA - (gently) Hey.

AQIB - Hi.

ISHA - Mm, you're not supposed to be here.

AQIB - Neither are you.

ISHA - Yeah, probably. Mummy was worried about you.

AQIB - She let you come look for me?

ISHA - No.

AQIB - Oh.

Beat.

AQIB - Okay.

A long silence, both in their own worlds together.

ISHA - I'm sure he's fine.

AQIB - Yeah, it's just been a while.

ISHA - Yeah.

Beat.

ISHA - Can I play?

AQIB - Don't you have stuff to do, for that scholarship or whatever?

ISHA - Not really. I mean maybe, I don't know, can't really do much right now though.

AQIB - It was all online?

ISHA - Yeah. It's okay, I can try again next year.

AQIB - You won't be under 12 next year.

ISHA - Yeah, well. There will be other scholarships! Anyway, do you want to play?

AQIB - I'm not really in the mood.

ISHA - Oh come on, there's nothing else to do.

AQIB - Go make some ladoos or something!

ISHA - *(punching her brother playfully)* You make some ladoos or something!

AQIB laughs and rubs his knuckles on his sister's head.

AQIB - Okay okay you're right, take this. 3...

ISHA takes the plate, jumps to her feet, and races out the alley, still staying close to the walls when possible.

AQIB - 2, 1! Here I come!

Though his voice is cheerful, AQIB's face returns to its somber state when ISHA has left the alley. AQIB gets to his feet with deep awareness of the current situation that is unnerving to see in a child his age. He is not in any rush as he follows his sister out the alley.

VIII. December 10, 2019

AQIB slinks into the playing space again, and goes directly to the wall, plopping down against it. He's not expecting much, but entertains himself with the toy plane anyway. Rather than flying it around and talking to himself as he used to, he finds a smooth stone and uses it to polish the plane wings and body. He looks up every once in a while, more out of caution than of hope.

After a few minutes, he looks up to see MASOOD standing in the entrance of the alley. AQIB jumps up to run to him but a look on MASOOD's face stops him from touching him.

AQIB - Masood!

MASOOD - Hey.

AQIB is taken aback by the awkwardness between the two of them.

AQIB - Where have you been?

MASOOD - Same as everyone.

AQIB - Oh.

Beat.

AQIB - I've come out every week.

MASOOD - You shouldn't. It's not safe.

AQIB - I just missed you, man.

MASOOD - Yeah.

Beat.

MASOOD - Yeah, it's been a weird few months.

AQIB - Yeah.

Beat.

AQIB - Hey, also...

He hands MASOOD the toy plane. A shadow of a smile appears on MASOOD's face, and he is genuinely touched.

MASOOD - You fixed it. Thank you, man.

AQIB - Yeah.

MASOOD - It's better than before.

AQIB - I polished it up a bit.

MASOOD - Thank you. You really didn't have to.

AQIB smiles awkwardly and shuffles around in the dirt of the alley.

AQIB - I had a lot of time to think of new games.

MASOOD - Yeah, I bet.

Beat.

MASOOD - Are your parents okay? And Isha, how is Isha?

AQIB - They're fine, yeah. Isha is okay. She reads a lot, we play sometimes. She really misses school.

MASOOD - Did she get that scholarship for her poetry?

AQIB - Oh, you remembered.

MASOOD - Yeah, I mean, everyone knew, she was really hoping for it. Did she get it?

AQIB - No, no internet.

MASOOD - Oh, right.

AQIB - Papa wanted to mail it. To London.

MASOOD - Oh?

AQIB - Post offices closed.

MASOOD - Right.

Beat.

AQIB - How's your mom?

MASOOD - Uh. You know.

AQIB - Yeah.

A long beat. MASOOD looks away from AQIB.

MASOOD - My brother joined Jaish .

AQIB - What?! Why??

MASOOD - What do you mean why? We can't live like this.

AQIB - It's a death sentence. They're Jihadists.

MASOOD - Being a fighter jet pilot is also a death sentence, you didn't have a problem with that.

AQIB - That was different, it was a world war.

MASOOD - This could be too, if the world cared about Kashmir.

AQIB - How would they know?

MASOOD - They should know. They will. If enough of us give them a reason to care.

AQIB - What are you talking about?

MASOOD - Don't you want something better?

AQIB - Of course, but not like -

MASOOD - We have no internet, no way of communicating with each other, with anyone outside, we live in Paradise on earth but we can't leave our homes, we can't go to school, your sister can't share her talent with the world. We're born into this war and we'll die in this war, wouldn't you at least want to fight for something if we have to die here anyway?

AQIB - (*Growing visibly uncomfortable*) What are you saying?

MASOOD - Nothing.

Beat.

AQIB - I thought you said this was their war. India and Pakistan. And that we don't have opinions they care about anyway. Why do you want to get in the middle of it?

MASOOD doesn't answer for a long time. He begins to unbutton his shirt.

AQIB - What are you doing?

MASOOD removes his shirt to reveal bright red dots all over his back, and long, thin, red and purple scars.

AQIB - MASOOD - ya Allah, kya hua (*oh my God, what happened*)? Kabhi hua (*when did this happen*)?

MASOOD - August. Main dho hafte kelye jail mein tha (*I was in jail for 2 weeks*).

AQIB - Why?

MASOOD - Bas asahi (*just because*). I don't know. I was walking home. They said we were "throwing stones" and "disrupting public order".

AQIB - Oh my God...

MASOOD - Yeah. 7 of us in a cell. No light for 2 weeks.²⁵

Beat.

MASOOD - A 9 year old too.²⁶

AQIB - What the hell?

MASOOD - They let one go on the same day.

AQIB - That's nice.

MASOOD - Sure.

Beat.

MASOOD - One died. Internal bleeding - in his skull.

AQIB - Shit.

MASOOD - I watched the superintendent beat him, trying to get him to name the boys in a video. Video of the protests.²⁷

AQIB - What the hell?

MASOOD. Yeah.

Beat.

MASOOD - One killed himself last month. Poison. He was my age.²⁸

AQIB - Oh my god. Masood...

MASOOD - It's fine. He's probably happier. He told his father he had "sacrificed his life for Kashmir".

AQIB - Masood...

MASOOD - What?

AQIB - I don't know. I just. I'm sorry.

MASOOD - You didn't do anything.

AQIB - I know, I just... I had no idea you were in prison. I wish I could have done something.

MASOOD - What could you have done? You were in prison too. The world's most beautiful prison, I've heard it said.

AQIB - I wasn't tortured, though.

MASOOD - Weren't you? Seeing your family and neighbors struggling for food or medicine? Not being able to go to school or knowing if your friends were okay? Hearing the protests and the guns and seeing the blood in the streets? Our Kashmiri leaders confined to their houses? Sneaking around CRPF just to get some fresh air? No TV, no internet, no news - what even happened to Chhote?

AQIB - I guess. I mean -

MASOOD - This is no way to live.

Beat. AQIB tries to get his thoughts together.

MASOOD - Asif joined Jaish a week after I was taken.

AQIB - What? How?

MASOOD - He knew someone.

AQIB - Why? To do what?

Masood looks at Aqib pointedly.

AQIB - I see.

Beat.

MASOOD - Mummy begged him not to go. She said she kissed his feet.

AQIB - Masood -

MASOOD - He came to the prison first, and pleaded to have me released. He'd heard that one of the boys got out because his father took his place, and he wanted to do that for me. But they kept making up charges to keep me there, and they told him I was a threat to public order.²⁹

AQIB - Shit. So, he left?

MASOOD - Yeah. When I got home, my mom wanted to tell Asif to surrender and come home, but we couldn't reach him, obviously. So we don't know where he is or if he made it or what.

AQIB - Masood, I'm so sorry -

MASOOD - It doesn't matter. Even the ones who leave end up detained and tortured, or disappeared and dead, I guess. One of the boys I was with had an older brother who surrendered from Laskhar-e-Tayyaba. The CRPF had him in jail the hour he got home.³⁰

AQIB - Maybe if don't know Asif left to join them, maybe -

MASOOD - Aqib, let it go.

AQIB tries to come up with a response, but struggles to process all he's heard so far. The boys sit in silence.

MASOOD - I'm going to join Jaish. To look for Asif. I want you to come with me.

AQIB - Masood, what? I can't, you can't do that to your mom?! Who else does she have in the world?

MASOOD - She made her peace when I didn't come home for 2 weeks. She knows we can die at any minute just by being here. I want my life and my death to mean something. Don't you want to fight for something better than this?

AQIB - Of course, but not like that - it's just, it's a death sentence.

MASOOD - Have you ever listened to that Churchill speech we started every game with? Really listened to it?

AQIB - What do you mean?

MASOOD - Aqib, it's about fighting to the death. It's about never surrendering. Never giving up on our liberation and our freedom. That's what Churchill was talking about.

AQIB - That was a World War.

MASOOD - Mein Kashmir ka azadi ke liye marne ko teyaar hun (*I'm ready to die for Kashmir's freedom*).

AQIB - Masood, you can't.

MASOOD - Vo hame zaroor maar dalenge (*They're going to kill us for sure*). We die one way or another. You've heard the way they talk about us, killing thousands of us. We might as well take a few of them to hell with us.

AQIB - I can't do that, I have to look out for Isha.

MASOOD - Then come with me. You can't protect her here. You can't do anything for her in this condition.

AQIB - I can't.

MASOOD - You can't what?

AQIB - I can't. I can't just leave. What about my family - what would happen to my parents? And Isha?

MASOOD - You're hiding behind her. Are you trying to protect her or is she protecting you?

AQIB - I -

MASOOD - You being here doesn't change anything that will or won't happen to Isha. You can't save her. And you know it - you're using her as an excuse.

AQIB - What do you mean?

MASOOD - What do I mean? What do *you* mean? Does this country mean anything to you? Do I even mean anything to you? Did you not hear what they did to us, what they're still doing? How can you be okay with that?!

AQIB - I'm not! I'm not okay! I'm not okay at all! Lekin mein mujahid bhi nahi hun
(But I'm not a militant either).

MASOOD - You're right. Tum sirf buzdil ho *(you're just a coward)*. You play war games to feel like a hero, but when it comes to real life, you want others to save you, and be tortured for you - die for you.

AQIB - Masood, that's not fair -

MASOOD - None of this is fair. I've made my choice, and you have to make yours.

AQIB looks at the coldness in MASOOD's eyes and drops his gaze. MASOOD understands, and looks at him with disappointment. He tosses the plane back to AQIB.

MASOOD - Keep it. I don't need toys where I'm going.

MASOOD turns on his heels and exits the alley, leaving a crestfallen AQIB staring at the small toy plane in his hands.

IX. February 6, 2020

CHHOTE crawls under the barbed wire and limps into the playing space. He sits down slowly on a milk crate. We see one eye is sealed shut, and he holds the papers close to his face to read the headlines. He mutters to himself as he tries to read and memorize the headlines. Eventually, he staggers up and stands in the center of the playing space.

CHHOTE - January 28 2020 ka news hai! January 28! India ne Kashmir ko internet wapas diya hai (*India has given internet back to Kashmir*),³¹jai Hind (*long live India*)! Jai Bharat (*long live our nation*)! Fastest internet!

CHHOTE makes his way to various audience members.

CHHOTE - Please sir, aap newspaper loge (*will you take a newspaper*)? Sirf panch rupaiya, aap ke jese boss ke liye tho kuch nahi hai, na (*just 5 rupees, for a boss like you I'm sure it's not much, right*), please sir! Just 5 rupees. Mere liye tho panch rupaiya bhot hoga (*for me, 5 rupees will be plenty*), please sir. Thank you sir.

Please ma'am, lockdown main koi news nahi par raha tha, aur vese bhi, main, newspaper-selling nahi kar sakta, main detain ho gaya tha, na (*no one is reading the news in lockdown, and anyway, I couldn't sell the papers, I was detained, right*)? Please ma'am, aap ke paas panch rupaiya tho hoga na (*you surely have 5 rupees, right*)?

Actually, ma'am, yeh last week ka paper hai, leken lockdown mein journalists kaam nahi karsakte hein, aur mera kaam bhi rukh jaata hai - mera sirf yeh ek copy hai (*this is last week's paper, but journalists can't work in this lockdown, and my work also stops - I only have this one copy*) .

CHHOTE continues in this way, begging to various audience members until someone gives him a coin.

CHHOTE - Thank you so much, thank you, thank you.

CHHOTE exits the playing space carefully.

X. February 16, 2020

AQIB slowly enters the playing space, ducking under the barbed wire.

MASOOD comes with a pack and wearing camo pants.

MASOOD - Hi.

AQIB - Hey.

MASOOD - I didn't know if you'd be here today.

AQIB - I'm here every week.

MASOOD - We talked about this, it's dangerous.

AQIB - More dangerous than joining Jaish?

Awkward beat.

MASOOD - Well, I came to say bye.

AQIB - Okay.

AQIB doesn't look at MASOOD.

MASOOD - Bye then.

AQIB - Okay.

Beat.

MASOOD - I don't know when I'll see you.

AQIB - I don't know that you will.

MASOOD - Okay.

Beat.

AQIB - You don't have to do this, you know.

ISHA - Do what?

MASOOD spins around to face her as she slinks into the alley.

MASOOD - Isha.

ISHA - Hey.

MASOOD - You look... Nice.

ISHA - You look terrifying. Where are you going?

MASOOD - To look for my brother.

ISHA - Where is Asif?

AQIB - He joined Jaish e Muhammad.

ISHA - Oh. My God.

MASOOD - Yeah.

ISHA - So what's your plan?

MASOOD - What?

ISHA - Do you know where they are? Are you going to infiltrate? Spy on them and expose them?

MASOOD - Oh, uh, I guess I haven't decided.

ISHA - No plan?

AQIB - Kya karre ho (*what are you doing*) man, tell it to her straight. He wants to join them.

MASOOD looks at AQIB beseechingly.

ISHA - Oh.

MASOOD - Uh.

AQIB - Yeah. Come on, don't be shy, tell the world if you're so sure about this. Tell Isha that you're ready to die for this.

MASOOD - Aqib...

ISHA - You sound like you have a lot to figure out.

MASOOD - I don't. I don't have another option.

ISHA - There's always another option.

MASOOD - You don't understand. I don't want this life.

ISHA - None of us do, but things will get better.

MASOOD - *(slower)* No, Isha, I don't want this life.

A beat as understanding dawns on Isha.

ISHA - Oh.

MASOOD - And I want my death to mean something. For Kashmir.

ISHA - Okay.

Beat.

MASOOD - Look at us, pathetically sneaking around, hoping we're safe today, only to be tortured tomorrow?

AQIB - Look, I get it. I get it. If this is what you need to do and you know what it means then, you know, we understand.

MASOOD - Thank you, man.

AQIB - Yeah.

MASOOD - If you ever change your mind...

AQIB - I'll find you.

ISHA - You guys are gross.

AQIB and MASOOD chuckle a little, and a cloud lifts.

ISHA - At least keep this.

She leans in to give MASOOD the toy plane, and MASOOD smiles at her, reaching to take it. At the last second -

ISHA - Sike! Come get it!

She takes off running across the playing space, and MASOOD laughs, chasing her. For a second, the three of them forget where they are.

AQIB - Isha, toss it!

ISHA chucks the plane over MASOOD's head to AQIB, who catches it deftly.

MASOOD - Give it here, you rascal!

AQIB - Oh come on, we're not surrendering so easily!

MASOOD - Then prepare to die!

MASOOD picks up a small stone and chucks it at AQIB, who dodges it laughing, but the interaction jogs something in MASOOD's memory, and a shadow crosses over his face. As SOLDIER 1 and SOLDIER 2 enter from the side of the alley closest to ISHA, MASOOD picks up a larger size rock, and throws it at them with all his might. ISHA ducks to the ground as it flies over her head.

MASOOD - HEY ASSHOLES!!

Masood crouches to grab another stone and throws it before anyone else realizes what is happening.

AQIB - What the hell Masood, what, get out of here, get out!! ISHA!! Isha, come here!

SOLDIER 1 - You son of a bitch, I know you! Get him!!

A rush of movement. MASOOD comes to his senses and grabs AQIB, forcing him out the other side of the alley. AQIB struggles, trying to reach ISHA, who is trying to scramble away from the Soldiers nearing her. SOLDIER 2 chases the boys out the alley, as SOLDIER 1 grabs ISHA.

(offstage)

AQIB - ISHA!! ISHA!!

SOLDIER 1 grabs ISHA's arms with one hand as she struggles, and he touches her face roughly with the other.

SOLDIER 1 - Stupid boys, leaving such a pretty girl behind. Where are all our men when we need them to witness your fairness?!

SOLDIER 2 reenters the alley dragging AQIB by his elbows and gathers the volunteers from the audience.

Scenarios where audience members refuse to join should be rehearsed beforehand. If no audience member raises any concerns while acting as a soldier in the playing space, the scene will proceed as follows.

AQIB - ISHA!! Please, stop, let me go!! Chhoddo mujhe *(let go of me)*, Isha!!

SOLDIER 2, still holding the struggling AQIB, lines the new recruits up against the wall of the alley, facing SOLDIER 1, with ISHA between them.

SOLDIER 1 - I told you all on your first day, these kids were trouble. But the girls, the sweet, fair, pure virgins of Kashmir, they make it all worth it.

The soldier begins forcefully undressing ISHA while she cries and screams to her brother. SOLDIER 2 forces AQIB to watch as SOLDIER 1 forces himself on top of her and pulls her leggings down around her ankles. He uses his hands under her dress and she continues to sob helplessly. She cries but stops screaming as she realizes no one can help her. She begs the audience member soldiers to help her as the soldier begins to undo his belt buckle and unzips his pants.

The scene diverges here and will be improvised based on the audience members who volunteered to join the play as recruits. Both scenarios should be thoroughly rehearsed.

Scenario i.

If an audience member or more steps in to stop the soldier from raping ISHA, SOLDIER 1 rises slowly, zips up his pants, and fastens his belt buckle. He approaches the audience member.

SOLDIER 1 - You dare question me?

If the audience member does not respond or responds softly:

SOLDIER 1 - I said, you dare question me?!

The audience member can respond. Either way, SOLDIER 1 thunders on.

SOLDIER 1 - You are on extremely thin ice, young man. Hand over your gun.

The audience member should hand over his gun.

SOLDIER 1 - Get the hell out of my sight. All of you, get out! Let him go.

SOLDIER 2 releases Aqib and shows the audience members back to their seats. Aqib rushes to his sister's side. The scene converges here.

Scenario ii.

If none of the audience members step in to stop SOLDIER 1 from raping ISHA, SOLDIER 2 should step in at the last second, and the scene will proceed as follows.

SOLDIER 2 - Sir, the new recruits are not comfortable.

SOLDIER 1 - Tell them to get comfortable.

SOLDIER 2 - Yes, sir, but maybe we can finish this another time, sir. We know who she is and who she belongs to.

SOLDIER 1 - You think I give a damn about her? It's not about this bitch.

SOLDIER 2 - Yes sir, but the new recruits, sir, they don't understand yet.

SOLDIER 1 - What the hell am I supposed to do about that?

SOLDIER 2 - Nothing, sir, they just need some time to adjust, sir.

SOLDIER 1 - Fine! Get out of my face! All of you!

SOLDIER 2 releases AQIB and directs the audience recruits back to their seats as SOLDIER 1 zips up and fastens his buckle. Aqib rushes to his sister's side. The scene converges here.

SOLDIER 1 - Damn shame - pretty whore. Lekin wapas milenge, ha (*but we'll meet again, yeah*)?

SOLDIER 1 exits the alley, with SOLDIER 2 close behind. ISHA is left, crumpled and sobbing as she tries to cover herself.

AQIB - Isha, Isha, I'm so so sorry, I'm so sorry.

ISHA - No, no, Aqib, mera izzat (*my honor*), Aqib, please, I'm sorry, please mummy papa ko nahi batao (*don't tell mummy and papa*), please, please Aqib, kuch nahi batao (*don't tell them anything*).

AQIB helps ISHA to her feet and holds her tightly, sobbing and apologizing to her again and again. She cries in his arms, also apologizing and begging him not to tell their parents. AQIB slowly leads her out of the alley with his arms around her. The lights fade slowly into darkness.³²

XI. February 17, 2020

Offstage, in the blackout, CHHOTE announces the news.

CHHOTE - February 17 ka news hai, February 17 2020. 5 boys missing from South Kashmir may have joined the militancy.³³ Shame on them. February 17 ka news paro.

As the lights come up again slowly, we see a figure assembling a pack. When the lights come up halfway, we see it is AQIB. He is wearing camo and lacing up a tattered pair of combat boots. He stands, and in the dim light, we can make out none of his energy, none of his boyish innocence, none of his hope. We only see his harrowing understanding of his nation's reality.

Blackout.

Anjaam... (Closing, Cessation, Ending, Death)

Endnotes

1. <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/current-affairs/120219/hizbul-militant-who-helped-lets-naaved-jatt-escape-in-2018-killed-in.html>

Urdu and Hindi speakers in the audience will catch this, but it should be noted for the creative team that the subtitles under this video are inaccurate, and Modi praises the Indian soldiers who died “while murdering and murdering” the opposition.

2. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tLrm29B9hrc&ab_channel=GlobalNews

3. Some suggested clips:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6K1dxoe3QM4&ab_channel=BBCNews 0:00-1:00 and 1:30-1:58

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cyayif_nla8&ab_channel=Vox 0:00-0:30

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kZHc1W_aHog&ab_channel=VOANews 0:00-0:30

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eYgy3_vpZq0&ab_channel=NDTV 0:00-0:30

4. Quote from Narendra Modi’s response to suicide bomber attack in Pulwama, early February 2019

5. Quote from Pakistan Major General Asif Ghafur

6. Quote from Narendra Modi

7. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2019-02-14/roadside-blast-kills-18-indian-paramilitary-troops-in-kashmir>

8. <https://www.thenews.com.pk/print/661161-nearly-300-violent-indian-ops-in-kashmir-in-18-days>

9. <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/india-accused-kashmir-human-shields-border-war-pakistan>

10. <https://thewire.in/rights/kashmir-aatif-shafi-encounter-human-shield>

11. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-pakistan-attack/female-suicide-bomber-kills-eight-in-northwest-pakistan-idUSKCN1UG08J>

12. <https://www.businessinsider.com/kashmir-forces-detaining-kids-molesting-girls-amid-blackout-report-2019-8>

<https://www.urdupoint.com/en/kashmir/indian-army-using-rape-as-weapon-of-war-to-su-1116111.html>

<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2019/8/21/kashmir-women-are-the-biggest-victims-of-this-inhumane-siege>

13. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-election-pakistan-pm/pakistan-pm-khan-congratulates-indias-modi-on-election-victory-calls-for-peace-idUSKCN1ST1DD>

14. <https://www.firstpost.com/india/from-kashmir-to-red-corridor-a-massively-stressed-crpf-remains-backbone-of-indias-internal-security-8041191.html>

15. <https://www.reuters.com/article/india-kashmir-paramilitary/explainer-crpf-soaks-up-attacks-and-hits-back-in-kashmir-idINKCN1VH0U7?edition-redirect=in>

16. <https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/eoir/legacy/2013/11/08/Armed%20Forces.pdf>

17. <https://www.indiatoday.in/news-analysis/story/-if-situation-has-improved-then-why-send-38-000-troops-to-j-k-1576436-2019-08-02>

18. <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-india-kashmir-separatists-insight/lock-them-up-india-marginalizes-kashmiri-separatist-leaders-by-detaining-dozens-idUSKCN1UR4F9>
19. <https://apnews.com/article/7735fec9d42c4565a881a2e50a32ad4f>
20. <https://scroll.in/article/913338/by-the-time-this-video-reaches-you-ill-be-in-heaven-the-teen-behind-kashmirs-deadliest-attack>
21. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-india-49234708>
https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/among-the-3000-detained-by-indian-authorities-in-kashmir-children/2019/08/29/1616b5c0-c91c-11e9-9615-8f1a32962e04_story.html
<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/asia-pacific/-torture-detention-of-children-adds-rage-in-kashmir-/1614269>
22. <https://youtu.be/x4vOCU1JluQ?t=4067>
23. <https://thewire.in/rights/kashmir-minors-children-police>
24. <https://www.samaa.tv/news/2019/11/i-will-be-kashmirs-ambassador-spokesperson-and-lawyer-vows-pm/>
25. <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-asia-india-49772269>
26. https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/asia_pacific/among-the-3000-detained-by-indian-authorities-in-kashmir-children/2019/08/29/1616b5c0-c91c-11e9-9615-8f1a32962e04_story.html
27. <https://www.businessinsider.com/kashmir-forces-detaining-kids-molesting-girls-amid-blackout-report-2019-8>
28. <https://thewire.in/rights/kashmir-boy-dies-by-suicide-after-allegedly-being-beaten-by-soldiers>
29. <https://www.justice.gov/eoir/page/file/1304356/download>
30. <https://scroll.in/article/913338/by-the-time-this-video-reaches-you-ill-be-in-heaven-the-teen-behind-kashmirs-deadliest-attack>
31. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jan/05/the-personal-and-economic-cost-of-kashmirs-internet-ban>
32. <https://www.urdupoint.com/en/kashmir/indian-army-using-rape-as-weapon-of-war-to-su-1116111.html>
<https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2019/8/21/kashmir-women-are-the-biggest-victims-of-this-inhumane-siege>
<https://tribune.com.pk/story/2258065/india-uses-sexual-violence-as-a-weapon>
33. <https://thekashmirwalla.com/2020/02/five-youth-missing-from-south-kashmir-may-have-joined-military/>